

The Devil's Advocate

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Introduction: three theistic arguments

Over the centuries, many different arguments have been used to support the belief in God. These range from the abstruse and theoretical, such as Anselm's famous Ontological Argument, to the relatively down-to-earth and practical, such as Pascal's Wager; but nearly all of them share a common weakness on which I intend to focus. I shall claim that the theistic arguments typically take for granted that in order to establish the existence of God they have only to establish the existence of a Supreme Being. They thus presuppose that for the office of Lord of the Universe, God as traditionally understood by Christians is the only candidate worth considering, and as a result they give insufficient attention to the nature of the Supreme Being whose existence they supposedly prove.

It is, perhaps, not at all surprising that philosophers brought up in an overwhelmingly Christian culture, or one dominated by a similar monotheistic religion such as Judaism or Islam, should disregard or overlook the possibility of alternative religious beliefs. But even if we confine our attention to monotheistic beliefs, it is surely very obvious that there are many possible theories about the nature of the Supreme Being which would be quite inconsistent with the Christian viewpoint. To qualify as the traditional 'Christian God' (a shorthand term under which I include also the God of Judaism and Islam), the Supreme Being must be not only the creator and sustainer of the universe; He must also be eternal, omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and morally perfect. Indeed it is the last of these qualities, the one which has least to do with God's supremacy, which is arguably the most significant from the point of view of religion, because what makes the Supreme Being worthy of worship is not simply His power, but rather His moral excellence. Of course His power might tempt us to curry favour with Him in the hope of being rewarded, even if He were morally neutral or thoroughly evil, but purely self-interested worship of this kind would hardly be virtuous, any more than it would be to ingratiate oneself with an evil dictator for the sake of personal gain. For the Supreme Being to be an *appropriate* object of religious attitudes, therefore, He must above all be morally good.

Another reason why God's goodness is so central to theism is that it is the only one of His traditional attributes which carries any implication concerning His motives, and hence concerning His treatment of people and the likely nature of His creation. The mere existence of a Supreme Being, if His motives were entirely unknown, would give no clue as to how we should behave to gain His favour, and would tell us nothing whatever about the world (or the hereafter). The first of these two points would obviously make religious observance quite futile, even for the purely self-interested believer, while the second would have the more subtle consequence of making it virtually impossible to obtain any evidence for the existence of such a Being. For it is only if we postulate a Supreme Being with particular motives that we can draw any conclusions about His likely actions, and it is only if we can draw such conclusions that we can then search the world for confirming evidence. To take just one example, religious experiences can provide evidence in favour of God's existence only on the supposition that because He cares for His creatures, God will on occasion wish to communicate with them, so that such experiences can be better explained on the hypothesis that He exists than otherwise. Without this supposition, or something like it, the best that religious experiences could do would be to provide a strange phenomenon calling for explanation. And even if for some reason an explanation in supernaturalist terms were to be preferred to one appealing to more mundane mental or neuronal activity, we would still have no grounds whatever to postulate a

theistic source of the phenomenon unless such a source had greater explanatory power than the multitude of possible non-theistic alternatives (mystical vision, transcendental insight, fairies, guardian angels or whatever). Without the hypothesis of God's goodness, theism has no such explanatory advantage.

An important consequence of these considerations is that if theism is not to be entirely sterile, the goodness of God must be at least to some extent interpreted literally. Thus the general mystical claim that God's attributes are entirely beyond human comprehension, and His goodness utterly different from human goodness, not only makes it hard to see why He should be called 'good' at all (or indeed thought worthy of worship), but also renders theism quite useless as a predictive or explanatory theory. The move towards mysticism is sometimes made in response to the Problem of Evil, in order to explain how God's 'goodness' can be compatible with the existence of sin and suffering. But the move is self-defeating, since if theism is emptied of all (humanly comprehensible) moral content, then it is rendered compatible with any state of affairs whatever, and therefore fails to draw any distinction between those states of affairs which God will allow or bring about and those which He will not. If God's goodness is *entirely* beyond human comprehension, then for all we know a 'good' God might take delight in gratuitous torture, and 'reward' those who worship Him with eternal agony. It is only to the extent that God is good, and good in a sense which is comprehensible to us, that we can draw any theoretical, religious or moral conclusions from His existence.

It follows from all this that any argument which purports to establish the existence of God must do much more than prove the existence of a Supreme Being - it must also, at the very least, show that this Supreme Being is good, rather than evil or completely amoral. And it is here, I shall maintain, that the traditional theistic arguments all fail: none of them does anything at all to show that there is a Supreme Being who is morally good.

In the case of some of the theistic arguments, this point is probably too obvious to be disputed. Take, for example, the versions of the Cosmological Argument put forward by Thomas Aquinas as the first three of his *Five Ways*, which are intended to establish respectively the existence of an Unchanged Changer, of a First Cause, and of a Primary Necessary Being.¹ Notoriously, Aquinas concludes each 'proof' with a simple statement to the effect that the Unchanged Changer (or whatever) is 'understood by all men to be God', and yet his arguments have given no shadow of a justification for claiming that the Unchanged Changer is living, conscious or knowledgeable, let alone morally good: he apparently assumes that all of these properties will be agreed without question by anyone who follows his reasoning. Defenders of Aquinas have pointed out that he later goes on to consider the nature of God in more detail, but it is nevertheless extremely misleading of him to refer to his arguments, without qualification, as 'five ways in which it can be proved that there is a God'. For it is one thing to prove that there is an Unchanged Changer (or whatever), but quite another to prove that there is a *God*.

