Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi 53:1 (2012), ss.167-181
DOI: 10.1501/Ilhfak_0000001101

Human Freedom and the Problem of Evil*

WILLIAM HASKER
Professor Emeritus, USA

The problem of evil arises from the claim that the evil that exists in the world provides good, even compelling reason to believe that there cannot be a creator and ruler of the world who is perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness – that is, as reason to believe that there is no God. Among philosophers the problem is brought into focus by any of several *arguments from evil,* arguments that purport to show that belief in God is unreasonable, given the reality of evil. But the underlying problem is one that is readily perceived, and indeed keenly felt, by many non-philosophers as well, as seen in the following bit of dialogue from a popular novel:

> I must have had faith then. I certainly had something. How had I lost it? When had I stopped believing the god thing? I didn't need to worry it to death, I knew when it was: the night I looked down into the bloodless face of the little girl who had been raped and strangled by her father.[1]

In these words John Dunning's hero Cliff Janeway recounts his loss of belief in "the god thing." The words are compelling; we can readily understand that confrontation with such a horror might lead to a person's giving up belief in God. An incident such as this brings us squarely up

* This is the text of a talk delivered by W. Hasker on September 21, 2010 in a conference organized by Fifth Floor Seminars at the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University. Publication courtesy of W. Hasker.
[1] John Dunning, *The Bookman's Promise* (New York: Scribner, 2004), p. 80.

against the problem of evil in its most troubling form. We may feel concern, even anguish, at the sufferings sometimes endured by animals. But for almost all of us, the most disturbing thing of all is the bad things that happen to people – to good people, as often as not. How, we ask, can God possibly be justified in permitting this? Meeting this challenge is the task of the present lecture, which will present a *theodicy of moral evil*. That is to say, I shall endeavor to meet the challenge of arguments from evil by showing why moral evil exists, and why its existence does not disprove the existence of God or render belief in God unreasonable.

In addressing this issue, philosophers are accustomed to distinguishing *natural evil* from *moral evil*. Moral evil consists of harms that, like the little girl's rape and murder, are perpetrated by other people, or are the fairly direct result of moral wrongdoing on the part of some person. Natural evil, on the other hand, is harm that results from "natural causes" – earthquakes, hurricanes, and the like – and that apparently is not the consequence of wrongdoing by rational agents. At least in recent years, moral evil has been more thoroughly studied and discussed by philosophers than natural evil, and there is widespread (but not universal) agreement that the concept of free will must play an important role in any answer to the problem. Since this is so, a consideration of the concept of free will is required. What exactly is free will? Why is free will essential for an adequate theodicy? What are the implications of free will for God's governance of the world? Answering these questions will not by itself do the whole job of theodicy, but it is an important part of that job, and without good answers success may not be possible.

The Nature of Free Will

What then is free will? There are two main conceptions of free will that are prevalent among philosophers, commonly referred to as *compatibilist* free will and *libertarian* free will. According to compatibilism, an action is free if it is done without constraint or compulsion – that is, if we are free to do whatever it is we most want to do in a given situation. The view is called *compatibilism* because it is logically compatible with the claim that

everything we do is causally determined, either by the "strongest motive" (psychological determinism) or by physical causes. It is also compatible with the theological view according to which everything we do is determined by immutable divine decrees – that is, with what some would describe as absolute divine sovereignty. For compatibilists, the age-old problem of predestination and free will is not a problem at all; we "freely" choose to do exactly what God has predestined us to do.

The contrasting libertarian view insists that for an action to be free in the most important sense it is not enough that a person be able to do what she most desires to do. The further question arises, was it *really possible* for her to desire, and to do, anything other than what she in fact desired and did? If this was not possible, libertarians say, she is not really free; she may not be subject to external constraint or compulsion, but she is all the same controlled by her desires, and ultimately by whatever it is that determined that her desires should be as they are. In order for her to be really free, it must be *really possible* for her either to perform the act in question or to refrain from it; it must be *entirely within her power* to do one or the other. But this "two-way ability" is not at all guaranteed by free will in the compatibilist sense. It needs to be recognized, however, that libertarians will not hold that *all* of our actions are free in this sense. Choices are constrained by motives, and when we have compelling reason to act in a certain way, and no reason not to, the action may be inevitable. In view of this libertarian free choice is best understood as a choice as to which of two motives (or sets of motives) shall prevail, in a situation in which neither clearly predominates over the other.

