

## **IF THERE BE A GOD, FROM WHENCE PROCEED SO MANY EVILS?<sup>1</sup>**

The title of this paper is put in a question form and any believer in God has to face this question. Perhaps no other theological problem affects our day to day life directly as this problem of evil does. But this is a problem important for both believer and non-believer. To the believer, the problem of evil often gives rise to an internal tension powerful enough to shake his faith causing a perpetual doubt. The non-believer, on the other hand, sees this problem as a proof of inconsistency in different religious beliefs which makes the idea of a loving Creator highly implausible.

Of course, the problem arises not just due to belief in any God, but belief in God who is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good. Sceptics claim that if God had these three attributes, then there should not be any evil in this world. But our robust common sense tells us that there are innumerable evils in the world. If God can not prevent those evils, then he is not omnipotent. If God does not want to prevent them, then he is not wholly good. If God could not have foreseen them, then he is not omniscient. Thus, the sceptic claims that it is logically impossible to ascribe all these attributes to God and admit the existence of evil as well.

It is interesting to note that the believer does not deny the existence of evil, he rather emphasizes it. A believer does not see fewer evils than a sceptic. But then how can he fit this evil in his scheme of God possessing those lofty attributes? People have come up with different explanations which gives rise to a new subject within theology known as 'theodicy'. Etymologically it means 'justice of God'. Thus, theodicy is a study which defends God's justice and righteousness in the face of the existence of evil.

---

Perhaps, one of the classic treatments of this problem can be found in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. After explaining Hume's position, I will discuss J. L. Mackie's (who can be viewed as a successor of Hume in this respect) attempt to show inconsistency in different theistic beliefs. I will also show how A. Plantinga refutes that charge. In the conclusion I shall mention certain points about what I think to be the right approach to this problem of evil. Let us start with Hume's formulation.

After criticising Cleanthes' anthropomorphism and specially the design argument for the existence of God, Philo (who represents Hume) goes on to discuss the problem of evil. Philo begins by attacking the very concept of natural theology. According to him, by independent human reasoning we can never justify our religious beliefs. The true basis of religion lies on feeling and not on reasoning. The fact of human misery has led people to express these religious sentiments. In order to awaken our religious attitudes, we need representations of misery and wickedness of people,

"and for that purpose a talent of eloquence and strong imagery is more requisite than that of reasoning and argument."<sup>2</sup>

Demea also joins Philo in describing how the whole earth is cursed and polluted. Our suffering has given rise to untold agony and horror. There are distempered conditions of our mind like mental anxieties, disappointment, shame, etc., which constantly haunt us. People can not prefer dying for they are afraid of death too.

Philo contributes to this depiction of human suffering by saying that everyone is surrounded by perpetual enemies. Though man can win over all other enemies, he himself raises his own enemies, like violence, war, injustice, treachery, etc.

After all these reflections, Philo wonders, how can Cleanthes still hold his anthropomorphism to be true and how can he ascribe omnipotence, benevolence and omniscience to God?

We can reconstruct Philo's depiction of the problem as follows :

- (1) There is evil in the world.
- (2) God is omnipotent and omniscient.
- (3) God is benevolent (wholly good).

Now Philo claims that one can not believe in these three propositions simultaneously. Believing in any two of them would lead to abandoning the third one. If we believe (1) and (2), we have to say that God foresees all the evils and can prevent them but does not do so. This means God is not benevolent, for he is not willing to prevent them. Similar explanation applies to our believing proposition (2) and (3) or (3) and (1).

Philo's point is that to think of God as omnipotent and omniscient means to think that he could prevent evils if he wished to. Similarly to think of God as benevolent means to think that God would prevent evil if he could. Notice that denial of either of these two assertions would lead to abandoning at least one of those three attributes ascribed to God.

However, Professor Nelson Pike has made an interesting observation here.<sup>3</sup> He does not think that the claim that a being would prevent suffering if he could follows from the claim that he is perfectly good. He gives the example of a parent forcing their child to take a bitter medicine which might cause a little suffering for the child but would cure him from his disease. What Professor Pike is arguing is that from the mere fact that a being is perfectly good it does not follow that he would have to prevent all evils. He might grant some evils in order to avoid greater evils.

