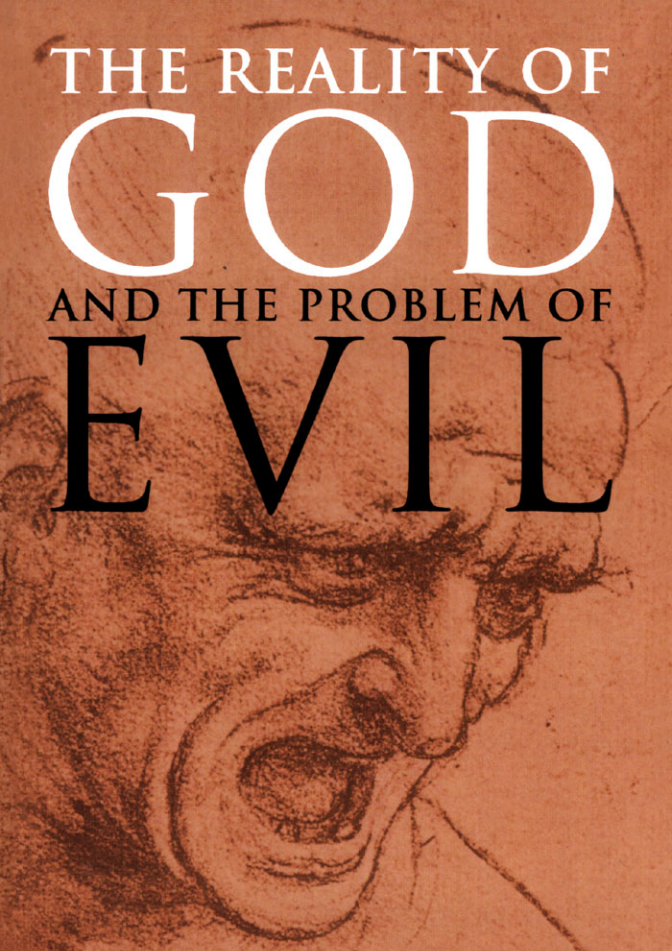
THE REALITY OF GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL



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and the Problem of Evil

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In memory of Gareth Moore (1948–2002)

A fine thinker and a great friend

Introduction

As we all know very well, people act badly – sometimes even atrociously. They hurt each other in various ways. Some of them commit gruesome murders. Some of them succeed in acts of genocide. Some of them just pain other people by what they say to them. As we also know, there is (and for a long time has been) a great deal of physical pain and suffering, and a lot of psychological pain and suffering which is not the doing or intention of any human being. Before people came on the scene there were prehistoric animals, many of whom must have died in agony.[1] And there are human beings alive today who are congenitally depressed, who have terminal diseases, and who are victims of natural disasters which leave them disabled. Our world is now, and has long been, full of anguish. Let me put all this by saying that evil is something with which to reckon.[2]

'Evil', of course, is a strong word that people now employ fairly rarely. Nobody likes being given an injection by a dentist (a bad thing to have to endure), but hardly anyone would call the pain of that injection an 'evil'. Then again, we may not approve of people who lie to excuse their late arrival at a party (perhaps this is morally bad), but we would not normally refer to them as evil for doing so. We tend to employ the term 'evil' when referring to a great or horrendous deal of badness – like that present in genocide, ruthless serial killing, wanton cruelty, cancer, the deaths of thousands of people by virtue of an earthquake, and so on. But badness is badness, even if it admits of degrees (from slight to horrendous). Medieval thinkers had one word for it in all its forms – *malum* (which we can translate either as 'badness' or as 'evil'). *Malum*, they rightly concluded, is all-pervasive. And, with this thought in mind, I say, once again, that evil is something with which to reckon.[3]

Given this fact, we might be forgiven for concluding that life is pretty grim and makes very little sense on the whole even if we appreciate much of what it gives us – like our families (if we have families), our friends (if we have them), the taste of a good wine (if we can afford it, or get someone to buy it for us), and the music of Mozart (if we have been privileged to have been introduced to it and are not deaf). Yet there are those who believe that the world is created and governed by a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and good. These people tell us that everything we encounter is God's gift to us and is guided by providence or mind (God's providence and mind). They insist that what we deem to be bad or evil in the world is no good reason for abandoning belief in God.