The compatibilist view of free will has considerable currency among contemporary philosophers. Furthermore, it is attractive to those theologians who wish to maintain the strong view of divine sovereignty according to which God's decrees determine everything that takes place. The majority of Christian philosophers, on the other hand, reject this view and insist on a libertarian understanding of free will. One reason for this is that free will in the compatibilist sense is of *no real help* in answering the problem of evil; it can be argued, in fact, that it makes a rationally intelligible answer to that

problem impossible. On a libertarian understanding of free will, it is impossible for God both to grant to his creatures the gift of free will, and at the same time control their use of that gift in such a way as to guarantee that they will never choose evil. And because of this, the existence of evil (moral evil, to be exact) is not incompatible with the perfect goodness of God. But on the compatibilist view it is entirely possible for God to create free persons and guarantee that they will always freely choose good; he need only create them and, if necessary, influence them in such a way that their predominant desires will never lead to a choice to do something morally wrong. One must then ask, why did God deliberately choose to create persons in such a way that they would commit great evils, when he could have created persons who always did only good, *without in any way infringing upon their freedom?*

There is, however, an additional (and quite formidable) theological difficulty that results from a compatibilist view of free will. When such a view is combined with the doctrine of absolute divine sovereignty and predestination, we are forced to conclude that *God is entirely pleased with the world exactly as it is; there is no single fact he would wish to alter in any respect.* This may at first seem surprising, but the conclusion is really inescapable. For consider the situation of God prior to creation, as he is deciding what sort of world to bring into existence. God holds before his mind every possible scenario for world-history – all the different "possible worlds," as philosophers say – and selects the very one that he finds most satisfying and most in tune with his creative purposes. (Or, he selects "one of the best," if there are multiple worlds that are equally good.) Then he proceeds to put that scenario into effect, and of course there is no possibility whatever that the actual result will differ in any respect from that envisioned prior to creation. Since God in his wisdom has selected a world-scenario that, out of all those that are logically possible, was most pleasing to him, he cannot fail to be entirely delighted with the course actually taken by his creation.

But when we apply this conclusion to the actual events the world contains, the result is chilling. Why was the little girl in Dunning's story raped and murdered? Because God wanted it that way; this terrible event

was part of the world-scenario that God, in his unconstrained freedom, decided should become actual. True, it was her father rather than God who performed the actual deed – but given God's absolute predestination, the father could have done nothing else. And the same is true of the innumerable instances of rape, murder, infanticide – the list goes on and on – that occur in real life and not merely in fiction; every one of them happened precisely because God desired that they should happen, and took whatever steps were necessary to insure that this would be the case.[2] Personally, I find this thought appalling, and I am astonished that some fellow Christians (and some other theists) are able to persuade themselves that it is acceptable. Without doubt, there is a great deal in the Bible (and also, I believe, much in the Koran as well) that speaks against this way of thinking – that says that many things that take place in the world are *not* as God wishes them to be, but are in fact very much opposed to his wishes. Think of the lament of Jesus over Jerusalem – "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37) Or the anguish of Yahweh, described by Hosea, at the unfaithfulness of Yahweh's wife Israel. An interpretation of these scriptures that holds these events to be exactly what God has always wanted seems forced indeed. And if we are told that God is good and loving – indeed perfectly good and perfectly loving – in spite of this, we cannot help but wonder what words like "good" and "loving" can mean in such a context.

I conclude, then, that a libertarian view of free will is essential for any adequate solution of the problem of moral evil. It should not be supposed, though, that it is only for this reason that libertarianism commends itself. On the contrary, there are strong reasons supporting such a view that have nothing directly to do with the problem of evil. One such reason is found in the fact that all of us naturally view our own decision-making in this way, unless we have been talked out of it by philosophical, theological, or

[2] To be sure, not every such event need be one that God would desire considered simply in itself, apart from its relation to all other events. It remains true, nevertheless, that every event that occurs, however evil or tragic, is exactly what God intended to occur, and God has taken whatever steps are necessary to guarantee its occurrence.

scientific arguments. And perhaps not even the arguments can change how we really think about the matter. According to philosopher John Searle,

> for reasons I don't really understand, evolution has given us a form of experience of voluntary action where the experience of freedom, that is to say, the experience of the sense of alternative possibilities, is built into the very structure of conscious, voluntary, intentional human behaviour. For that reason, I believe, neither this discussion nor any other will ever convince us that our behaviour is unfree.[3]