But one might ask here how can we know that God permits little evils in order to avoid greater evils. In other words, we are asking whether God has "a morally sufficient reason"<sup>4</sup> for his allowing evils. In the example mentioned above, I think that we all agree that the parents have "a morally sufficient reason" to allow that little suffering to their child.

What about God? In God's case it is humanly impossible to detect "morally sufficient reasons" for each and every suffering occurring in every individual's life. Even if Philo succeeded in making a long list of a number of reasons for allowing evils and then proving that none of them are "morally sufficient reasons", that list can never be exhaustive. At any point Cleanthes might mention one reason which Philo has not considered and might claim that one to be "a morally sufficient reason". If Philo takes up the task of disproving that,

it would lead to an infinite regress. We can never be sure whether God has "a morally sufficient reason" to allow evils.

Professor Pike mentions five different "morally sufficient reasons" for not preventing any given instance of suffering. All of them are quite interesting and give rise to a host of problems which I am not discussing here. However, a theologian might find two of them especially important. One might argue that God allows suffering because it brings in good which outweighs the suffering. Another proposal might be that God allows evils because they result from goods which outweigh the resultant sufferings.

Needless to say, both these positions are not immune from defects. And Philo rejects both of them. Taking the clue from the design argument, Philo argues that if a house was built wrongly, we would condemn the architect who has built the house. Similarly we would hold the Creator of the world responsible for any inconsistency in his creation (Notice, the design argument uses these types of analogy to prove their point).

But if we can prove the world to be a consistent one, can we infer the existence of a Deity who is responsible for consistency in his creation? Philo perhaps anticipated that question and quickly adds,

"however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence."<sup>5</sup>

From the consistency of the world we can only make conjectures about divine attributes but those conjectures will always fall short of inference.

Philo mentions four alleged causes of evil and argues that none of those causes are necessary or unavoidable. If we could manipulate those four circumstances, we could minimize the ill and misery to a considerable extent. Since the goodness of Deity is to be established only from these phenomena, we can not prove the attributes like omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence of God. As long as there is a single evil in this world, it should puzzle any believer.

On the face of these criticisms, Cleanthes says that Philo's representations of misery are exaggerated. He also goes on saying that

only by denying human misery altogether we can prove the divine benevolence. I think that Cleanthes' denial of human misery echoes St. Thomas Aquinas' theory of "privation" where evil is not a positive entity but the absence of some characteristics in an entity. The consequence of this theory is that God is not responsible for creating evil, he only creates beings. This theory, of course, has its own problems.

We have seen earlier that a theologian might argue that God allows evils, because those evils result from certain goods which outweigh the negative effects of those evils. Following this line, some theologians have tried to show that God creates a world with free autonomous agents capable of making free choices, which is definitely better than the world having no free individuals. Since agents can make free choices, sometimes they make wrong choices and suffering results. The capability of making free choices outweigh the negative results of man's wrong choices. This line of reasoning is known as free will defence in the history of theology.

To put this thesis in a different way, a world having creatures who freely perform good/bad actions is more valuable than a world having automata performing only right actions because they can not do otherwise. If God creates creatures and always causally determines them to do what is right, then actions of those creatures are not performed freely and hence do not have any moral worth. Hence, in order to have moral worth, God must create creatures capable of acting freely, choosing their own course of actions. And in doing so, some creatures choose the wrong path leading to suffering. Hence, God allows evils not because he is not omnipotent or not wholly good, but because he wants to maintain the moral worth of human actions. The existence of evil does not diminish God's wholly good nature, but glorifies it. In this way, some theists have tried to explain the existence of evil by ascribing it to the will of man rather than to the will of God.