A second example, which also betrays the implicit assumption that any Supreme Being must be the same as the Christian God, is provided by Pascal's Wager.² Pascal starts from the assumption that theoretical considerations alone are insufficient either to prove or to refute God's existence, and he aims to show that in these circumstances the prudent course of action is to adhere to Christianity, and to endeavour by prayer and religious observance to persuade oneself of its truth. If pure reason cannot settle the question of God's existence, Pascal claims, then it is entirely rational to allow one's mind to be determined by practical, prudential considerations. I cannot know whether or not there is a God, so I must take a 'gamble' on the basis of my likely prospects in each

¹ The *Five Ways* of Thomas Aquinas appear in *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 3, but have been translated and reprinted many times, e.g. in John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 82-85. They are discussed in detail by Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways* (London: RKP, 1969).

² Pascal's Wager is presented in *Pensees* III 233, e.g. translated by W.F. Trotter (London: Dent, 1931), pp. 65-69. For a more extensive critical discussion see James Cargile, 'Pascal's Wager', *Philosophy* 41 1966, pp.250-7.

case, which will also depend on my beliefs. Here the Christian moral teachings, and the doctrines of heaven and hell, are presumed to have implications as shown in the following table:

	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	Self-denying life, followed by eternal bliss	Self-denying life, followed by nothing
I don't believe	Enjoyable life, followed by eternal damnation	Enjoyable life, followed by nothing

If God does not exist, I might well be better off not believing, since I can then spend my life pursuing pleasure, free of religious restrictions, while after death my prospects will be identical whether I believe or not, since only extinction will await me. If God does exist, however, my prospects for the afterlife will differ dramatically in the two cases: eternal bliss if I believe, eternal hellfire and damnation if I don't. Not only is this infinite consideration easily sufficient, if God exists, to outweigh any benefits which non-belief may bring while I am living; it is also enough to tip the balance decisively in favour of believing when I am unsure whether God exists or not - no matter what exact probability is attached to God's existence, even a very small chance of infinite benefits is worth more than the certainty of merely finite and temporary pleasure. Therefore it is prudent to encourage myself in prayer and religious observance, in the hope that this will eventually lead me to become a devoted and convinced Christian.

This argument will only be the least bit persuasive to those who are completely blind to alternative religious hypotheses, and who therefore accept that Pascal's table of four outcomes indeed exhausts all the available possibilities. But this assumption needs only to be stated to be seen to be ridiculous: why, for example, should we not consider the possibility that a Supreme Being exists who will reward *disbelief*, or who will punish the sort of self-inflicted brainwashing that Pascal advocates? Pascal's argument makes no appeal at all to the plausibility of theism, so any number of crazy theories could be similarly supported. Suppose, for example, in order to focus on the Supreme Being's moral qualities, that we consider the theory that instead of a good God, there is an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal Creator who is supremely *evil*, and whom we might therefore call 'Antigod' (note that Antigod, who is entirely supreme, is not to be confused with the relatively limited devil of Christianity). To show that Pascal's Wager does nothing whatever to recommend belief in the Supreme Being's goodness, we can put forward a parallel argument for belief in Antigod, based on the following table of outcomes:

	Antigod exists	Antigod doesn't exist
I believe	Self-indulgent life, followed by eternal orgies	Self-indulgent life, followed by nothing
I don't believe	Temperate life, followed by eternal torture	Temperate life, followed by nothing

I do not wish to suggest that such an argument provides a convincing motive for taking up devil worship, but it is, I believe, no worse than Pascal's. Pascal asks us to believe that a good God will punish rational doubt with eternal damnation, and reward his own self-interested religious observance with eternal bliss. Antigod is surely at

least as credible a Deity: unrestrained by morality, He capriciously tortures those who do not worship Him, and shares the sensual delights of His eternal debaucheries with those who are sufficiently corrupt themselves not to make Him feel uncomfortable (we can suppose that just as God dislikes the contemplation of wickedness, so Antigod will dislike the contemplation of virtue).

Pascal's Wager, then, is at best a two-edged sword. So far from legitimating belief in God, it can with equal plausibility be adapted into a recommendation for belief in Antigod. Since an omnipotent God and an omnipotent Antigod are mutually exclusive, however (clearly it is not possible for two different beings both to have unlimited power), this adaptation simply demonstrates that Pascal's Wager is hopelessly unsound. Any method of argument which leads with equal plausibility to two contrary conclusions reveals itself to be untrustworthy. By applying a similar treatment to other traditional arguments for the existence of God, I hope in what follows to show that this condemnation applies with similar force to all of them.

Before moving on, it is important to note that this type of criticism of the theistic arguments in no way depends upon the supposition that antitheism is a reasonable hypothesis. Quite the reverse: the whole point of the criticism is to show that the arguments are bad precisely because they can be used with equal effect to 'prove' such a preposterous theory. Thus even if it were to be established on other grounds that theism is superior to antitheism (suppose, for example, that the notion of an evil Supreme Being were found to be somehow contradictory), then although this would indeed help the cause of theism against antitheism, it would do nothing whatever to rehabilitate the theistic arguments. If the arguments *by themselves* can give no reason for preferring theism to antitheism (let alone the multitude of other, less extreme hypotheses), then they clearly fail to support the claim that the Supreme Being is good rather than evil.