Given how we find the world to be, however, how can these people be right? With this question we come to what is commonly called 'the problem of evil'. It is, of course, an intellectual problem. I might wonder how to protect my family from terrorists, or I might worry about how to avoid heart disease or hurricanes. Then again, I might ask myself how best to control my desire to kill people, or how I might reform compulsive rapists. The problem of evil, however, is usually taken to be a *theoretical* matter, not one where the focus is on how one might bring about some desirable goal (a *practical* matter). In much philosophical literature it is commonly regarded as a philosophical challenge to belief in the existence of God. Does the occurrence of evil in the world show that there certainly is no God, or that there probably is no God? In response to this question some say 'Yes' and some say 'No'. If we take sides with either party here, or are interested in their positions, we are engaged with what now goes by the name of 'the problem of evil'.

How should we approach this problem? My view is that the right way to do so is to proceed by attending to what I would call 'basics'. That is to say, in order profitably to think about God and evil we need to begin by asking 'Is there a God?' and 'What is God?' So in this book I approach the problem of evil by trying to attend to such basics. In the very first line of his *De Providentia*, Seneca (3 BC–AD 65) writes: 'You have asked me, Lucilius, why, if a providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men. This would be more fittingly answered in the course of a work in which we prove that a providence presides over the universe, and that god concerns himself with us.'[4] You might think of the present book as written by someone partly seeking to follow Seneca's advice.

To start with I offer an introduction to ways in which people have reflected on God and evil since the time of David Hume (1711–1776), whose writings on God and evil did much to influence subsequent discussions of the topic (Hume is almost required reading, or an essential starting point, for the modern debate on God and evil). The purpose of this introduction is to give you (should you need it) a sense of how people have approached the topic of God and evil in recent years (though I also briefly refer to some less-than-recent authors).

I then proceed to talk about God and evil by focusing on the basics to which I have just referred. What I shall be arguing is very much what has been defended by many classical Christian authors – especially Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–1274), to whom I am particularly indebted and to whom I refer frequently in what follows. It has been suggested to me that I refer *too frequently* to Aquinas in this book, and perhaps that is so. Yet, as well as being a major figure in the history of theology, Aquinas is a thinker whose stature is increasingly acknowledged by philosophers (especially analytical ones).[5] And he strikes me as especially illuminating when it comes to issues with which I am here concerned. Aquinas, I think, is someone with whom we may approach the topic of God and evil with renewed vigour and insight. It therefore seems to me appropriate often to bring him into my discussion and sometimes even to engage in expositions of him and in evaluations of what some of his critics have had to say against him. The fact that I do so should not, of course, be taken to imply that points made by Aquinas, ones that I deem valuable, are not also ably made by other authors. Nor should it be taken to imply that a view is right just because Aquinas held it.

I shall be arguing that once what I call 'basics' have been attended to in a certain way, much that has recently been written on God and evil (by both foes and friends of God) should be viewed as either beside the point, just plain wrong, or even morally dubious. But I also want to say something positive about God and evil – to comment on how we might actually think of evil given God's reality. My basic line, counter-intuitive though it might seem, is that we can take much evil to be positively desirable. I deny that the problem of evil shows God to be certainly or probably non-existent. When it comes to evil itself, I argue that, up to a point at least, sense can be made of it (or, at least, of God's goodness in relation to it) if we view it as belonging to a

divinely created order, and especially if we view it in the light of some of the things that Christians (and *only* Christians) have said. Theologians sometimes suggest that evil is a mystery and that this is what one should stress with an eye on the problem of evil. My position, though, is that evil, as such, is not a mystery.[6] As we reflect on the problem of evil we should, I think, be ruminating not on the mystery (or problem) of evil but on the mystery (or problem) of good – our proper question being 'Why is there not more good than there is?'

It is easy to write on God and evil without going back to the basics of which I speak above. By this I mean (and only mean) that one is spared a lot of work if one does not take it as part of one's brief to approach the topic of God and evil by starting with questions about the existence and nature of God. Yet I take it as part of my brief to do just this. So I have a major problem at the outset. Discussions concerning the existence and nature of God are legion, and they raise all sorts of questions which cannot be fully dealt with in a single volume. In this one I have tried to deal with many of these questions in what I hope is a cogent way. But I recognize that much that I say could be developed and that there are objections to it which, for reasons of space, I simply pass over in silence. As I have said, though, it seems to me impossible fruitfully to engage with the problem of evil without having some (relatively developed) understanding of God at the outset. Such understanding is what I shall try to present as part and parcel of what I have to say about God and evil (though, as you will see, I believe that our understanding of God is extremely limited).