I can imagine a sceptic reacting to this position by asking: If God is really omnipotent and wholly good, why can he not make creatures who always freely choose what is good? Then, actions of those creatures will not be causally determined by God and at the same time they will always opt for the right course because of their very own nature. And God's failure to do this is again inconsistent with his being omnipotent and wholly good. This question has been raised by J.L. Mackie.<sup>6</sup>

Mackie begins his paper by claiming that this problem of evil serves as the final death-blow to God's existence where it can be shown,

"not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another....."<sup>7</sup>

He picks up one after another different proposed solutions of the problem of evil and tries to exhibit their shortcomings. Let us see how he tackles the free will defence.

Let us start by making a gradation of different evils and corresponding goods. We will call pain or misery a "first order evil" or evil (1). Correspondingly, pleasure and happiness will be "first order good" or good (1). Now in the case of "second order good" or good (2), evil (1) is a logically necessary component. The more severe evil (1) would be the more heightened good (2) would be. Sympathy, heroism can be examples of the good (2). Examples of "second order evil" can be cruelty, treachery, etc. I think that Mackie wants to call all the man-made evils "second order evils" or evil (2).

Now using this terminology, we can express the free will defence as follows : Evil (1) is justified for being a logically necessary component of good (2). And evil (2) is justified by ascribing it to wrong choices of human beings. God is not responsible for this. To the question, why does God create human beings making wrong choices, it is replied that God wants that man should act freely rather than being innocent automata. Thus, freedom is regarded as good (3) which is more valuable than good (2). And evil (2) is a logically necessary component of good (3) just as evil (1) was a necessary component of good (2).

Mackie questions this assumption that evil (2) is logically necessary for good (3). In other words, why should man's making wrong choices be regarded as necessary for his being free? Since there is no logical impossibility in man's making right choices freely on some occasions, there is also no logical impossibility in man's making right choices freely on every occasion.

If the free will defence argues that making some wrong choices is logically necessary for freedom, then freedom would mean

"complete randomness of indeterminacy".<sup>8</sup> And if freedom is randomness, it is not related to our will. If the free act is not a result of an agent's will, then how can we attach any value to a free act? Why should we regard it as the most important good or good (3)?

Moreover, if God creates man with free will and if he can not prevent people from exercising wrong choices, God ceases to be omnipotent. If it is said that not that God can not prevent, but God abstains from preventing, then God is not wholly good. In many other theological contexts we do not think that by taking away elements of wrongness from the world God takes away its value too.

This, according to Mackie, leads to "the paradox of omnipotence: ."<sup>9</sup> God is an omnipotent being and creates certain things which he can not subsequently control. If God can not perform these things (which he can not control), then he has not achieved omnipotence. If God can create those things which he can not control then he has lost his omnipotence.<sup>10</sup>

It does make perfect sense to say that a man has made a machine and then has lost control of it. What we mean in this case is that though the man has built this machine, he lacks the details of how the machine works. He does not foresee the machine's actions. But since God is omniscient, we can not say that God lacks the knowledge of when man will make wrong choices. And this again will lead us to that paradox of omnipotence.

Mackie suggests a possible solution to this paradox by making a distinction between "first order omnipotence" or omnipotence (1) and "second order omnipotence" or omnipotence (2).<sup>11</sup> Omnipotence (1) is the unlimited power of God, while omnipotence (2) is the unlimited power of God to determine what power creatures should have. Then, we can say that after creating the world and distributing powers to the creatures, God ceases to have omnipotence (2).

But, the question still remains that if God continues to possess omnipotence (1), why can he not regain omnipotence (2) and act accordingly to create humans who always freely choose good ways?

The moral of all this, according to Mackie, is that we can not solve this problem until we modify one of the propositions believed

by a theist. But any modification will invite far-reaching consequence in a theist's schema.

Like Mackie, some other philosophers<sup>12</sup> have tried to refute this free will defence along the same line. All these challenges to free will defense boil down to one point: It is not contradictory to suggest that God might arrange laws of nature in such a way that men always freely choose good rather than evil. This assertion rests on two assumptions: i) God as a Creator must arrange the laws of nature and ii) It is not contradictory to say that human actions are done in accordance with the laws of nature and yet they are done freely.