Of the major arguments for the existence of God, the only one which is purely *a priori* is the notorious Ontological Argument. Anselm's version in particular has intrigued philosophers for centuries, not because the argument is convincing - on the contrary, it is manifestly 'fishy' - but simply because it has proved extraordinarily difficult to pinpoint exactly how the logical sleight-of-hand takes place. My own opinion is that Anselm's argument trades on an ambiguity between an invalid argument for the existence of a perfect being, and a valid argument for the existence of the most perfect *existing* being; but this conclusion requires the careful analysis of some difficult and slippery concepts. To demonstrate the argument's unsoundness, therefore, it seems to me to be best not to enter into refined logical criticism, but rather to show how a simple adaptation can be used to 'prove' the existence of Antigod. Here, then, is the Anselmian Ontological Argument for the existence of an omnipotent devil.

The argument starts from the distinction between intentional and effective evil - a being is intentionally evil if it has malevolent thoughts, effectively evil if it is able to act upon them. We can then proceed as follows:

- (1) Antigod is by definition *that than which nothing more effectively evil can be conceived*.
- (2) Let us imagine someone (whom Anselm ungenerously calls 'the fool') who denies the existence of Antigod.
- (3) The fool understands what 'Antigod' means, so even he must concede that Antigod exists in his understanding, if not in reality.
- (4) But if *that than which nothing more effectively evil can be conceived* existed only in his understanding, it would be possible to conceive of something more effectively evil (e.g. a really existing Antigod, a real mass-murderer).
- (5) Since by definition nothing can be more effectively evil *than that than which nothing more effectively evil can be conceived*, the fool (in denying Antigod's real existence) contradicts himself.
- (6) So Antigod must exist both in the fool's understanding and also in reality.

A parallel adaptation is equally successful with Descartes' Ontological Argument in *Meditations 5*, and also the various modern versions by Hartshorne, Malcolm and Plantinga.³ Clearly, therefore, the Ontological Argument does nothing whatever to show that a Supreme Being exists who is good rather than evil.

The Design Argument and the Problem of Evil

My conclusions so far are unlikely to have worried many theists, because abstract reasoning such as the Ontological and Cosmological Arguments does not carry much weight with the average churchgoer, while Pascal's Wager might well appear to be downright dishonest. The possibility of Antigod begins to bite, however, when we turn to a much more popular line of thought, the traditional and ancient Design Argument. It has perhaps been most elegantly expressed by its greatest opponent, David Hume:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument ... we do prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.

These lines are quoted from the second part of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, itself a cleverly designed and beautifully executed work which must rank as one of the funniest, as well as one of the greatest, in the philosophical literature.⁴ Later in the *Dialogues* (Parts V to VII), Hume subjects this Design Argument to a devastating criticism, by showing how ambiguous are the analogies on which it is based, and thus the conclusions to which it can lead. For example, large human constructions such as houses, ships, and cities are typically designed and created not by a single individual, but by an enormous team following traditional and well-established methods. Perhaps, then, we should conclude that the world was created by a committee of deities, none of whom should take the credit for its intricacy, since they learned to create ordered worlds only by trial and error. As Hume's witty spokesman Philo puts it, 'Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out'. Nor have we any compelling reason for ascribing the world to intelligent beings in the first place - perhaps the world is a plant or an animal, whose order comes from vegetation or generation rather than from design. The universe might even have been spun from the belly of an infinite spider: it is only because we are intelligent creatures, and not spiders, that we find this suggestion ridiculous and the argument to an intelligent designer compelling.

³ Anselm's Ontological Argument is in *Proslogion* II, and differs from the inverse argument given above only in speaking of 'greatness' (something like existing perfection) rather than 'effective evil', so that God is defined as *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*. A translation appears in e.g. A. Plantinga ed., *The Ontological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 3-4, which also contains Descartes' argument and the modern versions by Hartshorne and Malcolm. Plantinga presents his own version of the Ontological Argument in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) chapter 10, and he is criticised in detail, together with Anselm and Descartes, by J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), chapter 3.

⁴ The above quotation is taken from p.143 of the classic edition by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), and the quotation given later in this paragraph from p.167. An excellent account of Hume's views is provided by J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2nd edition 1988).

Hume's critique of the Design Argument based on analogy is very powerful, and in particular I believe it shows quite decisively that no such argument can possibly prove the Deity's unity, infinity or perfection. Recently, however, the Design Argument has surfaced again in the writings of those, such as Richard Swinburne, who wish to establish the existence of God not by an analogy between the universe and a machine, but rather as a quasi-scientific hypothesis to explain the character of the world.⁵ On this account, the existence of a Christian God is a well-corroborated hypothesis, because the world as we experience it is precisely the sort of world which we would expect such a God to create. It may also be the sort of world which we would expect a society of demigods to create, but it is good scientific practice to employ a variant of 'Ockham's Razor': to look for the simplest and most comprehensive hypothesis which will explain the apparent phenomena. Thus the hypothesis of a single infinite perfect God, if it indeed explains the nature of the universe, is much to be preferred to the gratuitous postulation of several, finite, imperfect gods.

