

Chapter 4

God and Evil

*... any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind:
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls
for thee.*

—John Donne

*Are you, as well, a fool? Piety thrives here when pity dies.
Who is more blamable than he who weeps
When he beholds the judgment of the Lord?*

—Dante

The problem of God and evil may be summarized by asking whether existence of a loving and omnipotent God is logically precluded by the presence of evil. Our study of this problem should begin by defining terms: The God of our search is a personal God aware of His own existence, and who is active in human affairs. His qualities are as described in Chapter 1:

The theistic version of God, in addition to being conceived as the Supreme Being, the creator and sovereign of the universe, is, generally speaking, thought to possess infinite power and intelligence as well as infinite mercy, love, and compassion. He is also thought to be eternal and immense.

The qualities of infinite power, infinite intelligence, infinite mercy, infinite love, and infinite compassion are especially important. They should be borne in mind throughout the chapter.

Although the term, *evil*, embraces a variety of concepts ranging from “mischievous” to “morally corrupt,” it will for this discussion be defined as pain or that which causes pain in either the mind or the body. A few examples will clarify this definition: War is evil because it causes pain. Most crimes are evil because they cause pain. Many diseases are evil because they cause pain. Tornadoes and floods are evil because they inflict pain. Death is evil because it brings pain. Loneliness is evil because it *is* pain.

Obviously, pain is not entirely an objective matter since it depends, to a degree, on our state of mind for both its form and its intensity. But this in no way impairs its reality. Even if it be entirely subjective, pain is as real as are such things as beauty, friendship, an artist’s expression of reality, *esprit de corps*, and love. The existence of pain, then, is an objective fact which is, to a degree, subjectively influenced. Sometimes whether or not something is evil depends on the circumstances. If our cupboard is well stocked—especially if with succulent delicacies—then hunger is not evil but instead is the prelude to delight. But if our cupboard is bare and there is no hope in sight for filling it—as is the case today with a third of the world’s population—then hunger is evil and it becomes doubly so when there are children to feed.

With definitions accounted for, let us again state the basic question: How can an all-loving, all-powerful God permit evil to exist in His universe? There have been many attempts to explain this obvious contradiction but, because of our limited scope, only a few of them will be dealt with here. My plan is to examine four theodicies, the first three of which are that evil is privation, that it is illusion, and that it is necessary in this best of all possible worlds. The fourth is a Christian theodicy containing many separate points too numerous to summarize.

Evil as Privation This theory says that evil is nothing positive but is merely the absence of good. Sickness, for instance, is merely the absence of health, war the absence of peace, and death the

absence of life. Since God created only good things such as health, peace, and life, He obviously created no evil. He is therefore beyond reproach.

There are two objections to this argument. The first is that evil as privation is a half-truth. It is a half-truth because it describes evil only as the absence of something. It omits the fact that evil is also the presence of something—pain. Whoever has the power to eliminate it is guilty for its continued existence.

The second objection is that evil as privation is a semantic gimmick devoid of substance. It is merely an evasion of the issue of God's failure to eliminate it. This theodicy, in other words, is simply without basis.

Evil as Illusion This argument says that evil is illusory and does not exist. It only appears to exist because we do not practice right thinking. Since evil does not exist, God's justice therefore need not be vindicated.

Since evil is defined as pain, or that which causes pain, and if certain illusions cause pain, then evil exists. It exists in the form of those illusions. God's justice must therefore be vindicated.

Evil as Necessity This theodicy says that evil is a necessary by-product of natural law and that since evil is necessary, God cannot be blamed for it. The explanation is as follows: For this to be the best of all possible worlds, it must be a theatre for moral life, and a moral life is possible only if we can employ reason in the conduct of our lives. Reason can be employed only if nature and its laws are characterized by uniformity and regularity. The by-product of uniformity and regularity, however, is evil, since if nature's laws are to be held constant, then they cannot be relaxed even to prevent evil. Evil is therefore necessary.