Both these assumptions bring in certain problems. Regarding the first assumption, we can ask that though God creates the world, is he also responsible for the laws of nature? If he is responsible, can he change them at his will? If the laws of nature can be changed, how can we account for the deterministic explanations of natural sciences?

Regarding the second assumption, it would lead us to the age-old controversy of free will versus determinism. This problem arises due to a conflict between requirements of moral judgments and requirements of scientific explanations. One of the basic presuppositions of morality is that human beings are free agents. To make a moral judgment is to imply that the agent could have done otherwise, i.e., he could have performed an act different from what he in fact has done.

Scientific explanations, on the other hand, presuppose that natural events are strictly causally bound. Given the appropriate conditions, those natural events could not have been otherwise. This is why, scientists think that from the relevant causes if we can not predict its effect, we lack a proper scientific explanation of the event concerned.

Now the question is: Can we apply this scientific explanatory model to the study of human behaviour, especially in its moral aspect? Different responses have come up. People who are known as determinists regard scientific explanation as the paradigm and consequently explain away moral responsibility as an illusion. Indeterminists, on the other side, claim that some human actions are not amenable to scientific explanation and moral responsibility is a fact which we can not deny. The third response, which Professor T. Penelhum calls "reconcili-



ationist position"<sup>13</sup>, denies any real conflict between determinist and indeterminist positions. It claims that if we grasp the true nature of natural laws and that of human moral behaviour, we will see that the ascription of free moral choice does not run counter to the scientific explanatory model.

This very proposition has been asserted in very many different ways by philosophers like Mackie and his sympathizers, who have tried to refute the free will defence.

However, in the face of these criticisms philosophers like Alvin Plantinga have tried to clarify and revive the free will defence. He has dealt with this topic in many of his works, including *God and Other Minds* and *The Nature of Necessity*. In these books he has introduced some techniques of modal logic and tried to come up with a valid version of the free will defence. Let us narrow down our scope and see how Plantinga reacts to Mackie's objections.

We have seen earlier that Mackie thinks if God is omnipotent, then he can create man freely choosing always right actions. To put it in other words, God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good implies no free man God creates ever performs any evil action. To detect the fault in Mackie's argument, let us rephrase his thesis schematically following Plantinga:<sup>14</sup>

- (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good.
- (2) If God is omnipotent, then he can produce any logically possible state of affairs.
- (3) Therefore, God can produce any logically possible state of affairs (From 1,2).
- (4) That all free men always perform right actions is a logically possible state of affairs.
- (5) Therefore God can make free men such that they always perform right actions (From 3,4).
- (6) If God can make free men doing always what is right and God is wholly good, then any free man made by God always performs right actions (From 1,5).
- (7) Therefore, no free man made by God ever performs evil actions.

Thus Mackie tries to show that from premise (1) we can deduce premise (7) which denies that in order to be free, man must perform some evil actions. God can create man freely choosing always the right actions.

It seems that in this argument the premise (5) is most important and debatable too. Now premise (5) is true if and only if it is true that "God makes free men such that they always perform right actions" is consistent (5a). If by (5a) we mean that God makes free men and brings about that they always perform right actions, then this is not consistent for if God brings about man's actions then man is not acting freely any more. But if by (5a) we mean that God makes free men and these free men perform always right actions (5b), then it is consistent but gives rise to different problems. So, (5) can be meant to express that the proposition "God makes free men and those free men made by God perform always right actions" is consistent (5c).

But if (5) is equivalent to (5c) then it is also equivalent to the proposition that "If God is all good and the proposition 'God makes free men and free men made by him always perform right actions' is consistent, then any free man made by God performs always right actions" (6a). This is a slightly revised version of Mackie's premise (6). Plantinga doubts the truthfulness of this premise (6a). He argues "whether the free men created by God would always do what is right would presumably be up to them..."<sup>15</sup> He thinks that free agents can perform wrong actions by the way of exercising their freedom.