Now is this really, as Swinburne claims, the sort of world which we might expect from an infinite perfect Creator? There are a number of respects in which it is plausible to say that it is. Such a Deity, for example, will surely put a high value on love, happiness, beauty, creativity, knowledge, generosity, sympathy, courage and so on. But in that case He must obviously create a world in which these things can flourish: a world, that is, which contains living beings who are capable of love, happiness, aesthetic appreciation and the rest. Now any world capable of sustaining such beings must be a pretty remarkable place. It must operate according to stable laws which permit the evolution and survival of creatures developed enough to possess consciousness. To be creative these creatures must be capable of influencing their environment, and so the laws which govern it must be sufficiently graspable to enable them to gain reliable knowledge about it. To encourage mutual cooperation they must be given social instincts, and if they are to be able to manifest love they must also be given needs and desires which are capable of satisfaction by their own kind. And so on. All in all, Swinburne claims, it is quite striking that the universe as we know it possesses just this miraculous combination of qualities. So the simplest explanation of them is that they were brought about by a perfect Creator, and for precisely the sorts of reason which I have given.

There is, of course, one overwhelming difficulty that arises immediately for any theist such as Swinburne who wishes to argue for the existence of God from the character of the world. Why is it, that in a world supposedly created by such a perfect Deity, there is so much evil? Why indeed should there be any at all? Why does an all-powerful good God allow flood, famine, disease, murder, torture, war, and all the other appalling things that regularly fill our newspapers?

Theism has been around for a long time, and the fact of evil is in such manifest conflict with it that the production of *theodicies*, or explanations of evil within a theistic framework, has been something of a major industry. Some have dismissed evil as an illusion, but this leaves it quite unexplained why a benevolent God should present us with such unpleasant illusions. Others say that a certain amount of evil in the world is necessary to appreciate the good, but this seems very dubious, and would anyway account at best for only a minute portion of the evil we see around us. Yet others explain evil as a punishment for man's sin, but this gives no satisfactory account of the suffering of animals and babies, nor, indeed, of why a perfect God made man so sinful in the first place.

I shall concentrate here on the only theodicy that stands any real chance of reconciling the existence of God with a world containing evil: the claim that the existence of sin and suffering is necessary for the production of 'higher' goods, whose moral value more than outweighs the costs incurred. There are two main variations on this

⁵ Richard Swinburne's treatment of the Design Argument and the Problem of Evil is presented in *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), especially chapters 8 to 11. For a more detailed critical discussion of Swinburne's position see J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), especially chapter 8.

theme, depending upon whether the evil involved is considered to be absolutely necessary for the benefits gained, or merely an inevitable risk.

First, then, is the claim that certain types of evil are absolutely necessary for the achievement of 'higher' goods, which have a sufficiently high moral status to be worth the cost. Without suffering, it is said, there could be no room for sympathy; without danger, no courage; without diseases, no cures; without ignorance, no enlightenment; without obstacles, no progress; without struggles, no maturity. And a world with all of these things, some good, some bad, is far better than a world with none of them.

John Hick has taken this line, with his theory of the world as what, following Keats, he calls a 'vale of soul-making':⁶

Our mortality, frailty and vulnerability, within a natural order which is not built so much to comfort us as to challenge us, are not a punishment for Adam's sin but a divinely appointed situation within which moral responsibility and personal growth are possible. This world is not intended to be a paradise but a place of soul-making, and the hard demands that it makes upon us are integral to this function. Life requires all the courage, resourcefulness, and skill, and all the compassion and care for one another that men and women can muster; and the uncertainties, the dangers, the obstacles to human purposes through which life makes these demands upon us, belong to its God-given character. For in a world without the possibility of real setbacks, frustrations, failures and even disasters our present moral categories would have no meaning. ... It would be a world without moral values.

This sort of theodicy lends itself to one initially attractive but quite unsatisfactory interpretation: God is like a loving father who allows his children to suffer, not because their suffering is in itself desirable, but because he realises that without suffering they will never mature to become responsible and compassionate adults. Now this is obviously a plausible claim when applied to good human parents, who indeed allow their children to suffer for their own (and others') future benefit - taking them to the dentist; encouraging them to sample initially unpleasant foods; chastising them if they walk in the road or poke screwdrivers into plug sockets or beat up their little sister; and so on. But such an account of God's parenthood falls completely flat before the claim that He is omnipotent: if God is all-powerful, then He does not need to follow undesirable causal means to achieve His ends. So an omnipotent God should be capable of creating individuals who act maturely and lovingly without first suffering, who have good teeth without dentistry, and who avoid dangerous objects without having to be told.

To be of any use, therefore, this style of theodicy must claim that the evils of the world are not merely causally, but *logically* necessary for the greater goods which they allow: sympathy without suffering would be a contradiction in terms, as would courage without danger. The overcoming of obstacles, the curing of disease, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of moral character are not merely means by which the world can become better: they are intrinsic goods, which *logically* can exist only in a world which starts out containing obstacles, diseases, ignorance and moral imperfection.

Is this theodicy plausible? I don't think so, because once its misleading causal overtones are expunged, and its logical implications are spelled out, it seems to turn morality on its head. If sympathy really is sufficiently valuable to outweigh the suffering which prompts it, then those who torture others publicly are improving the world! Think how much sympathy is inspired worldwide by the plight of the victims of terrorism. If we were to accept this barbaric and callous theodicy, then we should praise the terrorists and, indeed, the newsmen who so insensitively pry into the agony of hostages' families, for producing so much good at the cost of so relatively little suffering! To take another example, the curing of disease is a declining art: many of the deadly diseases which used to blight us in the West have now all but disappeared, so that future generations of doctors have far less

⁶ The passage that follows is from Hick's book *Christianity at the Centre* (London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 87-88.

chance of doing good in this respect than those in the past. This theodicy suggests that we should destroy our medicines, burn our textbooks, cease inoculations (and perhaps even genetically engineer new diseases!), so that the great good of medical discovery and triumph against disease may once again be achieved. In short, this kind of theodicy is hopelessly unconvincing, because it portrays those qualities which merely mitigate the effects of evils, or remove them, as themselves outweighing those evils. This is like claiming that the breaking up of a great work of art is desirable, because of the opportunity for reconstruction which it gives to the restorer!⁷

The second main variant of the 'higher good' theodicy is based on the supposed desirability of free will, and is probably the most popular account of evil amongst modern philosophers of religion. It is indeed, as I shall now explain, the only theodicy which is capable of reconciling the existence of God with a world containing what we might call 'unnecessary evil', that is, evil which is not *logically* required for the sake of a greater good.