To illustrate, if a man tumbles off a cliff, two things can happen: He can fall to his injury or destruction, or God can suspend or reduce the law of gravity to save him. But nature's laws are

counted on by the whole of the world's population in the planning and conduct of their lives. To meddle with these laws in particular cases where evil is imminent would result in the world-wide disruption of human plans and activities, and this disruption would cause more evil than it would prevent. The law of gravity therefore cannot be tampered with and the man must fall to his injury or death. Evil is therefore necessary in this best of all possible worlds.

There are at least three flaws in this theodicy. The first flaw is in two parts: 1) since God is omnipotent, He *can* cause temporary suspensions in His laws. That's what omnipotent means. And 2) since God's compassion is infinite, He *should* rescue the man. That's what compassionate means. For example, when the man falls off the cliff, God should cause the suspension of gravity not on a world-wide scale but only on a local scale or, better yet, God should reach out and catch the man without suspending gravity at all. Either action would rescue the man without disrupting the rest of the world. One may object that any man, thus saved, would no longer fear the law of gravity and he would grow careless or even disrespectful of it. He might even tell others about his experience and they too would lose their sense of fear. The omnipotent God, however, could solve this problem by removing the experience from the rescued man's memory and, if there were witnesses to the event, He could remove the experience from their memories too.

The second flaw is not easy to detect because it consists of a false assumption hidden in the logic. The logic argues that evil is a necessary consequence of natural law. Even if the logic were true, this still would not explain why natural law had not been designed so that evil would not be a necessary consequence of it. To illustrate, could not God have designed His universe without this harsh law and its evil consequences? Since God is omnipotent, He could have done so. His justice is therefore not vindicated.

The third flaw is found in the contention that the moral life is the best life. There are two weaknesses in this assumption. The

first is that the superlative value of the moral life is based on a guess springing from the limited human intellect. How do we know that a superior kind of life might not have been possible had the omniscient God willed it? Since we are not omniscient, we can only guess at what the best life actually is. The first weakness in the assumption, then, lies in its speculative nature. The second weakness is that whether or not the moral life is the best life or even a good life is a matter of opinion. This will not be discussed here, however, since it will be argued later in the chapter that the moral life is not the best life.

A Christian Theodicy This theodicy consists of a group of eleven arguments (denoted below by Arabic numerals) none of which are intended as complete explanations of God and evil and some of which are intended merely as consolations to the faithful for whatever evil may befall them. This theodicy, then, offers only a “partial” explanation for the apparent discrepancy of evil in the presence of an omnipotent and loving God. These arguments have not been drawn from a single source but from several. Some of them may be found, at least in sketch, in *The Question Box* by the Reverend Bertrand L. Conway, C. S. P., and most of them are standard arguments in most Christian accounts of God and evil.

1.. The first of the eleven arguments is that this life is a time of trial during which a man must prove himself worthy of the eternal happiness that God metes out to those who serve Him. The sufferings of the good therefore are to be regarded as part of the punishment due their sins and as a great opportunity of merit.

There are at least six objections to this thinking. The first is that if God’s love, mercy, and compassion are infinite and if His power is also infinite, then the presence of just one iota of suffering in His universe proves a contradiction in these defined qualities. To explain evil in terms of a trial therefore does not meet the issue but, instead, avoids it. The idea of the trial, then, is barely worthy of further discussion.

The second objection is to the reference of the sufferings of the good as “a great opportunity of merit.” Merit for what? For suffering for God? Since God is omnipotent, self-contented, and self-sufficient, He does not need our sufferings. And since He is supposed to love us, He should not want them. The idea of merit through suffering is therefore rejected.

The third objection is that the alleged fact of our being on trial has been presented without proof. It may be contended that the proof lies in the authority of the professional theologians who devote their lives to this work. But the concept of a trial is not unanimous among authorities; it is limited to the Western religious world and even there it is subject to dispute. If the theory that we are on trial is based on the authority of scripture, then we should doubt it because the literal verity of scripture is open to challenge. If it is based on tradition, then we should doubt it because tradition is often primitive and devoid of logic. If it is based on logic, then the logic has not been made clear. And if it is based on intuition, then it is a subjective personal opinion that does not explain the objective reality of evil as pain. (Intuitive paths to truth will be considered in Chapter 6.)