For comments on various bits of what follows I am grateful (with the usual disclaimer) to Christopher Arroyo, Victor Austin, Michael Baur, David Burrell, Norris Clarke, Peter Geach, Paul Helm, Luke Timothy Johnson, Gyula Klima, D. Z. Phillips, James Ross, James Sadowsky, Charles Taliaferro, Margaret Walker and Charles Wrightington. T. W. Bartel, my copy-editor for this volume, helped me considerably, for he went about his task as a serious thinker and not just as someone able to note where a reference is missing or where a semicolon needs to be provided. I am also grateful to Fordham University for awarding me a Faculty Fellowship (2004/05) which gave me time to work on this book as well as on other things.

In conclusion I should note that all biblical quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

Notes

1. It has been suggested that non-human animals do not actually suffer. See, for example, Illtyd Trethowan, *Absolute Value* (George Allen & Unwin: London, 1970), pp. 153f. I think that most people, however, would take this to be a highly eccentric view. Those who do not might express their belief in their position by taking a knife to an unanaesthetized cat. I doubt, though, that many of them would be prepared to do this. In this book, anyway, I take it for granted that non-human animals can undergo suffering. They cannot, of course, suffer in what we might think of as a 'refined' (or 'human') way. They cannot, for example, be pained because their colleagues do not value them enough, or because they have been rejected by people with whom they have fallen in love, or because they endure deep remorse for something they did. But, I am assuming, they can suffer as sentient physical organisms and often give every evidence of doing so. Pain behaviour is a reason for ascribing pain to something – even a non-human animal. And I presume that things which undergo pain undergo suffering.
2. For a brief, albeit partisan, survey of humanly inflicted and other evils, see William Hart, *Evil: A Primer* (St Martin's Press: New York, 2004).
3. In 'The Concept of Evil' (*Philosophy* 79, 2004) Marcus G. Singer takes only people to be paradigmatically evil. And, he says, they are evil because of their evil acts, these being 'acts that are horrendously wrong, that cause immense suffering, and are done from an evil motive – the motive to do something horrendously wrong, causing immense suffering' (p. 193). I sympathize with Singer's discussion since it aims, with some reason, to distinguish evil from what is less than evil. We do, however, typically talk of the evils of various kinds of sickness and other natural occurrences.
4. I quote from Seneca, *Moral Essays*, vol. 1, tr. John W. Basore (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1928).
5. The following volumes (a representative sample only) all testify to the truth of this observation: Brian Davies (ed.), *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002); Anthony Kenny (ed.), *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Ind., 1976); Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (Routledge: London, 1993); Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2002); Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in 'Summa Contra Gentiles I'* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1997); Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Creation: Aquinas's Natural Theology in 'Summa Contra Gentiles II'* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1999); Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002); Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003).

6. I mean by this that I do not think that evil is generally something that does not admit, at least in principle, of some kind of explanation. That there are numerous grounds for supposing that evil can be thought of as mysterious, however, is not something I wish to deny. If you think that I should, then you might benefit from reading Predrag Cicovacki (ed.), *Destined for Evil? The Twentieth Century Responses* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY, 2005).

One

The Problem of Evil

In part 10 of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, three characters (Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes) continue a discussion that has already been going on for some time.[1] The discussion, however, now enters a new phase. Cleanthes has previously been stressing the view that God is, in many ways, like human beings, and both Demea and Philo have resisted his way of talking.[2] As part 10 of the *Dialogues* gets under way they press their case against him by drawing attention to evil. 'The topic of human misery', says Philo, 'has been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence, that sorrow and melancholy could inspire.'[3] According to Demea, 'the united testimony of mankind, founded on sense and consciousness' shows that our pain and suffering is something undeniable.[4]

What kinds of woe do Philo and Demea have in mind here? To begin with, Philo is thinking of damage things do to each other. He says:

> The whole earth . . . is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent. Weakness, impotence, distress attend each stage of that life: And it is at last finished in agony and horror . . . The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation. Consider that innumerable race of insects, which either are bred on the body of each animal, or flying about infix their stings on him. These insects have others still less than themselves, which torment them. And thus on each hand, before and behind,

> above and below, every animal is surrounded by enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction.[5]

Demea subsequently suggests that people tend to triumph over animals that threaten them, but Philo merely continues to drive home his point. He notes that we are prone to worry and fretfulness even when we have achieved certain states of well-being, and he adds that we oppress each other:

