

The Problem of Evil

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Detailed Contents

LECTURE I. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

In this lecture, I defend my approach to the problem of evil: my decision to approach the problem of evil by way of an examination of the argument from evil. I distinguish several different “problems of evil” and several different “arguments from evil”. I examine the contention that there is an “overarching” problem of evil, a problem that confronts both theists and atheists, and conclude that this contention is simply false.

LECTURE II. THE IDEA OF GOD

I present a more or less traditional list of the “divine attributes” and conclude that this list represents an attempt to flesh out the Anselmian notion of a “something than which a greater cannot be conceived”. I contend that the concept of God should be understood in this Anselmian sense, and that it is implausible to suppose that a “something than which a greater cannot be conceived” should lack any of the attributes in the traditional list. I raise and try to answer the question: To what extent is it possible to revise the traditional list of divine attributes without thereby replacing the concept of God with another concept?

LECTURE III. PHILOSOPHICAL FAILURE

My thesis in these lectures is that the argument from evil is a failure. But what is it for a philosophical argument to fail? I propose that a philosophical argument fails if it cannot pass a certain test. The test is the ability of the argument to win assent from the members of a neutral audience who have listened to an ideal presentation of the argument. That is: the argument is presented by an ideal proponent of the argument to an ideal audience whose members, initially, have no tendency either to accept or to reject its conclusion; the proponent lays out the argument in the presence of an ideal critic whose brief it is to point out any weaknesses it may have to the audience of “ideal

agnostics”. If—given world enough and time—the proponent of the argument is unable to use the argument to convince the audience that they should accept its conclusion, the argument is a failure.

LECTURE IV. THE GLOBAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

The global argument from evil proceeds from a premise about the totality of the evil (primarily the suffering) that actually exists. Having examined and refuted the popular contention that there is something morally objectionable about treating the argument from evil as “just one more philosophical argument”, I imagine this argument presented to an audience of ideal agnostics, and the beginnings of an exchange between Atheist, an idealized proponent of the argument, and Theist, an idealized critic of the argument. The idea of a “defense” is introduced: that is, the idea of a story that contains both God and all the evils that actually exist, a story that is put forward not as true but as “true for all anyone knows”. I represent Theist as employing a version of the “free-will defense”, a story according to which the evils of the world result from the abuse of free will by created beings.

LECTURE V. THE GLOBAL ARGUMENT CONTINUED

I begin with an examination of three philosophical theses about free will, each of which would, if it were true, refute or raise difficulties for Theist’s attempt to reply to the argument from evil by employing the free-will defense: that free will is compatible with determinism; that an omniscient being would know what anyone would freely do in any counterfactual circumstances; that free will is incompatible with divine foreknowledge. Having shown how Theist can show that these theses are doubtful (Theist’s use of the free-will defense does not require him to refute the theses), I pass on to a consideration of one of the sharpest arrows in Atheist’s quiver, “natural evil”—that is, suffering due to natural events that are not caused by acts of human will, free or unfree. I represent Theist as employing a version of the free-will defense that supposes a primordial separation of our remote ancestors from God, and as defending the conclusion that, according to this story, the suffering of human beings that is caused proximately by, e.g., floods and earthquakes, can also be remotely caused by the abuse of free will.

I invite my audience to consider carefully the question whether “ideal agnostics” would indeed react to this story by saying, “That story is true for all we know”.

LECTURE VI. THE LOCAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

Local arguments from evil proceed not from a premise about “all the evils of the world”, but from a premise about a single horrible event. They take the form, “If there were a God, *that* would not have happened”. (There are, of course, vastly many events on which such an argument could be based. Because, the “logic” of every such argument is the same, however, I gather all of them together under the rubric “the local argument from evil”.) I defend the conclusion that even if Theist’s arguments in the two previous lectures are indisputably correct, they do not refute the local argument, which is really an argument of a quite different kind. But I go on to say that if Theist’s response to the global argument is accepted, it provides materials from which a reply to the local argument can be constructed. This reply, oddly enough, turns on considerations of vagueness much like those considered in philosophical discussions of the sorites paradox.

LECTURE VII. THE SUFFERINGS OF BEASTS

Since there were non-rational but sentient organisms long before there were human beings, the free-will defense cannot account for the sufferings of those organisms. (At one time, it might have been possible to say that the sufferings of beasts were due entirely to a corruption of nature that was consequent on our first ancestors’ separating themselves from God. It is obviously no longer possible.) I present a defense (in no way related to the free-will defense) that purports to account for the sufferings of pre-human beasts and all the more recent sufferings of beasts that cannot be ascribed to the abuse of free will by human beings. I finally consider some problems that confront anyone who (as I have done) employs both this second defense and the free-will defense.