Let us assume that there is a perfect Creator of all things. Then since He is perfect, anything for which He is causally responsible can contain no unnecessary evil. Perfection involves omniscience, omnipotence, and moral excellence, so God would not initiate any process causally determined to produce unnecessary evil: He could plead neither ignorance, nor lack of alternative. Now if God created all things, and yet is not causally responsible for the world's unnecessary evils, then this can only be because He created a non-deterministic process which brought about these results. And His doing so would be quite without justification unless that non-deterministic process were itself of sufficient value to outweigh its unfortunate consequences - a God who introduced a random element into His creation, simply for His own amusement, would hardly be a paradigm of moral perfection.

So if a perfect God has made an imperfect creation, then this must be because He has initiated at least one intrinsically good and contra-causal process which is responsible for all of the unnecessary evil. Since, however, it is difficult to see how any inanimate process, such as random motion of molecules, can possibly be intrinsically good, we are left with free will as the only plausible candidate to fill the bill. The so-called 'Free Will Defence' must be used to account for *all* unnecessary evil: famine, flood, disease, war and all. And if free men are not responsible for famine, flood and disease, then we must invoke free non-human spirits to take the blame.

The account of evil, then, goes something like this. God aimed to create a world in which virtue would flourish, in which creatures would exhibit love and mutual cooperation. It might appear that He could have done this by creating automata: smiling robots who spend all their time helping each other, precisely because they have been programmed to do so. But this sort of 'love' would be of no value at all - real love must be a free response of the individuals concerned, without pre-programming, hypnotism, brainwashing or any other kind of covert compulsion. So if He wishes to create a world containing real virtue, rather than just a poor imitation, God has no choice but to create free beings, whose nature does not *determine* them to be loving, and who thus run the risk of not being loving. Free virtue is of overwhelmingly greater value than programmed virtue, but inevitably carries the risk that the free creatures to whom it is made available will freely reject it.

Swinburne develops this defence much further. Just as the possibility of sin gives free virtue its value, so the possibility of excessive and deliberate sin makes the pursuit of virtue more valuable still. Only in a world where I can cause another's death, for example, can I be given any credit for not doing so. Thus the heights of virtue can be attained only in a world which permits individuals deliberately to cause each other serious harm. In order that this should be the case, those individuals must have experience of harm: of pain, suffering and death. Only by seeing instances of knives causing injury can I learn that they do so, and only if I know this can I be given any credit for refraining from knifing those I meet.

⁷ If it is hard to believe that anyone could be driven to make such a claim, even by the difficulties of reconciling God and evil, then consider the following quotation from Richard Swinburne's book *The Existence of God*, p.197: 'The tiger, like the drought, provides the gazelle with one of its many opportunities to use its power for good ends - for its own benefit and that of its offspring - by escaping from it and helping its offspring to escape from it.'!

I shall not here criticise the Free Will Defence in detail, though I believe it to be quite unsatisfactory. First, it requires the assumption that free actions are not causally determined, a claim which is completely without foundation (introspection tells us nothing here: for all I know any ‘feeling of freedom’ that I have could itself be caused, in accordance with deterministic laws, by the bioelectrical stimulation of nerves in my brain). Secondly, the Free Will Defence must claim that such indeterminism is intrinsically desirable, even when it leads to appalling evil: this again seems difficult to defend (surely it is better to be determined to act morally by one’s possession of a morally good character than it is to act morally so to speak ‘at random’?). Thirdly, the claim that our behaviour is undetermined is dubiously consistent with an important theistic doctrine, that God is omniscient and therefore has foreknowledge of future human actions (if God knows in advance what we are going to do, then can we really be ‘free’ in the required sense?). Fourthly, on a less theoretical level, the Free Will Defence must explain *all* evil as the result of deliberate sin; it therefore cannot explain natural disasters or the suffering of animals before man came on the scene, except by attributing them to free non-human spirits, demons or whatever, for which once again there is no good evidence (and besides, if theism requires the hypothesis of demons, then it loses the simplicity which according to Swinburne is what favours it over polytheism). Finally, this theodicy seems blatantly to conflict with the claim that God and His angels are morally perfect: if true virtue carries the *logically* necessary risk of sin, then either God and the angels are, like us, liable to sin, or else they are incapable of true virtue (or to put this the other way round, if God and the angels can be truly virtuous without ever sinning, then why didn’t God make us like that too?).

Before leaving the theistic Design Argument, and its associated Problem of Evil, I should like to highlight two rather curious points. First, is it not extraordinary that theists should claim that this world *requires* the hypothesis of a perfect God to explain it, but then should have to torture their brains to explain how such a theistic hypothesis is even *consistent* with the world as we know it? Secondly, why is it, if this world really is the best that a perfect God can manage, that theists constantly assume that the afterlife will be better? Surely exactly the same arguments apply in both cases: if God allows so much evil here for the sake of greater goods, then will not the same be true of the hereafter? It is a sign of the total implausibility of theism, even to its adherents, that the other world with which God is attributed is universally supposed to be much better than this one.