I suspect, Plantinga is wrong here. I do not think that the truth of the premise (6a) taken by itself can be denied. The premise (6a) is a hypothetical proposition. The antecedent part of this hypothetical proposition consists of two parts; i) 'God is all-good' and ii) "the proposition 'God creates free men and the free men made by him always perform right actions' is consistent." In this case by 'God is all-good' we mean that God always creates free individuals. Thus, if God always creates free individuals, and if that is not inconsistent with free individuals' performing always right actions, then I can not see why it does not follow that any free man made by God always performs right actions. When Plantinga says that free individuals' performing right actions depend on their free choices thereby making room for wrong choices, he is in fact denying the very second part of the antecedent

viz. that the proposition 'God makes free man and free man made by him always performs right actions' is consistent.

However, Mackie might still argue that since God is omniscient, he can foresee what wrong actions will be performed by his creatures. And since he is omnipotent, he could have created another set of possible persons who would not have committed those wrong actions. For any actual person, there is a possible person who is exactly like the actual person in every respect but does not perform any wrong action.

Moreover, if God instantiates those possible persons ( who are exactly like actual persons but always perform right actions), then God brings it out that those persons perform always right actions and refrain from doing wrong actions. But then these persons are no longer free agents; they could not have done otherwise and also they are not exactly like actual persons. God can not make a person free and cause him to do or refrain from doing certain actions. So, Plantinga concludes that like the property of not being created by god, "God can not instantiate any possible person containing the property *always freely* does what is right."<sup>16</sup>

The main point is that there are some possible persons having certain qualities whom God can never create, e.g., persons having the quality of not being created by God, or being blind and not blind. To this group also belong persons having the quality of freely doing always right actions.

It is to be noted here that people normally make a distinction between natural and moral evils. Natural evils are natural calamities like earthquake, drought, etc. Moral evils are created by man, for example, war, all sorts of human wickedness, etc. Of course, the boundary between natural and moral evil is not always clear and to some extent one is the result of another. Some philosophers<sup>17</sup> have argued that even if the free will defence can explain moral evils, it can not explain natural evils. The free will defence ascribes moral evils to wrong human choices, but natural evils can not be so ascribed.

Plantinga here makes an apparently dubious move. He takes recourse to the traditional theological theory of Satan and ascribes

natural evils to that powerful, non-human spirit who has rebelled against God in creating all sorts of havoc.

Obvious enough, critiques of Plantinga's free will defence will not accept this Satan story. They will ask for independent evidence for this Satan hypothesis. They will argue that we have direct knowledge of wrong human choices done by ourselves and other people in everyday life. We can realize where we or other people have gone wrong. But we do not have any such knowledge of the activities of Satan.

Plantinga makes two points against this scepticism which are worth mentioning. First, the question of independent verification of Satan hypothesis does not arise at all. The charge against theist was that his beliefs are inconsistent, one conflicts with the other. The charge was not that his beliefs are not verifiable or true. If the theist, by introducing Satan hypothesis, can come up with a coherent system, he can very well refute the charge of inconsistency. All that a theist needs is that the Satan hypothesis is not inconsistent with God's existence, which it is plainly not. Whether a theory is true or verifiable and whether a theory is consistent (i.e., whether different propositions in that theory cohere with each other), are two different problems and should be dealt with at two different levels.

Secondly, this whole issue of verification of the Satan hypothesis depends on some version of verifiability criterion which is open to many criticisms and suffer from limitations.

This is why, even Mackie who thinks this Satan hypothesis to be "at best part of the religious hypothesis which is still in dispute..." accepts Plantinga's ascription of natural evils to Satanic acts as "Formally ... possible."<sup>18</sup>

In recent years Mackie renewed his attack against free will defence and clarifies his own position. Mackie is not saying that God makes man freely choose good i.e., God forces man to choose good always. Then man is not free any more. Mackie's claim is that God might have made man such that from his very nature he would perform always right actions. If a man performs an act from his very nature without being compelled by any external force, then his acts are results of free choices.

When free will defenders argue that it is logically impossible for all men to do freely always right actions, they presuppose that to do an act freely implies refraining from doing that act at some point. "But in so far as freedom *definitionally* involves variations, it is quite implausible to regard it as such a higher good."<sup>19</sup> We have seen earlier that the free will defender takes freedom to be a higher good which outweighs the bad results it brings in. Why should we regard freedom such valuable if it implies abstaining from doing an act (that act might be highly benevolent one)?

