

## ELEANOR STUMP

### THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

This paper considers briefly the approach to the problem of evil by Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and John Hick and argues that none of these approaches is entirely satisfactory. The paper then develops a different strategy for dealing with the problem of evil by expounding and taking seriously three Christian claims relevant to the problem: Adam fell; natural evil entered the world as a result of Adam's fall; and after death human beings go either to heaven or hell. Properly interpreted, these claims form the basis for a consistent and coherent Christian solution to the problem of evil.

#### *Introduction*

[Intentionally Omitted]

I

Plantinga's presentation of the free will defense is a landmark in contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. As Plantinga expounds it, the free will defense rests on these two philosophical claims, which it adds to the theological assumptions (1)-(3):

(6) Human beings have free will;

and

(7) Possession of free will and use of it to do more good than evil is a good of such value that it outweighs all the evil in the world.

Plantinga uses these assumptions to argue that a morally sufficient reason for God to permit evil is possible: the value of man's possession and use of free will is a possible reason for God's permitting moral evil, which is evil caused by man. The value of the fallen angel's possession of free will is a possible reason for God's permitting natural evil, evil which is not caused by human free choice but which (Plantinga suggests) could be attributed to the freely chosen actions of fallen angels. As long as it is possible that there be a morally sufficient reason for God to allow evil, regardless of whether or not that possibility is actualized, the existence of evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of a good God.

Plantinga's work has generated considerable discussion, which cannot be effectively summarized here.<sup>9</sup> But for my purposes perhaps the most interesting criticism is the objection that even if we grant Plantinga's free will defense everything it wants and

needs, what results does not seem to be even a candidate for a morally sufficient reason justifying God's permitting instances of evil. ...The problem with Plantinga's general strategy for the defense of theism against arguments from evil is that it leaves the presence of evil in the actual world mysterious. Plantinga's tendency is to show the weaknesses inherent in arguments from evil, not to provide a theodicy, and so it yields no explanation for why we in this world suffer from evil if our world is governed by a good God. No doubt many people, including Plantinga, would not find this result problematic. In fact, in a recent paper Steven Wykstra has argued that given the limitlessness of God's intellect and the finitude of ours, the mysteriousness of evil in our world is just what we might expect;<sup>12</sup> it is reasonable to suppose that we cannot understand why an omniscient and omnipotent entity does what he does. I think that there is some plausibility in Wykstra's thesis; and if all efforts at theodicy fail utterly, no doubt theists will be glad of arguments like Wykstra's and content with strategies like Plantinga's. The problem with such arguments and strategies, to put it crudely, is that they leave people on both sides of the issue unsatisfied. ...

Hick's solution to the problem of evil, like Swinburne's, consists in effect in an alteration of (7); and though Hick's work was published before Swinburne's, it can be conveniently thought of as providing a complicated addition to the formulation of (7) underlying Swinburne's solution.<sup>20</sup> On Hick's view, (7) should be reformulated in this way:

(7") Significant exercise of free will in the enterprise of soul-making is of such great value that it outweighs all the evil in the world.

Soul-making, on Hick's view, is the process by which human beings develop certain traits of character, such as patience, courage, and compassion, as a result of struggling with evils. Those who successfully complete this process will be admitted to the kingdom of God, in which there is no evil. The evil in the world is logically necessary for soul-making and so cannot be prevented if the process of soul-making is to be preserved....Even apart from this objection, Kane argues, Hick's solution is vitiated by an absurdity in the general scheme he postulates. According to Hick, evil is justified by man's acquisition of intrinsically valuable character traits which require the existence of evil for their development and display. Those who develop these character traits will be admitted to heaven where there is no evil and where, consequently, it is impossible to manifest the character traits they have acquired. But this is senseless, Kane maintains. On Hick's view, all the evils in the world are justified as a means of developing traits of character which it will be impossible to maintain thereafter in heaven, the reward for having developed such character traits. Why should we value a process which results in a character which cannot then be manifested? And if it is the possession rather than the manifestation of these character traits which is valued, so that what is wanted is a certain disposition, which can be had in heaven even in the absence of evil, then it is not

clear why God could not have imparted the disposition without the evil or why evil in the world is justified by the acquisition of such dispositions.<sup>24</sup> I think Hick has no good answers to these questions.”