So much for God. Now let us turn to Antigod.

Antitheism and the Problem of Goodness

If we are to follow the reasoning of Richard Swinburne, then the best hypothesis to explain the world is to suppose it to be the creation of a single, infinite, intelligent Deity. Given our discussion of the Problem of Evil, however, it seems that this Deity is probably not a good one. Might the Creator be morally variable, or even indifferent? Hume thought the latter to be the most reasonable conclusion, but let us go along with Swinburne a bit further. If the hypothesis of a morally *consistent* infinite God successfully explains the features of the world, then that is the most elegant, simple and comprehensive hypothesis available, and we should willingly embrace it.

Let us, then, sketch out the antitheistic theory of the universe. Antigod will surely put a high value on hate, misery, ugliness, destructiveness, stupidity, miserliness, sadism, timidity and so on. But in that case He must obviously create a world in which these things can flourish: a world, that is, which contains living beings who are capable of hate, misery, destructiveness and the rest. Now any world capable of sustaining such beings must be a pretty remarkable place. It must operate according to stable laws which permit the evolution and survival of creatures developed enough to possess consciousness. To be destructive these creatures must be capable of influencing their environment, and so the laws which govern it must be sufficiently graspable to enable them to gain reliable knowledge about it. If they are to be able to manifest hate and violence on a large scale then they must be given social instincts, and have sufficient toleration of their families, neighbours and compatriots to enable them to cooperate in mobs, armies, political parties and such like. To make room for miserliness and

maliciousness they must also be given needs and desires which are capable of frustration by their own kind. And so on. All in all, it is quite striking that the universe as we know it possesses just this miraculous combination of qualities. So the simplest explanation of them is that they were brought about by an infinite malevolent being, and for precisely the sorts of reason which I have given.

But why is it, I hear you cry, that in a world supposedly created by such an evil Deity, there is so much goodness? Why indeed should there be any at all? Why does an all-powerful Antigod allow virtue, love, happiness, beauty, creativity, and all the other wonderful things that occasionally find their way into our newspapers?

Let us not waste our time with the claim that good is an illusion. Nor with the theory that good is necessary for the full appreciation of evil: there may be some truth in this, but such a theory will clearly account for only a small proportion of the good which we see about us.

The most satisfactory antitheistic explanation of goodness comes down to the fact that the existence of some virtue and happiness is necessary for the production of 'lower' evils, whose moral badness more than outweighs the goodness incurred. Without happiness, for example, there could be no place for envy; without friendship, no loneliness; without cooperation, no organised violence; without hopefulness, no disappointment; without confidence, no dogmatism; without power, no conflict; without endeavour, no failure. And a world with all of these things, some bad, some good, is far worse than a world with none of them.

This line of thought may be taken further with the Hickian notion of the world as a 'vale of soul-breaking',⁸ based on the commonplace observation that moral degeneration is frequently brought about either by an over-indulgence in superficial pleasures, or at the other extreme, by continual frustration and failure. Antigod did not intend this world to be a torture-chamber but a place of soul destruction, and the opportunities which it offers to us are integral to this function. The natural order, built to spoil and challenge us as much as to hurt us, is a demonically appointed situation within which moral and personal degeneration are possible, for these come through excessive self-indulgence or through failure in response to challenges; and in an eternal torture-chamber there would be neither self-indulgence nor challenges. Accordingly, a person-breaking environment must give the individuals within it the ability to survive, the capacity for trivial pleasure, the strength to struggle towards deeper happiness and virtue, and an occasional insight into the joy and fulfilment of love and companionship which they are missing, so that the far greater evils of boredom, emptiness, frustration, despondency, loneliness and hopelessness may be fully realised.

A second explanation of goodness, which reinforces the first, depends on the notion of freedom. Antigod aimed to create a world in which sin would flourish, in which creatures would exhibit hate and mutual distrust. It might appear that He could have done this by creating automata: malevolent robots who spend all their time hurting each other, precisely because they have been programmed to do so. But this sort of 'hate' would not really be sinful at all - real hate must be a free response of the individuals concerned, without pre-programming, hypnotism, brainwashing or any other kind of covert compulsion. So if He wishes to create a world containing real sin, rather than just a poor imitation, Antigod has no choice but to create free beings, whose nature does not *determine* them to be malevolent, and who thus run the risk of not being so. Free hate is of overwhelmingly greater sinfulness than programmed hate, but inevitably carries the risk that the free creatures to whom it is available will freely exhibit love instead.

Now just as the possibility of virtue gives free sin its blameworthiness, so the possibility of excessive and deliberate virtue makes the pursuit of sin more blameworthy still. Only in a world where I can relieve another's

⁸ This antitheistic adaptation of Hick's notion is due to Steven M. Cahn, 'Cacodaemony', *Analysis* 37 1977, pp.69-73.

famine with minimal personal cost, for example, can I be given any blame for not doing so. Thus the depths of sin can be attained only in a world which permits individuals deliberately to bring each other great benefits. In order that this should be the case, those individuals must have experience of pleasure, friendship and love. Antigod allows these into His creation, therefore, so that it may contain malevolent beings who freely choose to avoid giving pleasure and love to others.