> This very society by which we surmount those wild beasts, our natural enemies; what new enemies does it not raise to us? What woe and misery does it not occasion? Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud; by these they mutually torment each other. And they would soon dissolve that society which they had formed, were it not for the dread of still greater ills, which must attend their separation.[6]

Demea does not disagree with Philo here. Indeed, he goes on to enlarge on what Philo says by adding to his list of horrors. For, notes Demea, people are also the victims of their physical and psychological constitutions. We are, he observes, prone to disease; and we are subject to remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, and despair:

> Were a stranger to drop, on a sudden, into the world, I would show him a specimen of its ills, an hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strowed with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. To turn the gay side of life to him, and give him a notion of its pleasures; whither should I conduct him? to a ball, to an opera, to court? He might justly think, that I was only showing him a diversity of distress and sorrow.[7]

In short, Philo and Demea have three kinds of woe in mind – (1) ills inflicted on things in the world by natural predators and the like, (2) ills inflicted by people on each other, and (3) ills that affect us because of ways in which our bodies and minds operate (or fail to operate). And Philo thinks that all of these misfortunes place a pretty

hefty question mark over belief in God in so far as a likeness is pressed between God and human beings. He asserts:

> EPICURUS's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] 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?[8]

Cleanthes has been comparing God with people, especially morally good ones. Philo is now implying that badness in the world casts doubt on such a comparison. For good people alleviate or prevent ills in so far as they can. Given that many ills are not alleviated or prevented, the inference (so Philo is suggesting) is that God (if there be one) is either lacking in power or morally bad. And that is what others have concluded. In reply to Philo, one might suggest that there are ills of which God (though neither impotent nor malevolent) is simply ignorant. Yet God is commonly said to be all-knowing (omniscient), and with this thought in mind many have added to Philo's charge the codicil: 'Given the ills that there are, God (if there be one) is not omniscient, or not all-powerful, or not morally good; or he is some but not all of these; or he is none of them.' Yet, so it is often claimed, God is *all* of these things. So people thinking along Philo's lines (or thinking that they think along Philo's lines) have frequently insisted that theists are faced with a problem, one damaging to their position as theists – *the problem of evil*, as it is usually called, though, as we shall presently see, it makes sense to speak in this context of *problems* of evil (implying philosophically distinct problems) rather than of *the problem* of evil (implying only one).[9]

Problems of evil and some responses to them

(a) Critics of theism

(i) Hume

As we have seen, Hume (via Philo) appears to be suggesting that it seems hard to believe in God (on one understanding of 'God') given the existence of the evils that we encounter. But this is a very general point to make (and, arguably, not an especially damning one for the theist – after all, one can find it hard to believe in many things one knows to be real).[10] So one might wonder whether Hume wants a con-

clusion having more bite so as seriously to undermine theism. Scholars differ when it comes to interpreting the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (they differ as to which bits of the text represent Hume's own views), but it seems to me that Hume, in the end, wants to suggest that evil shows that there positively is no God (as Cleanthes conceives of him).

Once Philo has made his case (as reported above) Cleanthes responds by asserting that things in the world are nothing like as bad as Philo makes them out to be. He says:

> The only method of supporting divine benevolence (and it is what I willingly embrace) is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man. Your representations are exaggerated: Your melancholy views mostly fictitious. Your inferences contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness: Pleasure than pain: Happiness than misery. And for one vexation, which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments.[11]

Yet Hume does not give Cleanthes the last word at this point in his text. For, with Cleanthes having tied his version of theism to the belief that things are better than Philo depicts, Philo promptly insists that Cleanthes' claim is 'doubtful' and that pain is 'infinitely more violent and durable' than pleasure.[12] And Hume goes on to represent Philo as confidently resting his case against Cleanthes on this basis. Discussion of God and evil continues in the *Dialogues* beyond part 10, but nothing emerges to suggest that Hume is not himself happy with the conclusion that, if God is as Cleanthes takes him to be, then there is no God. He has Philo conceding that there *might* be a God even as Cleanthes conceives of him and even though the world is as Philo takes it to be. As the *Dialogues* as a whole makes pretty clear, however, Hume doubts that there is reason to believe in such a God.

So Hume's position on God and evil seems to be this:

(1) Evil in the world is evidence against the existence of God (on one understanding of 'God').
(2) On one understanding of God it might be possible for the evils in the world to be real and for God to be so as well.
(3) There is no reason to think that, in the sense of 'God' taken for granted in (1) and (2), there is a God.