But is it logically possible that man from his very nature always freely chooses good actions? Here Mackie seems to side with what we have earlier called "reconciliationist" view. On this view freedom and determinism are not incompatible. Since human actions are causally determined by human nature and if it is logically possible that man always freely chooses good actions, it is also logically possible that man from his very nature always freely chooses good actions. Here God is not bringing out those good actions, nor is there any external compulsion. These good actions arise from the very human nature. We can well imagine a society consisting of such perfect men.

The next question would be: Is it logically impossible that God should create men with such nature that they would freely always do right actions? The free will defender might say that by creating man with such particular nature, God will intrude into the agent's freedom. God creates man without any specific nature leaving their nature to arise from the environment, for example. But if freedom implies God's creating man without any specific nature and if it also suggests that man must abstain from doing right action at some point, then it is not clear why we are attaching such value and importance to freedom and trying to justify it in spite of bad results which it brings in?

We have seen earlier that Plantinga defines the notion of possible worlds in a strict way such that it is not possible for God to create any and every possible world, even though God is omnipotent. He introduces the notion of "trans-world depravity"<sup>20</sup> by which he means that in which ever possible world a man exists, if he is free, he performs some wrong actions. And it is possible that every creature (either in this world or in any other possible world) suffers from "trans-world depravity."

Here, we can ask Plantinga the same question which he has faced before: If God is omnipotent and wholly good, why can not he rectify this suffering from "trans-world depravity"? Is it because he is given a very limited range of materials out of which he will have to make his creatures? Then, he is not omnipotent. Is it because he can not foresee this defect? Then he is not omniscient. If he can rectify it and knows how to rectify it but does not act accordingly, then he is not wholly good.

One might try to solve this problem by weakening the terms involved here. This can be done in two ways: i) By denying that God is omnipotent in an absolute sense, or ii) By denying there is really any evil at all. The first possibility suggests that God is omnipotent but in a qualified manner. God can not create possible worlds containing logically inconsistent characteristics. He can not create a world containing people having the characteristics of not being created by God. This notion of qualified omnipotence might help to solve certain dilemmas. Inability to square a circle does not mean any limitation on the part of God. Omnipotence is the power to perform logically possible actions.

But, I think, this does not solve our problem. Both Mackie and Plantinga agree that God can not create certain possible worlds i. e., worlds which are logically inconsistent. The issue in their debate is whether the world containing people freely doing always right actions is a logically consistent world which can be created by God. In other words, they differ as to which possible world is logically consistent one.

The second possibility denies the reality of evil. This has been envisaged by St. Thomas Aquinas who holds that evil is not a positive element, it is the absence of some proper feature. It is due to "privation". God creates being only, and in so far as it is being, it is good. Evil does not need a creative agent, it is only absence of being.

Following this line, some people might argue that the term 'good' has different meanings when applied to man. God, being God, does always good even if those actions do not adhere to our moral standards. Doing good follows from the very notion of God.

It seems to me that these theologians are guilty of changing the semantics of ordinary language. We use terms like 'good', 'evil' to

evaluate things and not to decide whether things are real or not. The existence of things is independent of their being good or bad. The former is factual, while the latter is evaluative. It is only after finding out that an object exists, we can think of it as good or bad. An object's being good does not necessarily follow from its existence.

Moreover, when we apply the terms like 'good' or 'bad', we do so according to our standard of using it. This explains the fact that different societies use these terms in slightly different ways. Now a Being (God) whose standard is radically different from ours, who thinks earthquakes, famine, war, treachery to be good, is not worthy of calling good. For, our application of the terms 'good' implies that the thing called good satisfies standards which makes us apply this term to ourselves.

From the above discussion it is clear that the problem of evil boils down to whether it is logically possible for God to create a world containing people freely doing always right actions. Plantinga denies its logical consistency while Mackie does not find it logically impossible. Since God could have created such a world, which implies, according to Mackie, we have to alter our theistic beliefs.