This antitheodicy is, like the theodicies we examined earlier, a tissue of unsubstantiated, gratuitous conjecture. But it is, I believe, no less plausible than they were. I shall not claim that the two cases are entirely symmetrical in every respect, since no doubt the theist, if he tries hard enough, will be able to discover some relevant disanalogies between them which would favour theism over antitheism. So I shall instead insure against this possibility in advance by giving five considerations on the other side, which together indicate that the quest for a successful antitheodicy is, if anything, rather more promising than the quest for a successful theodicy. First, by contrast with the theistic Free Will Defence, it is far less clear that the antitheistic account needs to invoke benevolent spirits in order to explain away any goodness in the world which is not attributable to human freedom: natural fortunes occur far less often than natural disasters, while animal pleasure before the appearance of humans may be explained as conducive to animal greed and competition. Secondly, significant acts of goodness are apparently much less common than significant acts of malevolence: compare the rarity of events such as ‘Band Aid’⁹ with the frequency of wars, revolutions, assassinations, kidnappings and so on. Thirdly, it is, I imagine, very rare to find anyone whose life is continuously happy: it is a commonplace that those with lots of money, for example, are seldom fulfilled by it. By contrast, there must be millions in the world whose life is an almost continual struggle against oppression, starvation and disease. Fourthly, we might get some idea of what kind of Creator is behind the world by looking at those who are successful in it: it is well known that power corrupts, or might it just be that those who are corrupt are more successful in achieving power? Finally, the antitheist might argue that even modern physics gives evidence of the ultimate and inevitable triumph of Antigod: according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics entropy must continue to increase, so that all the valiant creative efforts of intelligent creatures, even if they can survive such inevitable disasters as the ‘death’ of the Sun, are doomed to eventual destruction in the eschatological fulfilment of Antigod’s universe!

Three more theistic arguments

So far, it seems that the existence of Antigod is every bit as plausible as the existence of God. Let us conclude with a brief examination of three more arguments, which the theist might employ in an attempt to swing the balance in his favour. These are the Arguments from Morality, from Revelation, and from Common Consent.

It has often been claimed that our awareness of moral values is evidence that our Creator is a morally good being. But this is far too superficial a conclusion, even if we accept (as both the theist and the antitheist must) the highly controversial premise that our moral beliefs are ‘objectively true’ and thus more than mere biologically or socially conditioned prejudices. It is quite wrong to make the simplistic assumption that only a Supreme Being who is Himself morally good would have reason to enlighten us about morality, for as we shall see, even Antigod would have reason to do so.

It was argued above that sin is only really blameworthy if it is a free response of the individual concerned, and it seems plausible to claim that this can only genuinely be the case if the sin is performed intentionally by a person who knows it to be sinful. But then it follows that if Antigod wished to create the worst of all possible worlds, a world accommodating the very depths of depravity, He would indeed have an excellent motive for giving

⁹ ‘Band Aid’ was the first of a number of large popular music events that took place from the late 1980’s onwards to raise money for crises such as famine in Africa.

His creatures an awareness of *true* moral values. Just as God would presumably reveal true morality in order to inspire the free pursuit of virtue, so Antigod would also reveal true morality, in order to permit the free pursuit of vice!

Such a policy does, of course, carry some risk. The revelation of true moral values makes possible not only the free rejection, but also the free acceptance of morality, so it might be thought that for Antigod the price of such a revelation would be too high - how could He be sure that His plan would not backfire, and give rise to an overwhelming excess of virtue over vice? Here the antitheist has at least two possible replies. First, he might claim that Antigod has given us all a strong propensity to sin: not a compulsion sufficient to rob us of freedom, but nevertheless a selfishness which can generally be relied upon sooner or later to lure us from the strait and narrow. He might point out that such a propensity is already recognised by traditional Christians under the name of 'original sin', though unlike him they fail to draw the obvious conclusion as to the nature of their Creator! The antitheist's other possible reply would take advantage of the fact that Antigod, unlike God, can be presumed to be an extremely devious individual so that if, despite His plans, some people were to devote themselves to the single-minded pursuit of virtue, Antigod might at least be able to cut His losses by ensuring that their perception of virtue was entirely distorted. The antitheist could support this conjecture with the observation that far more people have been prepared to die in the cause of imperialism and religious wars than ever sacrificed themselves for the good of the starving. He might also point out that religious enthusiasts often degenerate into narrow-minded bigots, who see the suppression of differing opinions as of more significance than the propagation of love and happiness. The Crusades and the Inquisition provide obvious examples here, but no doubt many others could be added even if we were to confine our attention to Christianity, given the long history of the Church's suppression of secular learning, its support of militarism, and its opposition to the emancipation of women and slaves (this depressing history is far less well known than it should be, a fact which the antitheist would no doubt also attribute to the machinations of his devious Master!).

It seems, therefore, that the antitheist need not be embarrassed in the least by the Argument from Morality - the observable phenomena appear to be entirely consistent with the supposition that our 'awareness' of moral values, together with our notorious moral frailty and our tendency to fanaticism, have all been engineered by Antigod for His own despicable purposes. Let us now turn to the Argument from Revelation, which can take at least three forms, appealing to miracles, to religious experiences or to verbal inspiration. The first of these can quickly be dismissed as a means of supporting theism against antitheism, since natural disasters are, as we have already observed, far more common than natural fortunes, and are typically of far greater significance. Manna might fall from the skies once in forty centuries; floods, famines, earthquakes and volcanoes are altogether more common, and far better substantiated. So if there is an omnipotent being up there, Antigod is on this count a better candidate than God.