Of course, the less than illuminating phrase in that summary of Hume is 'on one understanding of "God"'. Yet Hume is clearly thinking of God as portrayed by Cleanthes, according to whom God is only different from people when it comes to degree and allowing for the fact that he (unlike people) is ungenerated, incorporeal and everlasting. Philo's worries about God and evil focus on the notions of power, will and goodness. As is clear from many parts of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes believes God to be powerful, able to act voluntarily, and good. As is also clear, however, he takes God to possess these attributes in much the way that people do – only more so. For him, God and I are both powerful, able to act voluntarily, and good, though God is all of these things to a much greater extent than I am. In particular, so he seems to think, God is much better than I am from the *moral* point of view, and it is this picture of God that Philo, thinking about evil, seeks to undermine.

Let us say that you and I are fairly powerful if we can lift a chair (something that a flea, for example, cannot do). Let us also say that we have the capacity to will if we can just choose to make a pie (something that a stove cannot do). Let us also say that we might be considered to be morally good if we befriend people in need and act, in general, as someone like Mother Teresa of Calcutta did.[13] According to Cleanthes, God is like us in these respects, but he is more powerful, has more options for willing and is much better behaved. Now, so Philo (and Hume) appear to be saying, that view of God is at odds with the facts of evil. There might, Hume seems to think, be both evil and the God in which Cleanthes believes. But it seems *prima facie* unlikely, and it cannot be proved that there is such a God as the one in which Cleanthes believes. Or as Philo says: 'There is no view of human life or of the conditions of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes [of God], or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom.'[14] In short, Hume seems to be suggesting that, lacking a proof to the effect that there is a morally good and all-powerful God, the reality of evil should lead us to conclude that there is no such God.[15]

(ii) J. L. Mackie

Present-day attacks on belief in God based on evil derive much of their impetus from what Hume writes in the *Dialogues*. So it is not,

perhaps, surprising that one of the most influential of recent critics of theism who focuses on evil should be a well-known commentator on Hume. Here I am referring to J. L. Mackie (1917–1981), whose famous paper 'Evil and Omnipotence' has had a considerable impact on philosophical discussion, though its position can be distinguished from that adopted by Hume.[16]

Mackie crisply asserts that evil shows that there *cannot* be a God. He writes:

> In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.[17]

But is it true that theists who acknowledge the reality of evil are somehow contradicting themselves? In the work from which I have quoted, Mackie supports the charge of contradiction in three ways.

(i) First, he explains why we should think that God and evil cannot both exist.

(ii) Then he explains how they might both be thought to exist, though only in a way which rejects traditional views about God.

(iii) Finally, he considers a range of solutions to 'the problem of evil', solutions which, so he argues, are misguided.

To begin with, Mackie concedes that 'God exists', 'God is omnipotent', 'God is wholly good', and 'Evil exists' do not, when affirmed together, obviously amount to the manifest self-contradiction of statements like 'One and the same assertion can be simultaneously both true and false' or 'There is something which is both entirely red and entirely green'. The contradiction, says Mackie, 'does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms "good", "evil", and "omnipotent"'.[18] Yet, so Mackie thinks, we can supply such premises or rules. As he puts it:

> These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

From these principles, says Mackie, 'it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible'.[19]

Mackie's second move is to acknowledge that worries about the possible co-existence of God and evil can be set aside, but only at a cost. 'The problem [of evil]', he says, 'will not arise if one gives up at least one of the propositions that constitute it.'[20] So the problem does not arise if, for example, one denies the assertion that God is omnipotent. Nor does it arise if one denies that evil is real. As Mackie implies, however, most theists would not want to deny the assertions now in question. So, as Mackie also implies, giving up 'at least one of the propositions that constitute' the problem of evil is not a serious option for theists.

Some theists, however, without wishing to deny either divine omnipotence or the reality of evil, have tried to explain how the existence of evil can be reconciled with the omnipotence and goodness of God. In seeking to clinch his case against theism, Mackie mentions four such explanations – to each of which he offers counter-arguments:

(a) According to the first, good cannot exist without evil.

(b) According to the second, evil is necessary as a means to good.

(c) According to the third, the universe is better with some evil in it than it would be with no evil.

(d) According to the fourth, evil is due to human free will.