LECTURE VIII. THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

The problem of evil can sometimes seem to be a special case of a more general problem, the seeming absence of God from the world, the conviction that some people sometimes feel that, if there is a God at all,

he is “hidden”. In this lecture, I raise the question: What does it mean, what could it mean, to say that God is hidden? The answer to this question, as I see it, turns on an understanding of the divine attribute of omnipresence. Consideration of the implications of the omnipresence of God shows that there can be only one sense in which God is “hidden”: he does not present human beings with (or at least presents very few of them with) unmistakable evidence of his existence in the form of “signs and wonders”. The fact that God does not present all human beings with such evidence suggests an argument for the non-existence of God that is of the same form as the global argument from evil: “If there were a God, he would present all human beings with unmistakable evidence of his existence in the form of signs and wonders. And yet no such evidence exists. There is, therefore, no God.” I present a response to this argument that is parallel to my response to the global argument from evil in Lectures 4 and 5.

Lecture 1

The Problem of Evil and the Argument from Evil

Like most Gifford lecturers, I have spent some time with Lord Gifford's will and with past Gifford Lectures. The topic of lectures supported by Lord Gifford's bequest was to be:

Natural Theology in the widest sense of that term, in other words, 'The Knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence, the Knowledge of His Nature and Attributes, the Knowledge of the Relations which men and the whole universe bear to Him, the Knowledge of the Nature and Foundation of Ethics or Morals, and of all Obligations and Duties thence arising'.¹

Moreover . . .

I wish the lecturers to treat their subject as a strictly natural science, the greatest of all possible sciences, indeed, in one sense, the only science, that of Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation. I wish it considered just as astronomy or chemistry is.²

I am not unusual among Gifford lecturers in that I find myself unable to meet these terms. I cannot meet them because I do not think that natural theology exists; not, at any rate, if natural theology is understood as a science that draws conclusions about an infinite being—a perfect substance, a first and only cause of all things—from the data of the senses, and draws these conclusions with the same degree of assurance as that with which natural science draws conclusions about red dwarf stars and photosynthesis from the data of the senses. I do not have, as Kant thought he had, general, theoretical reasons for thinking that natural theology, so defined, is impossible. It's just that I don't think I've ever seen it done successfully—and I know that *I* don't know how to do it. Having had a standard philosophical education, I have of course

seen lots of arguments that, if they were as compelling as arguments in the natural sciences sometimes manage to be, would establish natural theology as a going concern. But, having examined these arguments individually, having considered each on its own merits, I have to say that I find that none of them lends the kind of support to its conclusion that the arguments of astronomers and chemists sometimes—frequently, in fact—lend to their conclusions. And this, I would say, is no more than a special case of a rather depressing general truth about which I shall have something to say in the third lecture: no philosophical argument that has ever been devised for any substantive thesis is capable of lending the same sort of support to its conclusion that scientific arguments often lend to theirs. (Natural theology, whatever else it may be, is a part of philosophy.)

What, then, am I to talk about if these lectures are not simply to flout the terms laid down in Lord Gifford's will? I might talk about the arguments I have alluded to (the ontological argument, say, or the cosmological argument) and try to say what I think their strengths and weaknesses are (for I do think they have strengths as well as weaknesses). If I were to do that, I should be as faithful to Lord Gifford's conditions as most Gifford lecturers have managed to be. I have decided, however, to try something else. I am going to discuss the argument from evil, the most important argument for the non-existence of that Being whose existence and attributes are said to be the province of natural theology. My general topic is therefore what might be called (and has been called—I believe the term was invented by Alvin Plantinga) natural atheology. I shall not speak as a practitioner of natural atheology, however, but as one of its critics. Here is a first approximation to a statement of my conclusion: the argument from evil is a failure. I call this a first approximation because there are many things one could mean by saying that an argument is a failure. What *I* mean by saying that an argument is a failure is so complex that I have reserved a whole lecture (the third) for the task of spelling it out.

As a first approximation to a statement of the *method* of these lectures, I could say that I intend to use only the resources of natural reason, to say nothing that presupposes any special revelation. Thus, I do not think it is stretching the truth to say that the topic of these lectures belongs to natural theology, although not natural theology in Lord Gifford's narrow sense. I will not try to establish any substantive conclusion about God; my only object is to evaluate a certain argument for the non-existence of God, and, of course, a being may well not exist even

if a certain argument for its non-existence is the most abject failure imaginable. It is because I do not intend to establish any conclusion about God that I cannot claim that these lectures belong to natural theology in Lord Gifford's sense. I cannot, moreover, claim that my arguments constitute a contribution, however modest or indirect, to a *science* of natural theology. My attempt to show that the argument from evil is a failure does not lend—I do not claim that it lends—the kind of warrant to this thesis that, say, a mathematician's demonstration of an irremediable error in a supposed proof lends to the thesis that that proof is a failure.