## II

Besides (1)-(4)[(1)God is omnipotent; (2)God is omniscient; (3)God is perfectly good. (4)There is evil in the world], there are three Christian beliefs that seem to me especially relevant to the problem of evil. They are these:

(8) Adam fell.

(9) Natural evil entered the world as a result of Adam’s fall.

(10)After death, depending on their state at the time of their death, either (a) human beings go to heaven or (b) they go to hell.

It is clear that these beliefs themselves raise a host of problems, partly because they seem implausible or just plain false and partly because they seem to raise the problem of evil again in their own right. ... It would, of course, make a difference to my solution if any of the beliefs added in (8)-(10) could be *demonstrated* to be false, and so I will devote this section of the paper primarily to arguing that though (8)-(10) are controversial and *seem* false to many people, they are not *demonstrably* false....

The Christian belief in the fall of Adam, expressed in (8), has been interpreted in many ways.<sup>37</sup> Some (but not all) of these interpretations are incompatible with the theory ‘of evolution; and if the current theory of evolution is provably true, such interpretations can be shown to be false and so cannot be used in any effective attempt to solve the problem of evil. My solution, however, will rely on only a few elements which are common to many interpretations of (8) and not incompatible with the theory of evolution, namely, that

(8’) (a) at some time in the past as a result of their own choices human

beings altered their nature for the worse,

(b) the alteration involved what we perceive and describe as a change in the nature of human free will,<sup>38</sup> and

(c) the changed nature of the will was inheritable.

(8’) is compatible with the denial (as well as with the affirmation) that there once was a particular man named Adam who fell from a better to a worse state in consequence of a bad choice, but for the sake of convenience I will continue to refer to the events described in (8’) as ‘Adam’s fall’. Nothing in the theory of evolution entails the falsity of any part of (8’), and (8’) is compatible with any number of interpretations of (8)....

One of the classic expositions of this understanding is that given by Anselm.<sup>39</sup> Anselm's theory of the will is very different from most contemporary accounts,<sup>40</sup> and I cannot do it justice in this paper. I want to present just enough of the theory to show the difference it makes to an evaluation of (8). According to Anselm, human beings originally had wills disposed to will as they ought to will and an ability to preserve that disposition. This ability is what Anselm calls free will. On Anselm's view, free will is a strength. The capacity for either getting sick or staying healthy, Anselm would say, is not a strength, only the capacity to stay healthy is. Similarly, Anselm maintains that the ability to will what one ought to will or what one ought not to will is not a strength and cannot count as free will: only the ability to will what one ought to will is a strength and it alone is free will. Human beings in their pre-fall state could do evil because as finite beings they could be less than they had the strength to be. They could fail to use their strength to preserve the uprightness of their wills and so fall into evil. Adam's fall consists in such a failure. In consequence of past failure of this sort, human beings have lost their initial disposition to will what they ought to will and acquired instead a disposition to will what they ought not to will. This acquired disposition consists primarily of an inclination to will one's own power or pleasure in preference to greater goods;<sup>41</sup> it was and is inheritable. Although human beings still have some sort of ability to do good after the fall, because of the disposition of their will they find it very difficult (but not impossible) to resist evil. To this extent, then, their free will (in Anselm's sense of 'free will') is diminished.