The fourth objection is to the trial itself. Why a trial? Is it to tell the good from the bad or the innocent from the guilty? But cannot the omniscient God tell them apart? Since He can, then why the trial? That the good become more worthy of heaven through needless suffering seems unworthy of a noble God. The very idea of a trial is senseless and is therefore rejected.

The fifth objection is to the idea that those who fail the trial should be eternally damned. If those who fail would be either painlessly obliterated or assigned to limbo, then this would not be so bad. But to inflict unimaginable tortures lasting for an eternity is unspeakably repugnant to any civilized sense of justice, and our sympathy should be with the damned.

The sixth objection is that the idea of a trial assumes or presupposes the existence of God. Since we have not yet found an assurance of God's existence—as noted in Chapters 2 and 3—and since there is no apparent reason to presuppose it, the idea of a trial being conducted by a supernatural being can only be regarded as undue speculation.

2. The second argument says that even if the good are afflicted with suffering, this fact merely proves the existence of an after-life wherein an infinitely just and loving God will right all of the inequalities and injustices of this world. There are at least two objections to this argument. The first is that since the coexistence of god and evil is a logical incongruity, any fact deduced from this impossible combination can hardly be regarded as having been proven. The existence of an after-life is therefore neither proved nor inferred by the afflictions of the good. The second objection is that the theory of the after-life is derived from a presupposition or fore-knowledge of God's existence. Since we still have not found an assurance of God's existence and since there is no reason to presuppose it, the idea of the after-life can only be regarded as unevidenced speculation.

3. The third argument is that many evils are the product of our free will and that man, not God, is at fault for those evils of human origin such as crime, war, corruption, and vice, and, to a degree, even for those of natural origin such as drought and floods, both of which could be controlled if man would expend more of this energies on constructive instead of destructive ends. Since free will involves the possibility to do either good or bad, evil is a necessary consequence of it. But why free will? The argument answers that free will is an essential element of the highest kind of existence. Any creature which does not have free will is reduced to an automaton, a vegetable, or, at best, a pet. Free will means human suffering but it also means human dignity, and the former is more

than offset by the latter. The moral life, in other words, is the best life. God's justice is thus partly vindicated.

There are at least six objections to this argument. The first is that it fails to resolve the conflict of God and evil without stripping God of His omnipotence. If God cannot prevent evil, then god is not omnipotent. If god is not omnipotent, then He is not the God of our search as defined in Chapter 1. If God were truly omnipotent, evil would not be a necessity.

The second objection is that it is a matter of speculation, not fact, that free will is an essential element of the highest kind of life. It may be true that we can imagine no higher kind of existence, but this may be taken to illustrate the limitations of the human intellect and not the necessity of free will. A life with free will therefore is not necessarily the highest kind possible.

The third objection is that free will without the possibility of a concomitant evil is actually imaginable. The human body, for instance, might have been so designed by the Architect of the universe as to be incapable of rendering harm to any other human being, and it might also have been designed to be impervious to all harm, both human and nonhuman. That this task would have been complicated is obvious. That it would have been no challenge to the omnipotent Creator is also obvious. That evil is a necessary consequence of free will is therefore not evident.

The fourth objection is that the actuality of free will is disputable. In Chapter 6 we will see evidence that the human mind is shaped, affected, and afflicted by various physical, chemical, environmental, social, and psychological factors which give rise to serious doubts that our wills are truly and totally free.

The fifth objection is that in this difficult world, the prodigious pains of free will are not always offset by the diluted joys which accompany it. For instance, our free will is paid for in terms of frustration through the conflict of choice, fear of error, and the resulting insecurity which stems from these emotionally disturb-

ing experiences. Also, free will, as a practical matter, is sometimes almost worthless or non-existent when subjected to the rough demands of reality.