We started our discussion with Boethius, question: "From whence proceed so many evils?" Let us assume that theologians can not give any proper answer to this question. They simply do not know the answer. What follows from this is the fact that theologians do not have sufficient knowledge of their own field of study. This might be embarrassing for theologians. But this does not imply anything philosophically relevant about the cause or justification of evil. There are very many problems in science of which scientists have so far very little knowledge or no knowledge at all. This does not imply anything scientifically relevant about the nature of those hitherto unknown things.<sup>21</sup>

One might argue that if there were some justifications of evil, theologians would have known about it. This is a highly implausible suggestion and goes against our commonsense experience of other fields of knowledge.

People have argued that if a theologian does not know what reason God has allowing evils, then he does not know whether God has

any reason at all for allowing evils and consequently he can not believe in God's omnipotence, omniscience and all-good nature any more. But one can give many examples where we claim to know certain facts without knowing the details of their explanation. I know that there is a greatest cheque<sup>22</sup> (which involves the largest amount of money) right now in the world, though I do not know its exact figure. One can give many similar examples from mathematics where we know that a particular number has such and such property, but we do not know what exactly that number is.

One might argue that we have independent reasons for believing in such numbers in mathematics, but what independent reasons does a theologian have for justification of evil? Let us suppose, a theologian replies that there are reasons for his belief but he does not know what those reasons are. Apparently this might sound paradoxical. But if we analyze the structural pattern of any discussion, this suggestion does not sound that implausible. In any discussion, all the parties involved start from certain given premises which all of them accept as true. Unless this is so, no fruitful discussion can take place. We can not start our discussion from vacuum. Everybody participating in that discussion believes there are good reasons for believing in those basal premises. If anybody questions those elementary premises, two consequences might follow; i) There would be no genuine fruitful discussion, for any disagreement presupposes a vast area of shared beliefs; or ii) The content of the discussion would change, for then participants would be discussing the validity of those hitherto agreed (by all) basic premises. This would have to be done with reference to some other premises and so on *ad infinitum*. If any of those premises in that series is questioned by any of the participants, then the whole chain of discussion would fall apart and the discussion would come to an end. So, we must admit that in order to have a genuine discussion, we must start with certain premises which we accept as true, though we can not tell exactly what reasons we do have for believing in their truth.

Thus, in the theological circle of discussion, people start from certain premises which are accepted by theologians, though they might not be able to state exactly what reasons they have for accepting those elementary propositions. If we doubt any of those basal statements, our discussion with the theologian comes to a halt and no one can learn



anything from each other. I suspect, this is the picture not only in theological discussion but in any discussion on any subject.

One possible way to solve the problem of infinite regress might be that of explaining those basic premises with reference to one another. We can justify premise p with reference to premise q and premise q with reference to premise p. No doubt, this would give rise to the problem of circularity. Here I would like to make two comments. First, theological elementary sentences may be circular, one is dependent on the other, but they are not inconsistent. Notice, Mackie's main charge against theology was the inconsistency in different theistic beliefs. Now we see that the theological statements are circular but not inconsistent. They are interdependent and because of their interdependence they give rise to a system which is at least coherent. Those basal propositions do not conflict with each other. One might start with a set of different premises and one can construct a different system, but this does not show any inconsistency in the previous system.

Secondly, this kind of circularity is inevitable in any attempt to explain the basic elements in any system of knowledge. This would be clear if we look at the history of development of different logico-mathematical systems. People started with some basic elements and defined them tautologically, for at that level they do not know any other element with reference to which they can define those basic elements. They applied certain rules to those basic elements and came up with a whole network of theorems.<sup>23</sup> Thus theological statements are not exceptions in being circular.

This is why to a true believer, the problem of evil is not a problem at all. He starts with the basic theological statements such as God is omnipotent, omniscient and all-good. When he sees evils, he concludes that God must have sufficient reasons to allow evils. He might not explain those reasons exactly. But this matters little to him. For a theologian, the question is not why or how these evils appear. He is concerned with how to justify these evils in the face of God's existence. Thus different theologies came up with different theodicies.