There are, however, aspects of these lectures that cannot be described as natural theology even in my weaker sense of the term. I shall at several points raise the question how what I say about the argument from evil looks from a Christian perspective. In the course of discussing the argument from evil, I shall tell various just-so stories about the coexistence of God and evil. And I shall later raise the question: What is the relation of these just-so stories to the Christian story? Is one of them perhaps identical with what Christianity says about evil? Are various of them entailed by what Christianity says about evil—are they abstractions from the Christian account of evil? Are some of them suggested but not strictly entailed by the Christian account of evil? Is any of them even consistent with the Christian account? (I do not mean to suggest by the way I have worded these questions that there is such a thing as *the* Christian account of evil; whether there is, is a part of what is being asked.) Since these just-so stories function essentially as proposed counterexamples to the validity of an argument, there is no reason for me to be embarrassed if it turns out that some, or even all, of them are inconsistent with Christian doctrine. (Jean Buridan once presented a counterexample to a certain rule of modal inference, a counterexample that incorporated the thesis that God never creates anything. It would hardly have been to the point to remind him that this thesis was inconsistent with the Nicene Creed.³) Still, the question of the relation of my just-so stories to the Christian story, to the Christian narrative of salvation history, is an interesting question, and I mean to address it. My present point is that when I am addressing it I shall in no sense be engaged in natural theology.

This is, however, a relatively minor point, for what I say about Christianity and the stories I shall tell is in the nature of a digression. Here is a more important point. In this lecture, I am going to say something about the relation between philosophical discussions of the

argument from evil (like those I shall be engaged in) and the topic whose name is the title of these lectures: the problem of evil. And this discussion, I think, belongs more to theology in the narrow doctrinal sense than to natural theology. To this theological topic I now turn.

The word ‘evil’ when it occurs in phrases like ‘the argument from evil’ or ‘the problem of evil’ means ‘bad things’. What, then, is the problem of evil; what is the problem of bad things? It is remarkably hard to say. Philosophers—analytical philosophers at any rate—who say that they are writing something on the problem of evil generally mean that they are writing about the argument from evil. (There are two anthologies of work on the argument from evil, both widely used as textbooks by analytical philosophers of religion. They are called *The Problem of Evil* and *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*.⁴) For philosophers, the problem of evil seems to be mainly the problem of evaluating the argument from evil; or perhaps one could say that philosophers see the problem of evil as a philosophical problem that confronts theists, a problem summed up in this question: How can you continue to believe in God in the face of the argument from evil?, or How would you reply to the argument from evil? A philosopher might even offer something like this as a *definition* of ‘the problem of evil’. If so, the definition would be too narrow to account for the way most people use the phrase. I suspect that this “philosophical” definition of ‘the problem of evil’ is too narrow simply because it is a definition; for a definition, in the nature of the case, gives a definite sense to a term, and, in my view, the phrase ‘the problem of evil’ has no definite sense. If so, any definition of ‘the problem of evil’ is going to misrepresent its meaning.⁵

I think the reason is this: there are really a lot of different problems, problems intimately related to one another but nevertheless importantly different from one another, that have been lumped together under the heading ‘the problem of evil’. The phrase is used to refer to this family of problems collectively. (We may call them a family since their association is no accident: they are, as I say, intimately related to one another.) Any attempt to give a precise sense to the term ‘the problem of evil’, any attempt to identify it with any “single, reasonably well-defined” philosophical or theological problem, or any single, reasonably well-defined problem of any sort, runs afoul of this fact.

But what I have said is too abstract to convey much. Let me try to say something about the way I conceive the membership of this family of problems. The family may be divided into two sub-families: the practical and the theoretical. By practical problems of evil I do not mean

problems about how to respond to evil when we encounter it in our lives, or at any rate I mean only a very small minority of the problems that satisfy this description. I mean problems that confront theists when they encounter evil; and by “encounter evil”, I mean primarily “encounter some particular evil”.⁶ By “problems that confront theists” I mean problems about how their beliefs about, their attitudes concerning, and their actions directed towards, God are going to be affected by their encounter with evil. Practical problems of evil may be further divided into personal and pastoral problems. A personal problem arises typically when one, or someone whom one is close to, suffers some terrible misfortune; or, less typically, when one suddenly learns of some terrible event in the public sphere that does not directly affect one but nevertheless engages one’s general human sympathies. (The two most historically salient cases of this are the reactions to the Lisbon earthquake and the Holocaust by contemporaries or near-contemporaries of these events who were not directly affected by them.) Pastoral problems are the problems that confront those who, in virtue of their clerical office or of some other relation to a person, regard themselves as responsible for the spiritual welfare of that person when the person encounters evil in the way I have just described. Personal problems of evil raise questions like these: What shall I believe about God, can I continue to love and trust God, how shall I act in relation to God, in the face of this thing that has happened? Pastoral problems of evil raise the question: What spiritual guidance shall I give to someone for whom some terrible thing has raised practical questions about his relationship with God?