To illustrate, the 500 million inhabitants of India, in theory, have many opportunities to exercise their free wills. They may choose their own occupations, move to other parts of the country, move to other parts of the world, determine their leaders in free elections, choose their own religions, practice birth control to combat the population spiral, or rob their neighbors of whatever they have. In reality, however, things are not that easy. They take any job they can get—like it or not—which will remove them from the ranks of the unemployed; they do not bother moving to other parts of the country because things are miserable there too; they cannot move to other parts of the world because they do not have the money and even if they did, the immigration laws would prevent them; they do vote for their leaders but, somehow, their leaders have failed to fill their bellies; they do choose their own religions if a cultural inheritance may be considered a choice; they do not practice birth control because governments, such as ours, have not shown them how; and they cannot rob their neighbors of whatever they have because their neighbors have nothing. These people, then, are free to do whatever they are able to do, but they are able to do little. And it is not too difficult to imagine that many of them would gladly trade their free will for a daily bowl of rice, and that they would even think of themselves as shrewd bargainers in the process. Free will, then, may be desirable, but it is not edible, and its full richness can only be realized in the affluent society—a society which unfortunately includes only a minority of the world's population.

The sixth objection is that even if free will accounted for human evils, it could not do so for natural evils. If free will were exercised to bring natural evils under control thus preventing future sufferings, God would still be liable for the sufferings of

the past, especially those of primitive times when man had the will to control nature but not the means.

The argument from free will, then, by virtue of the above six objections, is not acceptable, and God's justice is still to be vindicated.

4. The fourth argument in this Christian theodicy says that evil is privation. Although this argument has already been examined and found unacceptable, it is worth noting that it is still considered by many Christians as one of the stronger cases in favor of God's justice. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, has been quoted as having said that evil is "the deficiency of some good which ought to be present."¹ Since evil-as-privation has already been shown to be a semantic gimmick, a half-truth, and an evasion of the issue, the intellectual abilities of St. Thomas, his church, and his followers may be deemed as less than infallible and the totality of their beliefs, their arguments, and their doctrines should be further thrown open to question.

5. The fifth argument says that since the finite, human intelligence is incapable of fathoming the infinite intelligence of God, the apparent incongruity of God and evil is a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is therefore not surprising that we fail to understand how evil can be a part of His loving plan. The problem of God and evil, then, may not be soluble but the very insolubility of it is explained by our limited intelligence. Of the eleven arguments in this theodicy, this is the one which is the least objectionable. It is the least objectionable because it recognizes the limitation of human intelligence. Then what's the problem? There are at least three.

The first problem is that to be consistent, the limitations of finite human reason must be recognized in other areas of theological thought. For instance, if human reason is limited enough to prevent a solution to the problem of God and evil, then why is it not limited enough to dilute our confidence in the existence of God?

The theologians, in other words, argue that we are smart enough to know what they want us to believe, but not smart enough to solve the conflict in their belief. But they can't have it both ways. If the problem of God and evil is merely a mystery, then everything regarding God is a mystery. The theologians have no way out of this problem.

The second problem is that this argument presupposes the existence of God and it does so at the expense of the antecedent reality of pain. Here's the key question: Which are we more certain of, that we have pain or that God exists? Our knowledge of pain, primarily, is not gained from theoretical calculations verified by systematic observations all of which are subject to human error. Instead, it is rooted in human existence. We do not reason that pain exists; we feel it. We know of its existence through our own existence. It might even be said that they evidence each other (I hurt, therefore I am, and vice versa). Since pain is as real as existence, its reality is as certain as death. We have seen, though, that the existence of God is not so certain since our human limitations—correctly brought out in this theodicy—must temper our confidence in Him. The existence of pain therefore is a fact more certain than the existence of God. In fact, it is *antecedently* more certain than the existence of God. God therefore probably does not exist.

The third problem is to calling the conflict between God and evil a mystery when it ought to be called an incongruity. The distinction between the two is that a mystery is a puzzle for which we have no explanation, but also for which there is no apparent contradiction of facts. An incongruity on the other hand, is not a puzzle but a plain contradiction of facts. A mystery is something we should ponder over; an incongruity is something we should reject. Since the coexistence of God and evil is an incongruity, it is something we should reject. If we do not reject it, we should

at least introduce a note of temperance into all of our beliefs and actions associated with a belief in God.