Mackie objects to the first claim by arguing that it effectively denies that God is omnipotent. For, Mackie suggests, good can exist without evil. An omnipotent God, he says, 'might have made everything good'.[21] In response to the second claim, Mackie sees no reason why an omnipotent God has to put up with evil as a means to good. It may, he says, be true that causal laws in the universe necessitate certain evils if certain goods are to arise. But, he adds, omnipotence can hardly be constrained by causal laws which obtain in the universe.

With respect to the third claim Mackie's main objection is that we are still left with a God who is prepared to allow for preventable evil. It has been argued that, even if good can, in principle, exist without evil, there are lots of particular goods which could never have arisen without certain evils. Take, for example, the goodness displayed in the lives of people who consistently care for people in trouble. Such goodness, it would seem, depends for its very being on the fact that people get into trouble. But, says Mackie, in willing a world in which goodness such as this exists, God is willing evil – evil which need never have been.

In turning to the fourth claim Mackie is addressing what is, perhaps, the most popular move made by theists in the face of evil. Commonly referred to as the 'Free Will Defence', this maintains:

(1) Much evil is the result of what people freely choose to do.
(2) It is good that there should be a world with agents able to act freely, and a world containing such agents would be better than a world of puppets controlled by God.
(3) Even an omnipotent God cannot ensure that free people act well (for, if they are free and not puppets controlled by God, what they do is up to them).
(4) Therefore, much evil is explicable in terms of God allowing for the possible consequences of him willing a great good.

However, and without denying the value of human freedom, Mackie finds fault with the Free Will Defence. For he does not see why God could not have made a world in which people always freely act well. He writes:

> If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right.

Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.[22]

(iii) William Rowe

We shall be seeing more of the Free Will Defence later. For now, however, let me turn to another anti-theistic approach to God and evil – the view that, though theists might not embrace contradictory beliefs in the way that Mackie thinks they do, the existence of evil is none the less *good evidence against* the existence of God.[23] Sometimes called the 'evidentialist argument from evil', this line of thinking (essentially a modern version of Hume's position) can be summarized by referring to William Rowe's much-discussed article 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism'.[24]

In general, Rowe allows that evil (e.g. intense human and animal suffering) might be justifiable if it leads to some greater good, a good not obtainable without the evil in question. With this allowance made, Rowe's basic argument is that there is unjustifiable evil which is good evidence against God's existence. Or, in Rowe's own words:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. [Therefore] [t]here does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.[25]

Since Rowe holds this argument to be logically valid, his main concern is to argue for the truth of the first and second premises.

The second premise, says Rowe, 'seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and non-theists'.[26] For Rowe, therefore, the really controversial premise is the first, and he admits that it might be false. Suppose we try to imagine an instance of pointless suffering. Though we may not be able to see that it serves a good which cannot be obtained without it, there might, Rowe agrees, be such a good. And yet, he continues, we have *good reason* to suppose that there *are* instances of

pointless suffering even if we cannot definitively *prove* that there are such instances.

Take, for example, the case of a fawn dying in agony as the victim of a forest fire. 'Is it reasonable', asks Rowe, 'to believe that there is some greater good so intimately connected to that suffering that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad?' Rowe's answer is: 'It certainly does not appear reasonable to believe this. Nor does it seem reasonable to believe that there is some evil at least as bad as the fawn's suffering such that an omnipotent being simply could not have prevented it without permitting the fawn's suffering.'[27] For the sake of argument, Rowe concedes that perhaps he is wrong with respect to the example of the fawn. But what of the multitude of instances of 'seemingly pointless human and animal suffering that occur daily in our world'? Turning to this question, Rowe maintains that the only reasonable conclusion is one unfavourable to the theist:

> In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.[28]

With this point made, Rowe holds that his first premise is a reasonable one and that, given also the reasonableness of his second premise, 'it does seem that we have *rational support* for atheism, that it is reasonable to believe that the theistic God does not exist'.[29]

(b) Theistic responses

Mackie and Rowe are clearly arguing for non-theistic conclusions.[30] What, however, have theists said in the face of evil? How have they responded to the charge that evil is proof of, or good evidence for, the non-existence of God? At the risk of simplifying somewhat, we may say that they have mostly done so by embracing one or more of the following lines of argument, some of which Mackie mentions.

