

The Problem of Evil Revisited

by Theodore P. Rebard, Ph.D.

The problem of evil never fails to elicit due philosophical and or theological interest; ironically, the issue seems to exercise a genuine attraction. The present article attempts to address some strictly philosophical attention to certain aspects of the problem. This effort at suppressing some of the heads of the Hydra-like problem of evil is one part Thomas Aquinas, one part C. S. Lewis, and partly my own modest work.

I.

The problem is best stated plainly, revealing its force:

God is all-loving and all powerful. Evil exists in the world. Therefore either: God cannot suppress evil, in which case He is not all-powerful; or: God does not will to suppress evil, in which case He is not all-loving.¹ In either case, God does not exist or is misunderstood.

II.

A weakness in the anti-God, evil syllogism.

The only ways in which this argument could fail, as any argument, is if there is either a false premise, a defect in its syllogistic structure, or an equivocation.

No premise in the argument is false; there is no defect in the syllogistic structure. My first sortie against the argument, then, is that it relies on an equivocation - though indeed an equivocation which readily escapes the eyes of the present society. It is the supposition of an equivalency of love and kindness, or, if you prefer, "making nice."

But not all acts of love are kind, nor are all acts of kindness loving. For example, a kind and well-bred person never gives offense; but to ask Josef Stalin "Why are you murdering your people?" is offensive - it was a breach of diplomatic *savoir-faire* on the part of Mrs. Roosevelt to inquire. Yet the love of human life motivated the question and its implicit criticism and demands. *Vice versa*, it may well be kind to tell the wife of a dying man that he is doing satisfactorily, but it is unloving and dishonest. Such a claim does violence to the intellect and the dignity of the person; it does not will the good, the truth. Kind, maybe, but loving, no.

To love, on the other hand, is to incline to the good in one way or another, according to circumstances. This I take to be the most general, 'master' definition of love. To call God good, then, is to call Him the first and final principle of love, that is, infinite good.

While goodness is the first and final principle of love; kindness may have no principle other than arbitrary social convention. Love, then, is always ultimately intelligible; kindness may be ultimately unintelligible. (I deliberately avoid the term etiquette, as this suggests, quite properly, that social grace is a lesser derivative from morality.)

III.

We notice evil, and even are shocked by it.

Evil is common, but it is always noted in contrast to the good that should be. No one who has been duly careful of his health should die of cancer; no woman should die in giving birth; no child should suffer at the hands of demented or evil guardians. Rather, care of health should yield a long life; childbirth should be the quasi-miraculous debut of life; the innocent should be preserved in their integrity and naivete, so that they cherish it while they may - the adult world will wait.

Goodness and intelligibility are the frame - the contrast and context which make evil stand out and be noticed.²

By way of metaphor, C. S. Lewis notes that "the Englishness of English is audible only to those who know some other language as well."³

Josef Pieper says this: "The incomprehensibility of evil in the world becomes fully apparent only against the background of the indestructible happiness of God."⁴

In short, to identify evil as such requires contrast, and evil is contrasted against good as chaos is contrasted against order. But for there to be order and good there must be also a principle of same, and an ultimate principle at that. Thus, evil not only is set off as by a picture frame against good, but evil, far then from being an argument in objection to the existence of God, evil is a telling argument for the existence and activity of God. The very fact that all evil is to some degree shocking and remarkable triggers an argument for God's real existence.⁵

To make the same point another way, if the universe were chaotic and absurd, we would not be able to identify evil as evil. What is not so odd is that the universe be unintelligible; what is very odd is that absurdists should take note of a feature of its unintelligibility.

IV.

Evil and 'actualization.' Two meanings of 'labor.' More anent the distinction between love and kindness.

Three analogies will serve to indicate further the difference between kindness and love, as though by way of illustration.⁶

First, the love of the artist for his artefact: an artist cannot rest until the artefact is fully actualized, that is, perfected. In respect to a great work, a great artist is its lover, and he loves as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother her child. Taking 'endless trouble ... [he] thereby *gives* endless trouble' to the artefact, if we speak of it as though it were sentient.⁷ In other words, the artist brings out into the world an artefact, in spite of the sweat of toil or the pangs of creation, and in spite of the recalcitrance of the medium.⁸

Not only in the transitive activity of 'making' does the artist reveal his demands, but also in the immanent activity of self-making also, not allowing himself to rest complacently while he can still become a better artist. Thus, as the virtue of art is more in the maker than the product, so also the perfecting is the demand of the good artist both of himself and of the artefact. Art is about a beloved, both as it reaches out into the world and as 'proceeding inward' towards the artist.⁹

The point of the analogy is that love is not 'nice' and 'kind,' but relentlessly demanding. Another analogy serves to show the demanding character of love from the viewpoint of the beloved: that of man for beast.