Further distinctions are possible within these categories. One might, for example, as the above discussion suggests, divide personal problems into those that arise out of the person’s own misfortune (this was Job’s case) and those that arise out of misfortunes of others. (Even for the most altruistic person, problems of these two kinds may have quite different characters.) But let us turn to theoretical problems.

I would divide theoretical problems of evil into the apologetic and the doctrinal. Doctrinal problems are problems faced by theologians: What shall the Christian—or Jewish or Muslim—teaching on evil be? What views on the origin and place of evil in the world are permissible views for Christians—or for Jews or for Muslims? Doctrinal problems are problems that are created by the fact that almost all theists subscribe to some well-worked-out and comprehensive theology that goes far beyond the assertion of the existence of an all-powerful and beneficent Creator. Attempts by theists to account for the evils of the world

must take place within the constraints provided by the larger theologies they subscribe to. It is in connection with the doctrinal problems that “theodicies”, properly so called, arise. A theodicy—the word was invented by Leibniz; it is put together from the Greek words for ‘God’ and ‘justice’—is an attempt to “justify the ways of God to men”. That is, a theodicy is an attempt to state the real truth of the matter, or a large and significant part of it, about why a just God allows evil to exist, evil that is, at least apparently, not distributed according to desert. A theodicy is not simply an attempt to meet the charge that God’s ways are unjust: it is an attempt to *exhibit* the justice of his ways. But a doctrinal response to evil need not take the form of a theodicy. I speak under correction, but I believe that no important Christian church or denomination has ever endorsed a theodicy. Nor, as far as I know, has any important Christian church or denomination forbidden its members to speculate about theodicy—although every important Christian church and denomination has, in effect if not in just these words, insisted that any theodicy must satisfy certain conditions (it must not, for example, deny the sovereignty of God; it must not affirm that there is an inherent tendency to evil in matter).

Apologetic problems arise in two situations: when the fact of evil is used as the basis for an “external” intellectual attack on theism by its enemies; when theists themselves, without prompting from the enemies of theism, find themselves troubled by the question whether an omnipotent and loving Creator would indeed allow the existence of evil.⁷ It is the apologetic problem that is most closely connected with the argument from evil. The apologetic problem is, in fact, the problem of what to say in response to the argument from evil. It is, any rate, that problem as it confronts those who, for one reason or another, regard themselves as responsible for the defense of theism or of Christianity or of some other theistic religion. The ordinary believer, the Christian on the Clapham omnibus, who is asked how he can continue to believe in God in the face of all the evils of the world, may well be content to say something like, “Well, what to say about things like that is a question for the experts. I just have to assume that there’s some good reason for all the evils of the world and that no doubt we’ll all understand some day”. But, of course, even if this response is allowable on the Clapham omnibus, it’s not one that can be made in the St Andrews lecture-room.

The construction of a theodicy is not demanded of a philosopher or theologian who is concerned with apologetic problems. If apologists for theism or for some theistic religion think they know what the real truth

about the existence of evil is, they may of course appeal to this supposed truth in their attempts to expose what they regard as the weaknesses of the argument from evil. But apologists need not believe that they know, or that any human being knows, the real truth about God and evil. The apologist is, after all, in a position analogous to that of a counsel for the defense who is trying to create “reasonable doubt” as regards the defendant’s guilt in the minds of jurors. (The apologist is trying to create reasonable doubt about whether the argument from evil is sound.) And lawyers can raise reasonable doubts by presenting to juries stories that entail their clients’ innocence and account for the prosecution’s evidence without maintaining, without claiming themselves to believe, that those stories are true.⁸

Typically, apologists dealing with the argument from evil present what are called “defenses”. A defense is not necessarily different from a theodicy in content. Indeed, a defense and a theodicy may well be verbally identical. Each is, formally speaking, a story according to which both God and evil exist. The difference between a defense and a theodicy lies not in their content but in their purposes. A theodicy is a story that is told as the real truth of the matter; a defense is a story that, according to the teller, may or may not be true, but which, the teller maintains, has some desirable feature that does not entail truth—perhaps (depending on the context) logical consistency or epistemic possibility (truth-for-all-anyone-knows).

Defenses in this sense are common enough in courts of law, historical writing, and science. Here is a scientific example. Someone alleges that the human eye is too complex to have been a product of the interplay of random mutation and natural selection. Professor Hawkins, an apologist for the Darwinian theory of evolution, tells a story according to which the human eye, or the eyes of the remote ancestors of human beings, did come about as a result of the combined operation of these two factors. She hopes her audience will react to her story by saying something like, “That sounds like it would work. The eye might well have precisely the evolutionary history related in Hawkins’s story.” Hawkins does not present her story as an account of the actual course of evolution, and she does not take it to constitute a proof that the human eye *is* a product of the interplay of random mutation and natural selection. Her story is intended simply to refute an argument for the falsity of the Darwinian theory of evolution: to wit, the argument that the Darwinian theory is false because it is inconsistent with an observed fact, the existence of the human eye.