6. This argument says that God's sense of justice may differ from ours and that therefore we cannot hold Him accountable for the evils which confront us. Since this argument is basically a restatement of the previous one springing from the limitations of the finite human intelligence, the foregoing objections are still valid. The argument is therefore rejected.

7. This argument suggests that perhaps suffering is not evil and that, if so (and if my interpretation is correct), then God's justice need not be vindicated:

Is suffering evil? The saints never thought so, for we find them always desirous of suffering, and welcoming it with joy.*2

There are at least four flaws in this thinking. The first is that even though suffering may not have been evil for the saints, it still is for most other people. This argument is thus revealed as little more than a switch out of the common definition of evil into one less unfavorable to the theologians. The second flaw is simply that even if suffering is not evil, the common people are still common people and they can hardly be expected to welcome it with joy as allegedly did the saints. The third flaw is that if the saints did welcome suffering with joy, perhaps there was something the matter with them. The fourth flaw is that if the saints never thought that suffering was evil, then why did many of them devote their lives to reducing it?

8. This argument suggests that some evils are accompanied by occasional worthwhile consolations:

Sickness has taught many a man his utter dependence upon God, and has opened the heart of many a sinner to the consolations of religion.*3

There are at least two flaws in this thinking. The first is that no consolation can justify even one iota of suffering in a universe governed by an omnipotent and loving God. If God wishes to teach man his dependence upon Him, then He can find a better way to do it than to allow people to be sick.

The second flaw is that since some sick people really do feel that they have been taught their utter dependence upon God, there may be a psychological explanation for this experience. When a person is ill, his spirits may be low, thus making him abnormally receptive to anything or anyone who consoles or caresses him as does religion. If, through sickness, he should come to feel utterly dependent on God, this may indicate nothing more than how feelings of insecurity, tolerable in health, are enhanced and brought to the fore of a troubled mind in bodily distress, and how they are assuaged by something which promises that, in the end, everything will be all right. The point, then, is that sick people should not be known for their keen insights, but for their desires to escape suffering. That sick people are consoled by religion is undoubtedly true, but this speaks only for the influence religion can wield, not for its truth.

9. This argument is based on the dogma of original sin and it says that Adam

...lost for himself and for us the sanctity and justice received from God, and, defiled by the sin of disobedience, transmitted to all mankind death, the sufferings of the body, and sin, the death of the soul.*4

There are at least three objections to this argument. The first is that the dogma of original sin is based on the idea that guilt can be transmitted from one person to another. The justice in this plan is not apparent. Our judicial system would disallow any attempt to punish a son for the crime of his father, and our society never holds an innocent person liable for the misdeeds of the guilty. Our common sense as well as our intuitive sense of justice should therefore compel us to reject this argument as being based on a justice which is not only incomprehensible, but foul.

The second objection is that since the theory of evolution is so well supported and so widely accepted, any argument which tends to deny this theory, as does the Biblical story of Adam, is thoroughly objectionable. It may be contended that the story of Adam should be interpreted figuratively, not literally, and that when seen in this light, the objection is no longer tenable. But this can only introduce a new objection for if words and stories are not to be taken literally, then how should they be interpreted and who should interpret them? This is a tough question to answer and the theologians have a problem: If they interpret the Bible literally, they have a conflict with science. If they interpret it figuratively, they have a free-for-all. In either case they cannot resolve the conflict of God and evil.