(i) The 'We Know that God Exists' Argument

If I know that it often rains in England, I should rightly assume that something is wrong with any attempt to show either that frequent rain in England is impossible or that there is good evidence against its occurring. In a similar way, so it has been argued, we have grounds for supposing that God's existence is not impossible or subject to doubt even though evil exists. For, it has been said, we can know, not only that evil exists, but *also* that God exists, from which it follows (a) that something is wrong with any attempt to show that God cannot exist, and (b) that something is wrong with any attempt to show that there is good evidence against God's existence. Defenders of this line of thought sometimes offer arguments for God's existence. Taking *p* to be equivalent to 'There is a good, omnipotent, omniscient God', their suggestion is that there are positive grounds for accepting *p*, grounds which entitle us to hold that the existence of God is logically compatible with the existence of evil, grounds which also entitle us to hold that there is no evidence based on evil which shows that God does not exist.[31]

(ii) The Unreality of Evil Argument

This argument takes two forms. According to the first, evil is an illusion of some kind. Such is the view of the Christian Science movement, according to which, in the words of its founder, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), 'Sin, disease, whatever seems real to material sense, is unreal . . . All inharmony of mortal mind or body is illusion, possessing neither reality nor identity though seeming to be real and identical'.[32] According to the second form of the argument, evil is unreal since it is no positive thing or quality. Rather, it is an absence or privation of goodness.

What is this second form driving at? It can be found in the work of writers like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, and the first thing to say about it (since this is often not appreciated) is that it is not siding with Mary Baker Eddy and is not claiming that there really is no pain, or that there are no wicked people or bad actions. Augustine and Aquinas would never have denied the reality of suffering or sin. They acknowledge that people and other animals suffer, and that people can be horribly vicious as well as slightly bad. Much of their thinking depends on this recognition. On the other hand, however, they hold that what makes suffering or wickedness bad is the fact

that it always amounts to a lack of some kind. On their account, 'evil' or 'badness' is not the name of some independently existing individual (like a particular human being, e.g. Mary) or of some positive quality or attribute (like being feline). Rather, it is a word we use to signify a gap between what is *actually* there and what *could be* there (and *should be* there) but *is not*. There can be people, but there cannot, so Augustine and Aquinas think, be 'baddities' (things whose nature is captured simply by saying that they are bad). There can be wooden boxes, just as there can be wooden chairs. But, so Augustine and Aquinas would say, while 'wooden' signifies a positive property, shareable by different things (like boxes and chairs), 'evil' and 'bad' do not. 'Evil', says Aquinas, 'cannot signify a certain existing being, or a real shaping or positive kind of thing. Consequently, we are left to infer that it signifies a certain absence of a good.'[33] Just as to say 'There is nothing here' is not to say of *something* that *it* is here, so, in Aquinas's view, to say that *there is* evil is not to say that there is *any real individual* or *any positive quality*.[34] With respect to the topic of God and evil, Aquinas regards this conclusion as significant since he thinks of it as implying that God cannot be thought of as causing evil, considered as some kind of thing or as some kind of positive quality. Aquinas holds that God, as Creator, causes the being of all that can properly be thought of as existing (i.e. actual individuals and all their actual, positive properties). On his account, therefore, evil cannot be thought of as something caused (creatively) by God. It is, he thinks, real enough (in the sense that it would be mad to say that nothing is bad or defective or sinful). But it is not, he concludes, something created. Its 'reality' is always a case of something missing.

(iii) The Free Will Defence

As we have seen, Mackie refers to the Free Will Defence. As we have also seen, his verdict on it is negative. But according to many philosophers it is a good response to the charge that evil somehow shows that God cannot, or probably does not, exist. One such philosopher (famous for advocating the Free Will Defence) is Alvin Plantinga.

In 'Evil and Omnipotence' Mackie rejects the Free Will Defence on the ground that an omnipotent God could have made a world in which free people always behave well. According to Plantinga, however, we cannot know that this is so. He agrees that there is no contradiction involved in the notion of someone always behaving well. But, he adds,

whether someone freely behaves well in some actual situation cannot be determined by God. Created people must freely decide to act well, and they cannot do that if the fact that they act as they do is determined by God. 'Of course', says Plantinga, 'it is up to God whether to create free creatures at all; but if he aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures upon whose co-operation he must depend. Thus is the power of an omnipotent God limited by the freedom he confers upon his creatures.'[35]

It might appear from this last quotation that Plantinga wishes to deny God's omnipotence. Yet that is not the way he sees it. Theists have regularly denied that divine omnipotence means that God can do what is logically impossible, and Plantinga's basic point is that it is logically impossible for God to create a creature whose actions are both free and determined by him. Plantinga wants to say this since he thinks that a free action cannot be caused by anything other than the agent whose action it is. 'If a person *S* is free with respect to a given action,' he writes, 'then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not. It is within his power, at the time in question, to perform the action, and within his power to refrain.'[36]