If the apologetic problem is the problem of what response to make to the argument from evil, there is not really just one apologetic problem, owing to the fact that there is not really just one argument from evil. And, of course, different arguments for the same conclusion may call for different responses. Let us look at the different forms that an argument from evil might take.

Many philosophers distinguish between the “logical” argument from evil (on the one hand) and the “evidential” or “inductive” or “epistemic” or “probabilistic” argument from evil (on the other). The former attempts to show that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God. The latter attempts to show that the existence of evil is strong, even compelling, evidence for the non-existence of God, or that anyone who is aware of the existence of evil should assign a very low probability to the existence of God. But this is not a distinction I find useful—I mean the distinction between logical and evidential versions of the argument from evil—and I am not going to bother with it. A much more important distinction, to my mind, is the distinction between what I shall call the *global* argument from evil and various *local* arguments from evil. The premise of the global argument from evil is that the world contains evil, or perhaps that the world contains a vast amount of truly horrible evil. Its other premise is (or its other premises jointly entail) that a benevolent and all-powerful God would not allow the existence of evil—or a vast amount of truly horrible evil. Local arguments from evil are arguments that appeal to *particular* evils—the Holocaust maybe, or the death of a fawn, unobserved by any human being, in a forest fire—and proceed by contending that a benevolent and omnipotent God would not have allowed that particular evil to occur. In my view, local arguments from evil are not simply presentations of the global argument from evil that make use of a certain rhetorical device (that is, the use of a particular case to make a general point); they are sufficiently different from the global argument that even if one had an effective reply to the global argument, one would not necessarily—one would not *thereby*—have an effective reply to just any local argument from evil. The problem of how to reply to local arguments from evil is therefore at least potentially distinct from the problem of how to reply to the global argument from evil. And this is the case (I contend) even if there really is something that can be called *the* problem of how to reply to local arguments from evil. It is not immediately evident that there is any such problem, for, even if there is a God and, for every particular evil, God has a good reason for allowing that evil to exist, it

does not follow that there is some general formula that would yield, for each particular evil, the reason why God permits the existence of that evil when the essential features of that evil are plugged into the general formula. But suppose there is such a formula. My present point is that even if such a formula exists, an explanation, a *correct* explanation, of the fact that God permits the existence of a vast amount of truly horrible evil, could not be expected to yield a statement of that formula—or any conclusion concerning any particular evil. One might, I contend, know or think one knew why God allowed the existence of vast amounts of evil in the world he had created and have no idea at all why he permitted the Holocaust—or any other particular evil. The following is to my mind a logically consistent position: the fact that there is a vast amount of truly horrible evil does not show that there is no God, but the Holocaust does show that there is no God and would have sufficed to show this even if there were no other evils. My point is a logical one and does not depend on the perhaps unique enormity of the Holocaust. I would make the same point in relation to “Rowe’s fawn”, the fawn that dies a horrible and prolonged death in a forest fire and whose fate never impinges on any human consciousness: even if God has a perfectly good reason for permitting the existence of a vast amount of truly horrible evil, it does not follow that he has or could have a good reason for permitting that particular fawn to suffer the way it did. In these lectures, therefore, I will regard the global argument from evil, on the one hand, and the many and various local arguments from evil, on the other, as presenting intellectual challenges to belief in God that must be considered separately.

Other distinctions could be made as regards arguments from evil. There is, for example, the well-known distinction between “moral evil” and “physical” or “natural” evil, which are commonly supposed to present distinct challenges to the defender of theism. There is the problem of animal suffering (that is, the problem of the sufferings of non-human animals) which is commonly regarded as a different problem from the problem of human suffering. I will address these and other distinctions at various points in these lectures. My purpose in these remarks has been to display some of the many different things that might be meant by “the argument from evil”, and to underscore the fact (I say it is a fact) that they are indeed different things. Having said these things, having said that there are many arguments from evil and, in consequence, many apologetic problems of evil, I serve notice that I’m very often going to ignore what I have said and, with no better

excuse than a desire to keep the structure of my sentences simple, speak of “the argument from evil” and “the problem of evil”. When I do this, what I say could always be easily enough revised to accommodate my official position.

My primary focus in these lectures will be on what I have called the apologetic problem. I am going to attempt to evaluate the argument from evil and to present my reasons for considering this argument a failure (in a sense of failure I shall explain in due course).⁹ What, then, is the relationship of my discussion of the apologetic problem to the problem of evil in its other forms—to personal problems of evil, or pastoral problems of evil? The answer is that the many problems of evil, for all they are distinct, do form a family and are intimately related to one another. (They are, I would say, separable into categories like those I have proposed only by a severe act of intellectual abstraction. In practice, in concrete cases, they run into one another; they so speak raise one another.) It is, fortunately, true that anything of value that is said in response to any of these problems is very likely to have implications, and by no means trivial ones, for what can be said in response to the others. I therefore contend that what I shall say on the question as to whether the evils of the world provide any sort of cogent argument for the non-existence of God will have ramifications for what I, or someone else who accepts what I say, should say in response to other problems that evil raises for believers.