The third objection is that even if the concept of original sin is not unjust and even if all theologians agree on the interpretation of Adam's fall, there are still other unsolved problems associated with this argument. Why, for instance, did God tempt Adam with the apple? In some localities it is considered a crime for an automobile owner to leave his keys in the ignition. This, of course, cannot prevent a determined thief from carrying out his ill deed, but it at least decreases the temptation and, supposedly, the number of thefts, especially in borderline cases of basically honest men who normally would never think of stealing until the delicious-looking fruit is placed in front of them. Adam was a happy

man without the apple and, therefore, God must share the blame for his crime. Why, also, after Adam had resisted temptation on his own, did God allow the serpent into the garden? Should not the mitigating circumstance of the serpent's malevolent influence call for a punishment less severe than the evils we experience in this life? Or has God's infinite mercy already been shed upon us—could things be a lot worse than they are? These are some of the problems of defending the dogma of original sin which is an indefensible dogma to begin with. When these and other problems are solved, that dogma will perhaps merit further attention but as it stands now, it does not.

10. This argument says that our sufferings are the source of supernatural satisfaction:

...our Savior made our ignorance, our concupiscence and our sufferings the occasion of supernatural satisfaction and merit. The supreme value of our spiritual struggle for heaven is ... the real purpose of God's permission of evil.*5

Apparently (if I interpret this argument correctly), the “real purpose” of ignorance, suffering and so on is that it gives us something to rise above and that when we rise above it this gives God satisfaction. There are at least two objections to this thinking. The first is that if God's permission of evil is justified by His satisfaction arising out of our conquests of it, then life is nothing more than a colossal game of cat and mouse, and God is revealed as a person having the power of a giant combined with the brain of a child—or a cat. The argument is therefore absurd and deserves no further mention.

The second objection is that it is inconsistent to assert, on the one hand, that the “real purpose” of God's permission of evil is known and then, on the other hand (in argument 5), that our under-

standing of the problem is precluded by our finite human minds. The contradiction is clear, and the argument is rejected.

11. This argument is one of consolation and it says that the evils of this world provide a contrast next to which our joys seem all the more joyful. There are at least five objections to this argument. The first is that although it is true that joy contrasted with evil appears all the more joyful, it is also true that contrasts are possible in the form of lesser joys and absences of joys. If it be argued that the contrasts afforded by lesser joys and absences of joys are not nearly as great as those afforded by evil, then it can be replied that the omnipotent God, if He so desired, could achieve the same degree of contrast by increasing the greater joys instead of enhancing the evils.

The second objection is that the idea of greater joy through contrast with evil is reminiscent of the story about the moron who enjoyed beating himself on the head with a hammer because it felt so good when he stopped. This is hardly a divine plan. In fact, it is moronic, and the idea of evil-contrasted joy is therefore rejected.

The third objection is not directed so much to the argument under discussion as it is to my own understatement of the second objection. There I said that the idea of evil-contrasted joy is moronic when, in fact, it is sub-moronic. It is sub-moronic because the moron's happiness is in two ways superior to ours: The first is that he beats himself only when he gets the craving for a little grief-contrasted joy, and the second is that he is free to adjust the intensity of the blow to suit his individual capacity for that style of happiness. The moron, therefore, has not only established an enviable rapport with life, but he deserves a citation for the comparative elegance of his design.

The fourth objection is that this argument can appeal only to those who are enjoying a respite from the harsher evils of existence. To the unsick, the unpoor, the unaged, and the unlonely, these consolations may (or may not) have some value, but to the

victims of dire misfortune, theoretical consolations can have an awful, hollow sound. One may as well inform the hungry who are pleading for bread that they should be patient, that someday, when the bread finally comes, their prolonged hunger will make it seem like cake. If there were a written guarantee that in the long run we would all have our share of the cake, perhaps this argument would carry some weight. But this is not the case. In the long run we die, whether we have eaten cake or not, and the time to escape suffering is now.

The fifth objection is that if there is a true consolation in the contrast of joy with evil, then there is also a true desolation in the contrast of evil with joy. The dubious value of grief-contrasted joy is thus negated by any reversal of the process, and the argument is without foundation.

Our study of God and evil is now complete. The main point of this chapter was that since our knowledge of pain comes prior to our knowledge of God, and since it is more verifiable and more certain than our knowledge of God, the presence of pain must therefore preclude the existence of God. God therefore probably does not exist.