

1

The Problem of Evil

In his expansive autobiography, the great twentieth-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. . . .

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.¹

While the problem of evil has exercised the minds of philosophers for centuries, it is no mere philosopher's conundrum. It does not take an encounter with the peculiar logical difficulties regarding evil to realize that there is a problem of evil. In philosophical environs the question of evil assumes a sequestered significance. But Everyman is just as aware of the problem as any philosopher is. Distinguishing between the existential problem of evil picked out by ordinary human experience and the more academic logical problem that concerns most philosophers as philosophers is now commonplace. The former is the problem of evil encountered in the "real" world of blood, sweat, and tears; the latter the problem considered from the relatively more comfortable perspective of the ivory tower. Of course, the logical problem of evil and the existential problem of evil are not unrelated in their purview. Rather, they represent different perspectives from which to regard what is fundamentally the same issue. The problem of evil must be felt before it can be pondered. Nevertheless, it is the same fact of evil that gives rise to the concern, whether that concern is essentially practical or distinctively theoretical. The practical and the

theoretical represent merely different points on a single continuum of concern with our experience of evil.

Some philosophers have been rather adroit in their expression of this theme. For Gabriel Marcel, the only problem of evil is what is sometimes called the "existential" mode of the problem. If Marcel is correct, this language intrudes a pseudodistinction and the so-called logical problem of evil becomes a pseudoproblem, or a mystery degraded to the level of a problem. To seek "the causes or the secret aims" of experienced evil, the professed goal of any theodicy, is to view evil "from outside," where evil no longer "*touches* me" and is therefore "no longer evil which is suffered." And evil that ceases to be suffered "ceases to be evil." So the only evil that exists is the evil that we encounter in our prereflective lived experience. Our ivory tower incursions into logical territory miss the heart of the matter.²

Even if we accept Marcel's corrective, and it is salutary that we learn to appreciate the priority that is to be reserved for evil as experienced, his insight does not entail that philosophical puzzles in this connection are simply about nothing. Furthermore, in the controversy about evil, the lofty realm of philosophical speculation and the mundane arena of hard personal experience are not mutually exclusive. Their respective concerns do not ride along parallel tracks, never to converge. The logical puzzles that preoccupy philosophers are generated by certain undesirable features of our experience (that is, particular evils) together with certain beliefs that we, or at least some people, hold about the divine nature. In fact, our very recognition of evil within experience involves the application of appropriate concepts and an appeal to distinctions we are given to making between what is good and what is evil. Langdon Gilkey observes:

Persons are thinking and reflective as well as merely existing beings. They have unanswered puzzles in their minds as well as unrelieved estrangement in their souls. They have skeptical doubts about the truth they possess as well as despair about the meaning of the life that is theirs. They are curious about intellectual answers as well as hungry for a new mode of being or existing. And clearly these two levels, the existential and the intellectual-reflective, are interacting and interrelated all the time.³

What Gilkey says here seems to be especially well illustrated in connection with the problem of evil.

All intelligent persons, and not philosophers only, are constrained to seek an explanation for our experience of pain and suffering. This observation finds subtle confirmation in the best of fictional literature. The literary imagination exploits an abundance of archetypes in its ruminations about this ubiquitous ingredient of human experience.

Who can read Albert Camus, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky, or Thomas Hardy without noticing the role evil plays in the lives of their characters and their interest in coming to terms with evil in their experience? The experienced reality of evil, as a central feature of the "human condition," begs the attention of all who are sensitive to the permutations of human existence.⁴