The irony of this is that Searle is himself a determinist – or was one when he penned these words; more recently, he has come to entertain libertarian free will as a serious possibility, precisely because of what seems the ineluctable testimony of experience.[4]

Another classic argument in this debate concerns moral responsibility. According to compatibilism, a person can perfectly well be morally responsible (and, in the case of a morally wrong action, guilty) for an action the occurrence of which is guaranteed by sufficient causes that are entirely outside the person's control. To others this seems incredible, so they maintain that if we are to hold people morally responsible for their actions we must affirm libertarian free will. It would probably be fair to say that this argument has reached a standoff. Compatibilists have developed complicated counter-arguments to show that, under certain conditions, it is perfectly reasonable to hold people responsible for actions whose sufficient causes existed before they were born and were therefore entirely beyond their control. Libertarians find these arguments unconvincing, but neither side is able to persuade the other.[5]

---

[3]John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 98. Searle's point may call for further elucidation. I take him to be saying that while we may believe, on a theoretical level, that our actions are causally determined, we are unable to maintain this perspective when actually performing a voluntary action.

[4]For these more recent views see John R. Searle, *Rationality in Action (*Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), ch. 9.

[5]For a careful defense of compatibilism, see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and*

This argument between libertarians and compatibilists has generally taken place in the context of the assumption that the (alleged) sufficient causes of behavior will be natural causes, whether physical or psychological. The situation changes dramatically, however, when we introduce God as the ultimate controller of everything that occurs, including the morally wrong action. In that case we are supposing that God, with full knowledge and deliberation, intentionally creates a situation in which human beings unavoidably act in morally abhorrent ways, and then punishes those humans for that behavior, while remaining all the while beyond reproach himself. I can only say that I find this entirely incredible; further comment on it by me seems pointless.[6]

It should not be supposed, however, that the value of free will is merely negative, arising from the undesirability of the determinist alternative. The belief that human beings make a genuine contribution to the course of the world, deciding some important things concerning their own lives and the lives of others, is a significant component in our concept of the inherent dignity and worth of persons. The value and impressiveness of human achievements is greatly enhanced if we see them as genuinely the results of free human creative activity. And on the other hand, these things tend to be diminished in our eyes if they are merely the result of ineluctable "programming," whether by a deterministic natural order or by an all-controlling Creator. All sorts of experiences and relationships acquire a special value because they involve love, trust, and affection that are freely bestowed. The love potions that appear in many fairy stories can become a trap; the one who has used the potion finds that he wants to be loved for his own sake and not because of the potion, yet fears the loss of the beloved's

---

Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. A number of essays relevant to the debate will be found in Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also the books by O'Connor and Pereboom referenced in ch. 3.

[6] It must be acknowledged that theological determinists usually do not describe their position as I have done. But what I have written is strictly entailed by the views they espouse, so I do not believe my characterization is unfair. They will also explain that God's actions are for his own good and wise purposes – purposes which, however, are inscrutable to us. I will leave it to the reader to decide how much this mitigates the situation.

affection if the potion is no longer used. Free will seems, indeed, to be an integral part of our nature and worth as persons; without it, human life as we know it could hardly exist.

The Structure of a Human World

At this point I will introduce my theodicy by setting out certain very general, structural features of a "human world." My claim will be that it is a good and desirable thing that there should be a world with these features, because they make possible forms of goodness and value that otherwise could not exist. However, these same features also show us why the possibility for moral evil is unavoidable in such a world. These features are general enough that they might well apply across a broad range of conceivable worlds containing persons, but it would be idle to pretend that we can imagine such alternative worlds except by selecting and/or modifying features familiar to us from human society. So we speak here of a "human world," but we mean to speak about its characteristics in as broad and general a way as possible.

First, *it is good that there should be free, rational, and responsible persons.* This, of course, is a general claim about the goodness of existence. The denial of this claim would seem to amount to a sweeping nihilism, something that may be possible to entertain in the abstract but is exceedingly difficult to embrace sincerely. One might imagine, to be sure, that there could be an alternative scheme of things that would have comparable or greater value, and would not involve the existence of free, rational, and responsible persons. My own view is that it will be extremely difficult, and perhaps outright impossible, to flesh out such an alternative scheme in such a way as to give us reasonable confidence that we are dealing with a real possibility.