The notion of a disposition of the will which is operative in this account needs to be understood in light of Anselm's unusual definition of free will. A free will is a will disposed to will the good and able to maintain such a disposition. In Aquinas's development of Anselm's account, recognition of what is good is the job of reason; and the righteous disposition of free will is a function of a right relationship among reason, the will, and desire.<sup>42</sup> For the will to be free, desire must be subject to reason, and reason must guide both the will and desire to what really is good. The post-fall disposition of the will is the result of a disordered relationship among these three. Desire is not subject to reason; often enough it governs reason instead. And rather than being guided by reason, the will tends to be moved by irrational desire, so that it wills an apparent or partial good rather than what is really or wholly good. This disordered relationship among reason, the will, and desire on Aquinas's view constitutes the change in the will produced by Adam's fall.<sup>43</sup> The original inclination of the will to will the good proposed by reason has been lost and replaced by an inclination to will what is sought as good by the appetites. These inclinations are inclinations of the will itself, not external constraints on the will; and they are only inclinations or tendencies, not necessitated willing. Post-fall evil is voluntary, not compelled. On the other hand, this account lends plausibility to the claim that the altered disposition of the will is inheritable. What is said to be inherited is not a certain set of acts of will or a specific habit of willing but rather a weakened

influence of reason and strengthened influence of appetite on the will, a loss of the will's natural inclination to follow reason. There is nothing obviously incoherent, as far as I can see, in supposing this change in the relationship of reason, will, and desire to be inheritable.

(8) also raises the problem of evil in two ways which must be briefly considered here:

(Q5) In view of all the subsequent evil occasioned by Adam's fall, shouldn't a good God have destroyed the human race immediately after Adam's fall?

(Q6) Couldn't God have prevented the human race from inheriting this evil inclination of will after Adam's fall, by some miraculous intervention in human history if necessary?

The answer to (Q5), I think, is that 'ending is better than mending' is not a principle appropriate to Christianity. On Christian doctrine, persons once created are everlasting and infinitely valuable; if they become defective, it is up to a good God not to eliminate them but to fix them if he can. This view, of course, is not peculiar to Christianity. If a family has a child with a possibly terminal, genetically transmissible disease, it does not usually consider destroying the child, but instead puts the child and the rest of the family to a great deal of pain and trouble caring for the child and trying to alleviate or cure the disease.

(Q6) is harder to deal with. Without destroying any of his creatures, God could have prevented the transmission of a defective free will in any number of ways. He could have prevented procreation on the part of the defective people, for example, or he could miraculously have prevented the transmissible defect from actually being transmitted. ...According to the Christian beliefs summarized as (8), (9), and (10), all human beings since Adam's fall have been defective in their free wills, so that they have a powerful inclination to will what they ought not to will, to will their own power or pleasure in preference to greater goods. It is not possible for human beings in that condition to go to heaven, which consists in union with God; and hell understood in Dantean terms is arguably the best alternative to annihilation. A good God will want to fix such persons, to save them from hell and bring them to heaven; and as the creator of these persons, God surely bears some responsibility for fixing and saving them if he can. How is he to do so?

It seems to me clear that he cannot fix the defect by using his omnipotence to remove it miraculously. The defect is a defect in *free* will, and it consists in a person's generally failing to will what he ought to will. To remove this defect miraculously would be to force a person's free will to be other than it is; it would consist in causing a person to will freely what he ought to will. But it is logically impossible for anyone to make a person freely will something, and therefore even God in his omnipotence cannot directly and miraculously remove the defect in free will, without destroying the very freedom of the will he wants to fix....If God cannot by his omnipotence directly fix the defect in free will, it seems that human beings