That serious discussion of the problem of evil is not the exclusive domain of professional philosophers is further evidenced by the numerous popular nonfictional treatments of the problem. It is interesting to note that even these display a marked regard for the logical and philosophical difficulties attending the question of evil, despite disclaimers to the contrary. Consider two examples. Rabbi Harold Kushner warns at the very outset of his national bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* that "this is not an abstract book about God and theology. . . . This is a very personal book."⁵ Kushner intends for his book to fill a rift in the landscape of theodicy, for he says regarding the other books he turned to in the face of personal tragedy that they "were more concerned with defending God's honor, with logical proof that bad is really good and that evil is necessary to make this a good world. . . . I hope that this book is not like those. I did not set out to write a book that would explain or defend God."⁶ Nevertheless, in reaching for an answer to his fundamental question of why "bad things" happen to "good people," Kushner not only betrays familiarity with the ordinary logical issues inherent in the problem of evil but even rejects traditional arguments purporting to solve the problem, and this precisely because of their inadequacy on logical grounds. His effort to formulate objections on this score is nothing if not a distinctly philosophical enterprise, however informally conducted.

In the inspirational book *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Christian author Philip Yancey asserts, "I will not attempt to address philosophers with this book. . . . Most of our problems with pain are not mental gymnastics." Yet he says, apparently with a sense of inevitability, that "some large philosophical questions I will leave *almost* untouched."⁷ Yancey's footnotes reveal a mixture of references both to popular writings and to semiphilosophical works. Both Kushner and Yancey exhibit a concern to redress the especially human side of theodicy. Yet they seem to recognize that, given this emphasis, their reflections and conclusions must remain sensitive to the principles of philosophy. A concern with the philosophical dimensions of the problem of evil appears unavoidable.

It seems that the popularity of the highly publicized problem of evil, even in airy philosophical circles, is due largely to the existential forcibleness of evil in routine human experience. It is the felt reality of

evil that impels even the philosopher; doubtless, no philosopher ever sought to address the matter who did not first sense that "all climates are not equally genial, that perpetual spring does not reign throughout the year, that all God's creatures do not possess the same advantages, that clouds and tempests sometimes darken the natural world and vice and misery the moral world, and that all the works of the creation are not formed with equal perfection."⁸

The most casual encounter with the philosophical literature on the subject of evil yields the impression that diverse formulations of the problem come down to essentially the same thing. In the final analysis, the greatest difference between diverse expressions of the problem of evil is their comparative degree of sophistication. The relative ease of posing the problem of evil philosophically is illustrated by two famous examples. The aristocratic Roman philosopher Boethius (c. A.D. 480–524) articulated the problem of evil with utmost economy of language: "If there be a God, from whence proceed so many evils?"⁹ Who cannot identify with this imposing question? The classic expression of the problem comes from David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Here Philo says to Demea, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [the Deity] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"¹⁰ Martin Gardner notes that "this argument, deadly and incisive, has been repeated endlessly by philosophers of all persuasions. I suspect that in every age and place, if you asked an ordinary atheist why he or she did not believe in God you would get some version of Epicurus's argument."¹¹

Skeptics are by no means the only ones who have formulated the problem of evil with such keen logical forcefulness and daring simplicity. The next chapter describes the manner in which the Christian thinkers St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Gottfried Leibniz have defined and addressed the problem of evil. But first, it is useful to delineate the distinctiveness of the problem of evil for theistic belief.

In its logical form the problem of evil is typically sketched against the backdrop of belief in a God having certain specific attributes. This is the God of classical theism, whose problematic attributes include omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Hume's formulation of the problem of evil is clearly directed against this Judeo-Christian conception of God.

Of course, it is true that monotheistic faith is not the only religious orientation that has had to face the problem of evil generally. "All religions take account of this; some, indeed, make it the basis of all they have to say."¹² The history of religions attests that evil is

everyone's problem. Even the sophisticated atheist is not exempt, for in a very important sense the problem of evil is not overcome by denying the existence of God. Though the experience of evil does not present the same theoretical problem for atheists that it does for religious believers of various kinds, the conceptual difficulty of accounting for the reality of evil and the practical challenge of coping with the experience of evil remain.¹³