Second, *it is good that persons should have occasion and opportunity to develop their inherent potentialities.* Given that persons exist, this seems self-evidently true; it would be absurd to claim that it is a good thing that the persons with their potentials exist, but not a good thing that the potentials should be developed and manifested. To be sure, there are in a sense

potentialities for evil as well as potentialities for good; the response to this is that the potentialities for evil are merely the perversion of those for good, and involve no positive excellence of their own that deserves to be cultivated. These potentialities fall into two broad categories, perhaps inseparable in practice: potentialities for cultural development, and potentialities for the development of individual character. Both sorts of potentialities are conditioned by historical circumstances; the former more conspicuously so. Intelligent extraterrestrials observing the earliest members of the species *homo sapiens* would have had little evidence on which to predict the proficiency of some later members in non-Euclidean geometry, or the composition of such works as the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven.

A little reflection suffices to show that both sorts of potential require for their development an objective environment, one in which the reactions of surrounding objects to the actions of persons is generally reliable and predictable. Obviously there could be no sciences if the world of nature were not reliable in its reactions, and in view of this understandable and predictable. Music is possible because of the reliable acoustic properties both of voices and of the materials of which musical instruments are made; speech itself is possible only because patterns of sound are reliably transmitted through the atmosphere. And as John Hick rightly points out, "The presence of an objective world – within which we have to learn to live on penalty of pain or death – is also basic to the development of our moral nature." [7] This is one of the major themes of Hick's Irenaean or "soul-making" theodicy. It seems to me that Hick is right about this, and that this provides a further reason why the existence of a dependable natural environment such as the one in which we exist is a good thing to be celebrated and not an evil to be deplored.

It needs to be said here also that Christian faith contemplates a further goal of personal development, one that lies beyond the cultivation of moral character though that is an essential component of it. Our true end, it is said, is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever" – to become sons and daughters of God, living in loving fellowship with God, and with one another in the enjoyment of God's love. Clearly, this aim is less widely recognized in our

[7] John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," in Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil* (New Edition), p. 46.

society than is the importance of moral character, but for Christian faith it is non-negotiable.

Third, *it is good that persons be joined together in families, communities, and larger forms of social organization, within which persons are responsible to and for each other.* These communities are really presupposed in the two desiderata already stated: free and responsible personhood, and the development of the potentialities of persons, are for beings such as ourselves impossible apart from a community of some kind. (Even the hermit has been shaped by the community from which he has departed, and his project is largely determined by his wish to separate himself from it, or at least from some of its aspects.) Higher culture is possible only in a society with a considerable division of labor; the very expression, "civilized way of life" refers both to a certain quality of human existence, and to the social organization needed to sustain it. But communities and social organization inevitably involve differences of power and status between persons; these may be exaggerated or minimized, depending on the proclivities of a particular group, but they can never be eliminated entirely. The "noble savage," noble precisely because of his independence from organized society, is and must always remain a myth.

Finally, *it is good that the structures and processes of human societies develop from within, utilizing the potentials and the ingenuity of the members of those societies, rather than being imposed from without by a "higher power."* This statement tells us that the structures of human society are precisely *human* structures, the product of human ingenuity and foresight, and that it is good that this should be so. Or would it be better if the structure and organization of society were an "ideal" structure and organization, prescribed from above? It would, however, be the very same, decidedly non-ideal individuals who must live in this ideal society and carry out its requirements, and the results could hardly be expected to conform to the perfect ideal. (Consider the uneven success of recent attempts to impose the "democratic ideal" on nations around the globe.) In any case, no single ideal pattern would be feasible; a structure that was the best possible at an early stage of social development would be entirely unsuitable for a more advanced society.

These four features are familiar and in a sense obvious. It is also all too obvious how evil, specifically moral evil, can and does arise from these features. Free and intelligent persons can use their freedom and intelligence for self-centered purposes rather than for the common good. The opportunities for development can be neglected or, more ominously, perverted to serve evil purposes. The differences of power and status that are inherent in any society or community can be exploited by some to the detriment of others. The fact that the structures of society are humanly devised means that at best they will be imperfect, and at worst highly dysfunctional. All this is unfortunately too familiar in practice to need elaboration.

There are, however, some additional points that need further emphasis in order to maintain proper perspective. First of all, there is the absolutely crucial role played by sin in the entire process. Viewed in a theological context, sin and moral evil are very nearly coextensive, and their effect on human lives is pervasive and profound. And this means that there is something deeply disordered about the lives of human beings. This disorder was not part of the Creator's intention, and is not chargeable against the design plan of creation. As we contemplate the human scene we are not viewing a more-or-less faithful image of the divine intention, but a badly marred and distorted version of it. There is, to be sure, the absolutely vital question as to what a loving God would and should do to counter and overcome this distortion of his creative intention; the answer to this question is the central theme of the doctrine of redemption. Our present concern, however, is not with that doctrine but rather with the ground-plan of creation and the way in which it has been marred by sin and moral evil.