must fix it themselves. Self-repair is a common feature of the natural world, but I do not think self-repair is possible for a person with post-fall free will. ...With considerable diffidence, then, I want to suggest that Christian doctrine is committed to the claim that a child's suffering is outweighed by the good for the child which can result from that suffering. This is a brave (or foolhardy) thing to say, and the risk inherent in it is only sharpened when one applies it to cases in which infants suffer, for example, or in which children die in their suffering. Perhaps the decent thing to do here is simply to sketch some considerations which may shed light on these hard cases. To begin with, it is important to remember that on Christian doctrine death is not the ultimate evil or even the ultimate end, but rather a transition between one form of life and another. From a Christian point of view, the thing to be avoided at all costs is not dying, but dying badly; what concerns the Christian about death is not that it occurs but that the timing and mode of death be such as to constitute the best means of ensuring that state of soul which will bring a person to eternal union with God. If children who die in their suffering thereby move from the precarious and frequently painful existence of this world to a permanently blissful existence in the other world and if their suffering was among part of the necessary means to effect that change, their suffering is justified. I am not trying to say here that the suffering which a child or any other person experiences is the only way in which that person could be brought to God. Rather, I am trying to avoid constructing the sort of explanation for evil which requires telling the sufferer that God lets him suffer just for the sake of some abstract general good for mankind. Perhaps it is true that such a general good—the significant freedom of created persons, for example—is the ultimate end for the sake of which God permits evil. It seems to me nonetheless that a perfectly good entity who was also omniscient and omnipotent must govern the evil resulting from the misuse of that significant freedom in such a way that the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces *for that person*; otherwise, we might justifiably expect a good God somehow to prevent that *particular suffering*, either by intervening (in one way or another) to protect the victim, while still allowing the perpetrator his freedom, or by curtailing freedom in some select cases.<sup>52</sup> And since on Christian doctrine the ultimate good for persons is union with God, the suffering of any person will be justified if it brings that person nearer to the ultimate good in a way he could not have been without the suffering. I think that Christianity must take some such approach to the suffering or death of children; and perhaps something analogous can be said in connection with the hardest case of all, the suffering of infants. Psychologists tell us that the first year of a child's life is tremendously important in molding the personality and character. For some persons the molding of the personality produced by suffering in infancy may be the best means of insuring a character capable of coming to God.

In all these hard cases, the difficulty of formulating a Christian position which does not appear either implausible or inhuman will be diminished if we have clearly in mind the view of man Christianity starts with. On Christian doctrine, all human

beings are suffering from the spiritual equivalent of a terminal disease; they have a defect in the will which if not corrected will cost them life in heaven and consign them to a living death in hell. Now suppose that we are the parents of a child with a terminal brain disease, which includes among its symptoms the child's rejecting the notion that he is sick and refusing to cooperate in any treatments. The doctors tell us that there are treatments which may well cure the child completely, but they hurt and their success is not guaranteed. Would we not choose to subject the child to the treatments, even if they were very painful? The child's suffering would be a terrible thing; we would and we should be grieved at it. But we would nonetheless be glad of the treatments and hope of a cure. And yet this example is only a pale reflection of what Christianity claims to be the case for all human beings, where the loss inflicted by the disease and the benefits of its cure are infinitely greater. If moral and natural evil contain an essential ingredient of a possible cure, surely the cure is worth the suffering such evil entails....

V

I think, then, that it is possible to produce a defensible solution to the problem of evil by relying both on the traditional theological and philosophical assumptions in (1)-(4) and (6)[, and on the specifically Christian doctrines in (8)-(10). Like other recent attempted solutions, this one also rests fundamentally on a revised version of (7), namely, this:

(r) Because it is a necessary condition for union with God, the significant exercise of free will employed by human beings in the process which is essential for their being saved from their own evil is of such great value that it outweighs all the evil of the world.

(7'") constitutes a morally sufficient reason for evil and so is a counter-example to (5), the claim that there is no morally sufficient reason for God to permit instances of evil. ...

Finally, for the many other goods sometimes said to be produced by evil, such as punishment for sins or aesthetic completion of the whole canvas of creation, if any of these are in fact both good and produced by evil, I welcome them into my account. In (7'") I have singled out one good produced by evil as the good which justifies all the evil in the world, but nothing in this claim rules out the possibility that evil produces various other lesser goods as well which may contribute to the justification of some sorts of evil.

In the brief exposition of this solution in this paper, I cannot hope to have given anything but a sketch and a preliminary defense of it; to do it justice and to consider carefully all the questions and objections it raises would require book-length

treatment. For all its complexity, the story of Cain and Abel is the story of a simple instance of evil, which is easily dwarfed by any account of evil culled at random from today's newspapers; and I am under no illusions that by providing an explanation for the simple evil in the story of Cain and Abel, I have given a sufficient and satisfying explanation of even the commonplace evils of ghetto violence, much less the almost unthinkable evils of Belsen or Hiroshima. What I would like to believe I have done is to have shown that with good will and careful attention to the details of the doctrines specific to a particular monotheism there is hope of a successful solution to the problem of evil along the lines developed here.

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