In order to improve a dog, to make it better, that is, more lovable, the man will clean it, house-break it, train it neither to steal nor beg, and often silence it.¹⁰ C. S. Lewis remarks anthropomorphically, and his point is altogether clear, that "to the puppy the whole proceeding would seem, if it were a theologian, to cast grave doubts on the 'goodness' of man." But he goes on to understand that the "full-trained dog, larger, healthier, and longer-lived than the wild dog, and admitted ... to a whole world of affections, loyalties, interests, and comforts entirely beyond its animal destiny, would have no such doubts," as a saint may be beleaguered by fewer doubts about divine goodness than a sinner.¹¹

Again, the point is the same as before, that love is not mere kindly affection, but is at least sometimes painful to receive - as well as to give.

The third and last of these analogies is the love between father and son. Here the elements of the previous analogies are retained and in fact subsumed, and yet another feature of love (as different from kindness) is indicated. As the artist the artefact, and as the man the dog, so the father has a relentless and demanding love for his son. The father wills the best for his son, and to achieve the best is not easy - even for those most natively talented. To will effectively what is the best for his son, the father must make demands-to-be-obeyed; the alternative is that the son be left unto himself, unloved, and seeing his own immature and inadequate lights. At the same time, the son must, in order to benefit from his father's love, do as required. In other words, authoritative and obediencial love are mutually necessary for the sake of the good being brought about. In neither case is the loving pleasant, but it is not to be expected that love be easy, only that it be wisdom in action, which the Greeks called by its own name, *phronesis*.

In every case, love requires the perfecting, that is, the actualizing, of the beloved. This is true even of self-love worthy of the name.¹² To actualize oneself, to become happy, is done in actions. We may put the matter this way: Happiness means perfection.¹³ Perfection means full realization.¹⁴ Realization is achieved by action.¹⁵ To act for the good is to labor over one's works both interiorly and exteriorly, and labor involves two things: labor is a curse, it is the "sweat of the brow" indicated in *Genesis*; further, it is the building up of the human. It is, in other words, a toil of pain at the same stroke as it is an edification. Pain is essentially involved in finding happiness. Love cannot be realized without suffering - even though we can be nice and sweet and kind all painlessly.

V.

'Possible worlds,' a pseudo-problem.

But need it be so? Could God not have made a world in which love and kindness coincided? Clearly it appears that God did not create the best of all possible worlds, nor even a particularly good world!

God did not, indeed, create the "best of all possible worlds." Rather, He created what should be understood to be the *only* possible world. What I mean is that the same reasoning which makes us understand God to exist and to be all-good and to be His own very willing also makes us to understand that His will is perfect - that it never fails to choose well. Divine willing, however, like divine being itself, is ineffable, but not opaque. This is precisely what makes it (analogously) meaningful to understand the existence of God. Divine willing, then, must not be construed as merely like human willing; if we so construe divine willing, it is anthropomorphized, which seems to me to be exactly what happens in a mistaken notion of God as author of the "best of all possible worlds." It is easy to think of God, even to picture God, as having laid out before Him the array of possible worlds, over which He deliberates, finally settling on one, which, at least from man's viewpoint, could have been better - could have been another. In other words, "possible worlds" on such a view, means "worlds that God could have made, but did not." But divine willing does not mean hesitant indeterminacy over multiple possibilities, for this is precisely an imperfection in human thinking and willing.

It seems to me that the case is actually quite different. To propose that God has chosen the "best of all possible worlds" is to propose what is metaphysically impossible, because of the infinite number of possibilities allowed by the infinite distance between the perfect and the imperfect, between creature and God. In turn, to find it a defect in God that He did not do what is *per se* impossible is to propose nonsense, and nonsense does not become sense by adding a formulaic "God can ..." at the head of it.¹⁶

Therefore, because it is in itself imperfect (i.e., finite) this world is also experienced by us as imperfect. But, for the reason adduced above, this does not impugn divine wisdom.

In fact, it is "Not because they are that God knows of creatures spiritual and temporal, but because He knows them that they are."¹⁷ That is to say and to underscore in another way that God cannot do what is unintelligible in and of itself.

Epilogue

To many it seems that Thomas merely 'goes through the motions' of objection to himself when he undertakes to prove the existence of God. Even in the abbreviated pedagogy of the early *Summa Theologiae* it is noticeable that he places only two objections at the outset of the celebrated "Five Ways." But what are these objections!