(iv) The Means and Ends Approach

You would probably think me bad if I cut off someone's leg just for the fun of it. But you would probably not think me bad if I were a doctor who amputated a leg as the only way known to me of saving someone with gangrene. Why not? You would probably say something like: 'Because it is not bad to aim for something regrettable, something we might truly deem to be bad, if we are working toward a good at which we should aim (or are justified to intend) which cannot be achieved in any other way.' And this thought constitutes the basic thrust of what I am now calling the 'Means and End Approach'. Here again we have a line of thought referred to and rejected by Mackie, though it is one which has found many theistic supporters. According to them, the evil we encounter is a necessary means to what is good. Considered as such, evil cannot, they think, be appealed to as part of a *proof of* God's non-existence. Nor is it *evidence for* God's non-existence.

A notable and impressive contemporary defence of the Means and End Approach can be found in Richard Swinburne's book *The*

Existence of God.[37] To begin with, Swinburne endorses a version of the Free Will Defence. It is good, he thinks, that people should be significantly free, but God can only allow them to be this by also allowing them to act badly should they choose to do so. For this reason Swinburne deems human wrongdoing to be explicable as a means to an end (the end being a world of free creatures, the means being God's standing back and allowing them freedom). What, however, of pain and suffering not brought about by people? To this question Swinburne replies by suggesting that this can also be seen as a necessary means to a good. For it is good, thinks Swinburne, that people have serious moral choice to harm or help each other, and, he argues, choice like this can only arise against the background of naturally occurring pain and suffering. He writes:

> If men are to have knowledge of the evil which will result from their actions or negligence, laws of nature must operate regularly . . . if humans are to have the opportunity to bring about serious evils for themselves or others by actions or negligence, or to prevent their occurrence, and if all knowledge of the future is obtained by normal induction, that is by rational response to evidence – then there must be serious natural evils occurring to man or animals.[38]

One might say that there is *too much* naturally occurring evil. Swinburne, however, thinks it reasonable to conclude that this is not so. The fewer natural evils God provides, he suggests, the less opportunity he offers for people to exercise responsibility. To say that there is 'too much' naturally occurring evil, says Swinburne, is effectively to suggest that God should make 'a toy-world; a world where things matter, but not very much; where we can choose and our choices can make a small difference, but the real choices remain God's'.[39] Swinburne considers the possibility of God making himself evident to us so that we always choose well. He thinks, however, that God needs to be somehow hidden if people are to be genuine choosers. If God were really evident to us, says Swinburne, we would desire to be liked by him and our freedom of action would be undermined. 'We will be in the situation of the child in the nursery who knows that mother is looking in at the door, and for whom, in view of the child's desire for mother's approval, the temptation to wrongdoing is simply overborne.

We need "epistemic distance" from God in order to have a free choice between good and evil.'[40]

A line of thinking similar to Swinburne's can be found in John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (justly a modern classic on the topic of God and evil).[41] Hick also employs the Free Will Defence: human freedom is a good which entails the risk of evil (the assumption being that a good God would be happy to take such a risk). Then he endorses a line of thought which he claims to derive from the writings of St Irenaeus of Lyon (*c.* 140–*c.* 202). According to Hick, God cannot create a world in which people can morally mature and eventually enjoy a proper relationship with him (this being thought of as a good) unless he also creates a world in which there are obstacles to overcome. Hick understands evil in the light of God's desire not to coerce people into accepting him. He suggests that people are sin-prone creatures, created as such by God, but able, in a world containing naturally occurring evil, to rise to great heights precisely because they are given the opportunity to become mature in the face of evil. He writes:

> Let us suppose that the infinite personal God creates finite persons to share in the life which He imparts to them. If He creates them in his immediate presence, so that they cannot fail to be conscious from the first of the infinite divine being and glory, goodness and love, wisdom, power and knowledge in whose presence they are, they will have no creaturely independence in relation to their Maker. They will not be able to *choose* to worship God, or to turn to Him freely as valuing spirits responding to infinite Value. In order, then, to give them the freedom to come to Him, God . . . causes them to come into a situation in which He is not immediately and overwhelmingly evident to them. Accordingly they come to self-consciousness as parts of a universe which has its own autonomous structures and 'laws' . . . A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges.[42]

Athletes say 'No pain, no gain'. This is basically Hick's position when it comes to God and evil.