I will not attempt to say any of these other things myself. For one thing, I am, by my nature, the wrong person to say them. If a grieving mother whose child had just died of leukemia were to say to me, “How could God do this?”, my first inclination would be to answer her by saying, “But you already knew that the children of lots of other mothers have died of leukemia. You were willing to say that he must have had some good reason in those cases. Surely you see that it’s just irrational to have a different response when it’s your own child who dies of leukemia?” Now I see as clearly as you do that this would be an abysmally stupid and cruel thing to say, and even I wouldn’t in fact say it. I should, however, have to bite back an impulse to say it, and that’s why I’m the wrong person to respond to that question under those circumstances. And if what I’d be inclined to say would be a stupid and cruel thing to say in the circumstances I’ve imagined, it would be equally stupid and cruel to respond to the mother’s question with some sort of just-so story about why a loving and all-powerful God might allow such things to happen, even given that this just-so story would, in another

context, constitute a brilliant refutation of the argument from evil.¹⁰ Nevertheless, or so I think, there is an important connection between theoretical discussions of the argument from evil and the real sorrows, the real despair, that attend life in this world. Perhaps an example will show something about why this is so.

One component of the just-so story which will be the core of my reply to the argument from evil is this: Many of the horrible things that happen in the course of human life have no explanation whatever; they just happen, and, apart from considerations of efficient causation, there is no answer to the question why they happen; they are not a part of God's plan for the world; they have no meaning. I have published a version of this just-so story,¹¹ and I have had the following response from a clergyman, Dr Stephen Bilynskyj (I quote, with his permission, a part of a letter he sent me after he had read what I had written):

As a pastor, I believe that some sort of view of providence which allows for genuine chance is essential in counseling those facing what I often call the "practical problem of evil". A grieving person needs to be able to trust in God's direction in her life and the world, without having to make God directly responsible for every event that occurs. The message of the Gospel is not, I believe, that everything that occurs has some purpose. Rather, it is that God's power is able to use and transform any event through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus a person may cease a fruitless search for reasons for what happens, and seek the strength that God offers to live with what happens. Such an approach is very different from simply assuming, fideistically, that there must be reasons for every event, but we are incapable of knowing them.¹²

The relevance of a theoretical discussion of the argument from evil to a pastoral problem of evil is, or can be, this: it may provide materials the pastor can make use of. It is asking too much, it is asking the wrong thing entirely, of a philosopher's or theologian's response to the argument from evil, to ask that it be suitable reading for a mother who has lost a child. But if one cannot ask, one can at any rate hope, that it will be suitable reading for a pastor whose duty it is to minister to people in situations like hers. And that hope, in my experience, can sometimes be fulfilled.

I will not, in these lectures, try to say anything to bring that hope to fulfillment. It is not, in my view, advisable to try to do that sort of thing. If I were to try to say something that could be "immediately" useful to ordinary believers to whom some terrible thing had happened or to the pastors who ministered to them, I should almost certainly fall between two stools: I should neither give the argument from evil its intellectual

due nor say anything that would be of any aid to the grieving Christian. The task I propose for myself is a purely intellectual one. I am going to do the only thing having to do with the problem of evil that I am not manifestly unqualified to do. I am going to try to show that the argument from evil is a failure.

I now turn to the topic of evil. I have said that in the phrases 'the problem of evil' and 'the argument from evil', the word 'evil' means simply 'bad things'. And this is correct. That is what the word does mean in those phrases. But why *that* word? Does the word 'evil' not suggest a much narrower idea? (Consider the familiar phrases 'the evil empire' and 'the axis of evil'.) Does the word not bring to mind Sauron and his minions or at any rate Heinrich Himmler and Pol Pot? Mr Gore Vidal has gone so far as to suggest that the idea that there *is* such a thing as evil is a Christian invention, that evil is, like sin, an illusory bugbear that the Church has foisted on a credulous humanity. Whatever plausibility his thesis may have in a world that has just got through the twentieth century, it was, surely, not Vidal's intention to suggest that the idea that bad things happen was an invention of St Paul and the Fathers of the Church. It is evident that one meaning of 'evil' is something like 'the extreme reaches of moral depravity', especially those parts of the extreme reaches of moral depravity that feature delight in systematic cruelty and depraved indifference to the suffering consequent on one's acts. In this sense of the word 'evil', it is reserved for things like the death camps, a government's decision to develop a weapons-grade strain of the Ebola virus, or the production of child snuff-porn. The word is certainly to be understood in this sense in Hannah Arendt's well-known phrases "radical evil" and "the banality of evil".