Some theists have argued that, apart from some ultimate objective basis for assigning moral distinctions, there is the problem of adequately defining evil from an atheistic point of view. Nicolas Berdyaev, for example, appeals to this difficulty in explicit connection with the philosophical problem of evil: "The ethical problem presupposes a theodicy, without which there can be no ethics. If there is a distinction between good and evil, and if evil exists, God must be justified, since the justification of God is the solution of the problem of evil. If there were no evil and no distinction between good and evil, there could be no ethics and no theodicy."¹⁴ In response to this sort of claim, Kai Nielsen, for example, has objected to the accusation that there can be no basis for affirming the meaningfulness of human existence and of ethical norms without reference to religious values of some kind.¹⁵

This debate reflects an area of concern for atheists when confronted with the reality of evil that faces any person, believer or nonbeliever. The atheist certainly does not accept the thesis that the nature of evil cannot even be properly conceived without reference to some moral ultimate that inheres in a personal Being. And yet it would seem unsatisfactory for the atheist to deny the reality of evil for the sake of disbelief in God. There are two reasons for this. The experience of evil seems too immediate to warrant such a denial, and atheists have tended to rely on the reality of evil in framing their most compelling objections to the claim that God exists. Even objections that consist primarily in decrying confusion about impossible conceptions of God often refer, *en passant*, to the reality of evil.

Despite this universal concern with the problem of evil, when speaking of "the problem of evil" in this book I have in mind the particular difficulty (or cluster of difficulties) arising when Christian theistic faith encounters the reality of evil in the world and in human experience. This restriction of discussion to Christian theistic belief is due in part to the realization that the encounter between Christian faith and the experience of evil is internal to that faith itself. The redemptive aspects of Christian theology are central to the Christian tradition. In their redemptive nature these components are responses to the presence of evil.

Furthermore, the problem of evil has traditionally been associated

with the truth claims of the Christian religion. Historically, "the problem of evil" is the official label for a difficulty uniquely attending Christian theism, with its affirmation of divine omnipotence and omnibenevolence. While theoretical problems regarding evil may be posed for other religious traditions, the *prima facie* conceptual difficulties for these alternative religious perspectives can often be assuaged in ways not open to the Christian theist. This latter point calls for some independent explanation.

In almost every other religious orientation the specific logical difficulties attending evil vary according to their respective orientation's conceptions of God and evil, and *prima facie* solutions at their disposal are discoverable along one of two general avenues. Either the nature of evil itself is defined in a way that does not seem to risk contradiction with belief in the existence of God, or else the nature and character of God is conceived in such a way as to mitigate the difficulty that the reality of evil would otherwise pose. Often an alteration in the conception both of the divine nature and of the essence of evil go hand in hand. Either strategy has the effect of dissolving the theoretical-philosophical problem of evil by conceiving either of evil or of God's nature (or both) in such a way as to eliminate the appearance that these realities are ultimately irreconcilable. (A further strategy that is sometimes suggested involves some fine-tuning of the conception of human freedom.)

In the first strategy, that of redefining evil, two alternatives immediately present themselves. These are the antithetical positions of either concluding that evil is an unreality (as we find in the Christian Science of Mary Baker Eddy, Theosophy, Buddhism, and some forms of Hinduism) or regarding evil as a real metaphysical principle that coexists with the principle of good (as taught in Zoroastrianism). If either of these options is adopted, the *logical* problem of evil recedes into the background, more or less regardless of one's conception of the divine nature. It does so, however, at a price that the traditional Christian theist is unwilling to pay. The Christian believer must not deny the reality of evil, for then the redemptive aspect of Christian faith would be entirely superfluous.

The philosophical options concerning the nature of God are more numerous. They are, in fact, representative of a rather wide range of metaphysical viewpoints. At least three alternative conceptions of God each allow for the simultaneous existence of both God and evil by altering the concept of God in some way. This result is obtained when it is denied either that God is capable of destroying evil, that God is willing to destroy evil, or that God is capable of foreseeing evil. The most common of these three strategies is the first, which allows for a