This having been said, it is also important here as elsewhere not to permit ourselves a myopic, one-sided emphasis on the evils in human life at the expense of the good it contains. Family life can be the source of great misery and the occasion for horrendous crimes. But it also provides the nurture that is essential for persons to grow to a healthy maturity, and it is the source of a very large part of the happiness enjoyed by human beings. Communities can be the locus for oppression and discrimination, but should not be viewed solely in this light; there do exist relatively sound and healthy

human communities in which many needs are cared for and in which human flourishing becomes a realistic possibility for many members. Nations can make war and wreak devastation on neighboring peoples as well as their own; they can also be a force, imperfect though it may be, for peace and justice in the world. It serves no good purpose if, when reflecting on the problem of evil, we abandon ourselves to an unrelieved pessimism that would serve us poorly in other facets of our lives.

Here is a further point: as we consider the communal dimension of human life, it is important to reflect on the fact that in communities we are responsible *to and for each other*. It is integral to the nature of any true community that its members establish standards for behavior within the community, work to inculcate the standards in members and potential members, and hold themselves and each other responsible for upholding those standards. The community standards will include some common concern for the welfare of members of the community; otherwise communal life might offer too little benefit to be worthwhile. An important implication of this is that it may be destructive rather than beneficial for a community if persons or other entities outside the community take over these functions, thus relieving the members of the responsibility for each other.

All this has implications for the role that we should expect God to play in relation to human communities. God's parental concern for his children will not be expressed by his taking over the role of the human parents in nurturing and instructing their children. God is concerned for the material needs of people, but he will not take over and preempt the efforts of those who can and should meet these needs by their own labor and ingenuity. God is Judge of all the earth, but he does not preside in the local traffic court, nor is he the omnipresent policeman, patrolling the neighborhood and making sure that nothing improper takes place on his beat. God's concern for human fulfillment and maturity is precisely what rules out certain types of intervention – at least, rules them out as routine and habitual occurrences.

A Free Will Theodicy

At this point it is time to draw the threads together and state formally the theodicy developed through our reflections. The Free Will Theodicy

comprises five propositions:

1. The world contains persons who are intelligent and free, living in communities within which they are responsible to and for one another. Human societies have developed by actualizing the inherent potentials of persons and utilizing these potentials for the development of progressively more complex social and cultural systems and progressively increasing control over the material environment.

2. The human world so constituted offers great potential for good in the realization and fulfillment of the potential of human persons and the development of human culture; beyond that, persons have the opportunity to become children of God, enjoying the ultimate fulfillment of which human beings are capable. The human world also offers the possibility, and indeed the reality, of great evil, as persons utilize their freedom to choose evil over good, short-term gratification over the common interest, hatred over love.

3. So far as we can see no alternative world that does not share these general features could offer a potentiality for good comparable to that afforded by the actual world; only free and responsible persons are eligible to become sons and daughters of God.

4. Frequent and routine intervention by God to prevent the misuse of freedom by his creatures and/or to repair the harm done by this misuse would undermine the structure of human life and community intended in the plan of creation; accordingly, such intervention should not be expected to occur.

5. In virtue of 1-4, it is good that God has created a universe containing human society as described; there is no basis for holding God morally at fault for doing so, or for supposing that a perfectly good Creator would have acted differently.

It is not to be expected that these five propositions by themselves will suffice to produce conviction. They function rather as a summary of a certain way of viewing the human world, a way that makes the evils that it contains understandable (though not acceptable), and counters the inclination we sometimes feel to blame the Creator or doubt his existence on account of these evils. This perspective on the world admits of indefinite elaboration … There are, however, two additional topics that have been less emphasized

here than in many other treatments of the subject, and that call for comment at this point. Both of these topics have to do with possible reasons for particular instances of suffering.