That the word 'evil' has that meaning is clear, but any dictionary of quotations bears witness to another meaning of the word: "a necessary evil", "the lesser of two evils", "the evil men do", "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof". That is to say, the meaning that 'evil' has in the phrase 'the problem of evil' is one of its ordinary meanings. "An evil" in this sense of the word is "a bad thing", and the mass term bears the same simple, compositional relation to the count-noun that 'fruit' and 'fire' bear to 'a fruit' and 'a fire'. 'The problem of evil' means no more than this: 'the problem that the real existence of bad things raises for theists'.

That the problem of evil is just exactly the problem that the real existence of bad things raises for theists is a simple enough point. But it has been neglected or denied by various people. The late J. L. Mackie,

in his classic presentation of the argument from evil, mentioned one rather simple-minded instance of this:

The problem of evil, in the sense in which I shall be using the phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good. . . . [This point is] obvious; I mention [it] only because [it is] sometimes ignored by theologians, who sometimes parry a statement of the problem [by saying] “Well, can you solve the problem yourself?”¹³

If what Mackie says is true, there are, or once were, theologians who accept (or have accepted) the following thesis:

There is a certain philosophical or theological problem, the problem of evil, that confronts theists and atheists alike. When theists confront the problem, they confront it in this form: How can evil exist if God is good? But the very same problem confronts atheists, albeit in another form.

These theologians, whoever they may be, are certainly confused. The “general” problem they appeal to simply does not exist. For what could it be? It could not be the problem of accounting for the existence of evil. For an atheist, the question “Why do bad things happen?” is so easy to answer that it does not deserve to be called a problem. And there is this point: even if atheists *were* at a loss to explain the existence of bad things, it’s hard to see why this inability should embarrass them qua atheists, for the existence of bad things has never been supposed by anyone to be incompatible with atheism. No atheist has a good account of why the expansion of the universe is speeding up, but that’s not a fact that should embarrass an atheist qua atheist, since no one supposes that the speeding up of the expansion of the universe is incompatible with atheism. The theist’s position with respect to explaining the existence of evil is not at all like that, for many people think that the existence of bad things is incompatible with theism, and there is a well-known argument, an argument that theists themselves say must be answered, for that conclusion.

One source of the confusion exhibited by Mackie’s theologians is no doubt the ambiguity of the word ‘evil’, which, as we have seen, has at least two meanings: ‘bad things’ and ‘the extreme reaches of moral depravity’. Let me use Arendt’s term “radical evil” to express the latter meaning unambiguously. It may well be that there is a problem of some sort—philosophical, theological, psychological, anthropological—concerning radical evil, and that this problem faces both theists

and atheists. Suppose we distinguish radical evil and “ordinary” evil. (Ordinary evil comprises such diverse items as a twisted ankle, the Lisbon earthquake, and Tamerlane’s building a hill of his enemies’ skulls.) It may be that although atheists have no trouble accounting for the existence of ordinary evil, they cannot easily account for the existence of radical evil. Since I am saying “it may be”, since I have done no more than concede this point for the sake of the argument, I need defend neither the thesis that the distinction between radical evil and ordinary evil is real and important nor the thesis that the existence of radical evil (unlike the existence of ordinary evil) poses some sort of problem for atheists.¹⁴ There may well be people who say that there is no important moral distinction to be drawn between the Holocaust and, say, the Roman obliteration of Carthage following the Third Punic War. And there may well be people who say that, although there is indeed a qualitative moral difference between the two events, atheists can nevertheless as easily account for the existence of the one as the other. I am simply examining, hypothetically, the consequences of supposing, first, that the distinction can be made and is important, and, secondly, that accounting for the existence of radical evil presents atheists with a *prima facie* difficulty. If these two suppositions are right, a certain problem about evil, the problem of accounting for the existence of radical evil, confronts both the theist and the atheist. My point is this: If there is indeed a “problem of radical evil”, it has little to do with the problem of evil. Not nothing, maybe, but not a great deal either.¹⁵ There is, nevertheless, an obvious terminological connection between the two problems. One of the meanings of the word ‘evil’ is ‘radical evil’—and this meaning is not merely *one* of its meanings; it has been the word’s primary meaning for several centuries. If the phrase ‘the problem of evil’ weren’t already a name for a certain ancient philosophical or theological problem about a benevolent and omnipotent Creator and a creation that contains an ample supply of very bad things, it would be an excellent name for a problem we must today, on pain of elementary confusion, call by some other name—such as ‘the problem of radical evil’. I find it plausible to suppose that the ambiguity of the word ‘evil’ has something to do with the confused belief of Mackie’s theologians that something called “the problem of evil” confronts both theists and atheists.