The first is based on the principle of explanatory economy called 'Occam's razor,' and need not detain us here. But the second is precisely the argument that evil and God are incompatible, and the reality of evil is incontrovertible and directly known empirically. The reply is that God allows evil because His goodness and omnipotence bring good even from evil.

This certainty is so far in our view unmolested, that God is His own goodness and the first and final principle of all that is and therefore of all good. This certainty means, as Josef Pieper expresses it, that "the world is plumb and sound; that everything comes to its appointed goal; that in spite of all appearances ... nothing and no one is lost ... that God holds in His hand the beginning, middle, and end of all that is."¹⁸ This in turn implies that even what seems to be evil outright is somehow involved in God's willing of man's good. "Somehow" makes admission of the ineffability the divine nature, and we need also be mindful that ineffability is one pole of analogicity. We have already shown that mistaking good for evil (as unkind) is caused by a defective understanding; it is ourselves who are defective, rather than the world.

A valuable literary image of this point is found in Thornton Wilder's *Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which affords us simultaneously divine-omniscient and human-myopic perspectives on one event which the news media would no doubt identify as incomprehensible. A bridge over a gorge breaks under the weight of its last travellers, who fall to their deaths - these include a woman we are quite certain we would despise and damn (she having long outlived whatever value she may have had), and a young man who 'had everything to live for.' Yet Wilder gives us to see the very wisdom, and even need (were it known to each of the victims of the broken bridge) of each to die his or her 'untimely' death.

To us who are not God, it must be enough to understand that love is not always kind. Rather, love is good, and even better than that, as we ought expect it to be, given its principle.

With this much said, evil does not become pellucid, but neither does it remain the simple and effective obstacle to God's very existence and nature that it is widely supposed to be.

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Endnotes

1 This is approximately the formulation used by St. Thomas in *ST*, I, 2, 3. C.S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962) gives a similar and equally strong form of the argument. Of course, others have done the same, but it is important to note that no consideration of this objection or problem is well-conducted if it does not state the counter-position forcibly.

2 Peter Kreeft, *Love is Stronger than Death*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp. 26-26, 45-46.

3 *Miracles*, cited in Kreeft, *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, p. 46.

4 Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, (Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 31. Pieper also notes explicitly that God *is* His very happiness. I am concerned here to indicate that God is not only perfectly happy, but that also and as it were simultaneously and by the same token He is the principle of good and order in creation.

5 See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chapter 71: "A certain philosopher ... asks: 'If God exists, whence comes evil?' But it could be argued to the contrary: 'If evil exists, God exists.' For, there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God."

6 Let us note here that many and very different philosophers have acknowledged the difference between pleasure and wisdom, which is relevant in this discussion because the failure so to distinguish obscures the equivocation indicated in section II above. "From Socrates and Solomon to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, philosophers contrast the pursuit of pleasure with the pursuit of wisdom. Truth is a severe master, not a gentle one. We [of the mass culture of the 20th century] prefer tolerance to truth, kindness to love, compassion to idealism," Kreeft, *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, p. 80.

7 *The Problem of Pain*, p. 42.

8 See Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, p. 57.

9 *ST*, I, 27, 1. Cited in Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, p. 57. We here see St. Thomas tidily distinguish between inward and outward procession. Both are involved in human activity, whether moral or artistic, or even intellectual, where the procession outward is signified by the 'word of the voice,' while the procession inward lies in the formation of the 'word of the heart.' In discussing the Trinity, Thomas finds also the two analogous processions in God.

10 We will again later have recourse to the identity of the 'better' and the 'more lovable,' when speaking, albeit briefly, of the divine choice to make a better world.

11 *The Problem of Pain*, pp 43-44.

12 In the *City of God*, IXX, c. 14, St. Augustine lays to rest any doubts we might have about whether self-love is good. He identifies self as one of the three things to be loved in obedience to the commandments of love. The other two are of course God and neighbor.

13 See *ST*, I-II, 3, 2: "Beatitude is man's perfection."

14 *ibid.*, "Every being is perfected to the degree that it is in act (*actu*)."

15 *ibid.*, "Operation is the final actuality of the operator."

16 See also *Summa Theologian*, I; 25, 6, *ad* 1: "When it is said that God can make a thing better than He makes it, if 'better' is taken as a noun, this proposition is true. For He can *always* [emphasis mine] make the same thing ... better than it is ... "

17 St. Thomas quotes directly from St. Augustine's *De Trinidad*, xv.

18 *Happiness and Contemplation*, pp. 84-85.