Further, the problem of evil is not merely a problem of logic, i.e., reconciling a number of beliefs as claimed by Mackie. It has another dimension. It has a reference to extremely private subjective experi-

ences of an individual. It might be viewed as a problem of logical consistency by an unbeliever who falls outside the theological system. But for a believer, this problem affects his day to day faith, his world-view, sometimes his very existence. The problem of evil does not arise in vacuum. It affects the very core of our heart. Since every individual occupies a unique position in this world and is affected thereby uniquely, the problem of evil affects each individual in its own way. It is not uncommon to observe that the same experience of pain turns some people to believers while some other people to unbelievers. This shows that it is not a matter of mere logic. These dilemmas can not be solved in abstract, i.e., without any reference to the experience of an individual, which again varies from man to man. We can not expect solutions to the problem of evil which would be accepted by all.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario  
Canada N2L 3G1

NIRMALYA N. CHAKRABORTY

### NOTES

1. Boethius, *Consolations of Philosophy*, Book 1, Sec. IV. I have taken this quotation from Nelson Pike's Introduction to *God and Evil* edited by him, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1964.
2. Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Ed. by Henry D. Aiken, New York, Hafner Publishing Company, 1957.
3. Pike, Nelson, "Hume on Evil" in *God and Evil*, (Ed.) Nelson Pike, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1964, p.88.
4. *Ibid.*, p.89
5. Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p.73.
6. Mackie, J. L., "Evil and Omnipotence" in the *Philosophy of Religion*, Ed. by Basil Mitchell, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 100.
7. *Ibid.*, p.92.
8. *Ibid.*, P.101.
9. *Ibid.*, P.101.

10. I will show a possible way out of this paradox in the concluding part of this paper.
11. Mackie, J. L., "Evil and Omnipotence," p.103.
12. Flew, A. G. N., "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Ed., by A. G. N. Flew and A. Macintyre, London, S. C. M. Press, 1955.
13. Penelhum, T., *Religion and Rationality*, New York, Random House, 1971, p.243.
14. Plantinga, A., "The Free Will Defence" in *The Philosophy of Religion*, (Ed.) B. Mitchell, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.109.
15. *Ibid.*, p.111.
16. *Ibid.*, p.114.
17. Flew, A. G. N., "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Ed. by A. G. N. Flew and A. Macintyre, McCloskey H. J., "God and evil" in *God and Evil*, Ed. by N. Pike.
18. Mackie, J. L., *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, p.162.
19. *Ibid.*, p.166.
20. Plantinga, A., *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p.184.
21. Some of the ideas expressed in these paragraphs are taken from *Belief in God* by George I. Mavrodes, New York, Random House, 1970, Chapter IV.
22. This example has been used by Professor J. Horne of University of Waterloo during our discussion.
23. There is an interesting problem about the status of these rules, a discussion of which will take me beyond the scope of the present paper.

## INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS

**Daya Krishna and A.M. Ghose (eds) Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives, Rs.10/-**

**S.V. Bokil (Tran) Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone, Rs.25/-**

**A.P. Rao, Three Lectures on John Rawls, Rs.10/-**

**Ramchandra Gandhi (ed) Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization, Rs.50/-**

**S.S. Barlingay, Beliefs, Reasons and Reflections, Rs.70/-**

**Daya Krishna, A.M.Ghose and P.K.Srivastav (eds) The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Rs.60/-**

**M.P. Marathe, Meena A.Kelkar and P.P.Gokhale (eds) Studies in Jainism, Rs.50/-**

**R. Sundara Rajan, Innovative Competence and Social Change, Rs. 25/-**

**S.S.Barlingay (ed), A Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian Universities (upto 1980) , Part I, Rs.50/-**

**R.K.Gupta, Exercises in Conceptual Understanding, Rs.25/-**

**Vidyut Aklujkar, Primacy of Linguistic Units, Rs.30/-**

**Rajendra Prasad , Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language Rs.100/-**

**Contact : The Editor,  
Indian Philosophical Quarterly  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Poona,  
Pune - 411 007**