A pervasive theme in religious writings concerning suffering, and in some treatments of the problem of evil, is the moral and spiritual value for the individual that can result from such suffering. This is an important theme in writing on this subject because it plays an important role in the lives of many religious people. How is one to learn patience, except by dealing with difficulties that persist over a considerable period? (Everyone recognizes the irony in the prayer, "Lord, make me patient, and please do it *right now!*") Love in the deepest sense is sacrificial love, but sacrificial love requires an occasion for sacrifice, and most often this involves suffering of some kind. However, there is a pair of cautions that may be appropriate at this point. The first is, that while suffering can be the occasion for moral and spiritual growth, it may be unwise to assume that "the reason" for an instance of suffering is to provide such an occasion. This may sometimes be so, to be sure, but I suspect that we are not usually in a position to be confident that this is the case. This assumption is particularly problematic when the suffering involved affects another person. The sudden and unexpected death of a friend may lead me to reconsider my own careless attitude towards life, with beneficial results, but it would be worse than insensitive to assert on that account that my friend died in order that I might make such a reassessment. Furthermore, we should resist the temptation to claim that all suffering has such beneficial results; there simply are too many apparent counterexamples, instances in which suffering ruins someone's life with no visible benefit. On this topic I agree with Austin Farrer (himself a theodicist of the first order), who wrote, "Good, even animal good, such as physical health or a moderate plenty, is a more fertile breeder of good on the whole – yes, even of moral good – than evil of any kind can be."[8]

The other theme to which I wish to call attention is the perspective that views instances of suffering in the light of punishment for sin. The idea is

[8]Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 167.

not merely that (as was pointed out above) sin and moral wrong-doing are prolific causes of the suffering in the world. What we are now considering is the idea that particular instances of suffering are to be seen as punishment precisely for the sins of the sufferer. This idea certainly occurs in the Bible, and not only in such discredited sources as the friends of Job. It is also something that comes readily to the minds of some religious people, and it finds an echo even in our secular culture in the phenomenon of "blaming the victim." (If those who suffer can be viewed as doing so because of some fault of their own, this reduces our anxiety that we may be vulnerable to similar misfortune.) There is no reason to deny that suffering may sometimes be a punishment, but caution is needed here just as it is in extolling the beneficial results of suffering. Most often we simply are not in a position to assert that someone is suffering as a punishment; the role of Job's comforters is always open to us, but we should be leery of stepping forward to occupy it. Even less should we commit to the general proposition that *all* suffering is punishment for the sins of the sufferers. We are warned against this, not only by the example of Job, but by the words of Jesus, who denied that a certain man was born blind either because of his own sin or that of his parents (John 9:3). We should not doubt divine justice, but neither should we rush to interpret it.[9]

Summary and Conclusion

It is time to summarize. I have introduced the libertarian concept of free will, and argued both for its intrinsic merits and for its importance in finding a solution to the problem of evil. I then set forth a series of "structural features" of a world containing creatures that are rational and also free in the libertarian sense. These features are derived from the "human world" in which we find ourselves, but arguably would apply to any world containing free and rational beings. The features are, I maintain, the source of great excellence and value, but they also unavoidably create the real possibility for

[9]On one occasion Pope John Paul II was asked whether the AIDS epidemic was a judgment of God on the sin of homosexuality. His answer was a model of circumspection: "It is difficult to know God's intentions."

sin and moral evil. This was followed by the formal statement of my theodicy, in which I contend that the creation by God of a world with these structural features is a good thing, and that in view of this the presence in this our world of a great deal of moral evil is not something that should lead us to deny either the existence of God or God's goodness.

It is important to see what has and has not been claimed for this theodicy. I do not claim to have definitively identified "God's reasons" for creating a world such as this one. The ideas put forward here may best be seen as plausible conjectures, considerations that seem to be credible in the light of all we think we know about God, God's nature, and God's intentions. And it is argued that, if what has been said is the truth or at least close to the truth, then the presence in this our world of a large amount of moral evil should not lead us to deny God's existence or his goodness. But believers in God should always leave open the possibility that God has other and better reasons for what he does than any we have been able to think of.

There is another limitation which is inherent in the nature of the project here pursued. The theodicy that has been advanced, if accepted, serves as a kind of vindication of the divine plan of creation; it shows that the creation of a world like ours is not morally blameworthy on God's part. Nothing has been said, however, about what a good and loving God would do, and perhaps has actually done, to remedy the grave evils that have come to afflict our world. The three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have importantly different answers to this question, differences which have not been discussed in this lecture. It would seem, however, that the three faiths share a common concern, and can to some extent find common ground, in addressing the issues with which we have been occupied here.[10]

[10] Some of the material in this lecture has been adapted from ch. 6 of my book, *The Triumph of God Over Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).