I have called Mackie’s theologians ‘simple-minded’. I called them that because I judged that their confusion was a verbal confusion and that they had fallen into it because they were not thinking clearly or

not thinking at all. But they are not alone in their belief that there is an overarching problem of evil. (I will say that people who accept the thesis that there is a problem properly called ‘the problem of evil’ that confronts both theists and atheists believe in an “overarching problem of evil”.) They have been joined by the philosopher Susan Neiman, who has defended this view in her book *Evil in Modern Thought*. (Neiman thinks of what she does as philosophy. I’d prefer to call it European intellectual history. But then I have a very narrow conception of philosophy.) In my view, Neiman is, like Mackie’s theologians, confused. But I would by no means describe her confusion as ‘simple-minded’. My preferred description would be ‘too clever by half’. Neiman has not confused a problem that essentially involves God with some other problem that has no essential connection with God. Her view is, rather, that the late eighteenth-century theists who strove to reconcile the goodness of God with the occurrence of the Lisbon earthquake and the recent, mostly European, philosophers who see the Holocaust and other twentieth-century horrors as posing a fundamental philosophical problem are confronting the same problem, although, because of their vastly different historical situations, it assumes very different forms for these two groups of thinkers. (My reference to these two groups of thinkers should not be taken to imply that Neiman thinks that they and no other writers have confronted what she calls the problem of evil. Understanding the responses of various philosophers to the overarching problem of evil, she believes, is a key that opens a doorway through which the whole history of modern philosophy can be viewed from a novel perspective.) Her belief in an overarching problem of evil leads her to make remarks like this one:

Contemporary analytic discussion of the problem of evil. . . remains squarely confined to the marginalized field of the philosophy of religion. Thus historical discussion, where it does occur, is focused largely on Leibniz and Hume, whose treatment of the problem of evil remained within traditional religious discourse. (p. 290)

But what is the overarching problem of evil that Hume and Leibniz and Nietzsche and Levinas confront (each from within his own historical perspective)? I do not find her attempts to state and explain this problem easy to understand, but the idea is something like this (the words are mine):

Evil threatens meaning. Evil threatens our ability to regard the world in which we find ourselves as comprehensible. The Lisbon earthquake

presented late eighteenth-century Christians with an intractable problem regarding the meaning of existence, and the death camps have had a comparable or analogous effect on post-religious thinkers. The problem of evil is the problem of how to find meaning in a world in which everything is touched by evil.

I will say nothing of Neiman's larger project, her project of studying various responses to "the problem of evil" with a view to providing a new understanding of the history of modern philosophy. I will speak only of her thesis that there is an overarching problem of evil. Her arguments for this conclusion strike me, if I may risk repeating the phrase, as too clever by half. In my view, they are no more than an illustration of the fact that one will generally find that any two things have common features if one ascends to a high enough level of abstraction.¹⁶ (As David Berlinski once said, commenting on another application of this method, "Yes, and what a man does when he jumps over a ditch and what Canada geese do when they migrate are very much the same thing. In each case, an organism's feet leave the earth, it moves through the air for a certain distance, and, finally, its feet once more make contact with the earth."¹⁷)

I am only a simple-minded analytical philosopher. (Not, I hope, as simple-minded as Mackie's theologians, but simple-minded enough.) As I see matters, the problem of evil is what it has always been, a problem about God and evil. There is no larger, overarching problem of evil that manifests itself as a theological problem in one historical period and as a problem belonging to post-religious thought in another.¹⁸ I don't know how to argue for this conclusion, because I wouldn't know how enter into anything I would call an argument with someone who would even consider denying it. It is evident to me that any person who would say the sorts of things Neiman says has so different a mind from mine that if that person and I attempted, each with the best will in the world, to initiate a conversation about whether there was an overarching problem of evil, the only result would be two people talking past each other. What I call 'the problem of evil' essentially involves God, and any problem that someone else calls the 'problem of evil' is, if it does not involve God, so remote from "my" problem that the two problems can have very little in common. (Not nothing, maybe, but very little.) If you insist on my saying something in defense of this thesis, I could quote some words that Newman used in a rather different connection: my thesis is true "for the plain reason that one idea is not another idea".

Or, to quote another cleric, “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.”¹⁹ It has been said that the greatest benefit Oxford confers on her sons and daughters is that they are not afraid of the obvious. I seem to enjoy the benefit without the bother of the degree. It is just *obvious* that Neiman’s attempt to identify an overarching problem of evil that is confronted in one way by Leibniz’s *Theodicy* and in another by *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* fails, and must fail, because there is no such problem.²⁰

The problem of evil is a problem about God and about the evils, both ordinary and radical, that are such a salient feature of, as I believe, the world he has made. In these lectures I will discuss this problem. In the next lecture, I will discuss this God whose non-existence the argument from evil is supposed to prove.