The theist is more likely to appeal to smaller-scale miracles and religious experiences that occur within a religious tradition, and which are typically interpreted by those who experience them as an authentication by God of a particular prophet, teacher or doctrine. But even these are extremely double-edged. Such miracles are generally poorly substantiated, give little benefit to those concerned, or benefit only a few individuals. On the other hand they are frequently the source of religious dogmatism, controversy, conflict and persecution. One reason for this is that religious experiences are typically appropriate to the religious context within which they occur: Roman Catholics may have a vision of the Virgin Mary, for example, but never of Mohammed. Now if adherents of different religions each have experiences which encourage them in their different religious doctrines, and hence in their mutual opposition, is this not at least as likely to be Antigod at work, breeding conflict and fanaticism, as it is to be a benevolent, truthful God appearing in His true nature to the faithful?

The final type of revelation to which the theist is likely to appeal is verbal inspiration, as is supposedly to be found in holy books such as the *Bible* or the *Koran*. No doubt parts of these books do preach a high form of virtue, as for example, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Such passages by themselves, however,

prove nothing, since we have seen already that even Antigod has a motive for enlightening us about the true nature of morality, so that our subsequent waywardness may be all the more culpable. The Sermon on the Mount must therefore be judged, as it itself advocates, by its fruits: does it *actually* encourage virtue, or does it merely breed despair, by emphasising our hopeless inability to live up to the moral law? Augustine, Luther and many other theologians seem to have thought the latter, so who am I to argue?

Since the apparently virtuous passages of the *Bible* are so ambiguous, maybe we should look at some of the others. Take God's supposed commandments in *Deuteronomy* chapter 20, for instance:

[When you do battle against] the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded.
Deuteronomy ch.20 vv.16-17 (RSV)

This passage is surely precisely the sort of thing that one would expect to be inspired by Antigod, but certainly not by God! The Old Testament is an excellent source for such material, which is not by any means restricted to the rules of battle:

[Elisha] went up from [Jericho] to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!'. And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.
II Kings, ch.2 vv.23-4 (RSV)

It is not at all surprising that the ancient records of a warlike people should contain such atrocities (compare the antics of the Homeric gods), but what is surprising is that so many religious believers should have considered the God thus portrayed to be worthy of worship. The Old Testament is sacred not only for Jews and Christians, but also for Muslims, and this puts an interesting perspective on the once-popular Argument from Common Consent. The fact is that many religious people, and historically perhaps most of them, believe that literature such as the Old Testament provides an accurate representation of the nature of the Supreme Being. They thus believe in a Deity who advocates behaviour which is violent in the extreme, and which must strike the unprejudiced observer as disgustingly immoral (New Testament illustrations would be Christ's teachings about hell, e.g. *Matthew* 13₄₀₋₄₂, and various other passages such as *Matthew* 10₃₄₋₃₆ or *Luke* 14₂₆). Not only does this cast serious doubt on any argument for the existence of a benevolent God based on scriptural revelation, but it also shows that even the Argument from Common Consent is by no means unambiguous in its implications. Many people have believed in a being much like Antigod, so anyone who argues that the beliefs of billions must have some truth may be unwittingly committed to atheism!

Conclusion: two preposterous theories

We have now examined most of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and have found them all wanting. This negative conclusion has been based, however, not on refined analysis or abstract logic, but instead on the relatively crude observation that none of them provides any reason whatever for supposing that the Supreme Being, if there is one, is good rather than evil. In detail, the arguments fail for different reasons. The Cosmological Argument simply does not address the issue of God's moral status. Pascal's Wager and the Ontological Argument do address the issue, but can be shown to be unsound because parallel arguments lead equally plausibly to a directly opposite conclusion, namely the existence of Antigod. The Design Argument, too, has an equally effective analogue which tells in favour of Antigod - even if it provided a good reason for belief in a Designer, therefore, it would give no grounds for supposing that Designer to be morally good. The Moral Argument succumbs to the same fate - perhaps the greatest surprise of all, since although theists generally concede that it is a very weak argument, one might naively suppose that such force as it has would, if anything, favour

theism over antitheism. By contrast the failure of the Argument from Revelation is only to be expected: once it is suggested that apparent revelations may be illusory, or the product of a mischievous demon, then it is difficult to see how they could possibly retain much of their superficial evidential force.

I believe that criticism of this sort is in practice far more damaging to the theistic arguments than is subtle logical analysis, since no matter how carefully such critics as Hume or Mackie show the logical flaws in, say, the Cosmological Argument or the Design Argument, it is undeniable that these arguments retain for the layman a considerable intuitive appeal which it is difficult to dispel. I have not attempted to rob them of this spurious appeal by destructive analysis, but have instead adopted the strategy of undermining them in a different way, by focusing not on the reasoning which constitutes them, but rather on the conclusion which they supposedly support. For all their logical faults, many people will continue to find considerable plausibility in the Cosmological Argument ('The world must have come from somewhere'), the Design Argument ('Animals and plants are obviously products of intelligent design') and the Argument from Revelation ('Jesus' miracles prove that he was divine', 'Religious experience gives clear evidence of a spiritual reality') - it is very hard to persuade believers that these arguments are bad, but it may perhaps be easier to persuade them that such arguments fail to establish the existence of *God*. Once it is seen that the choice is not simply between atheistic scientific naturalism and traditional Christian theism, but rather between scientific naturalism and a whole host of possible supernatural theories, the inadequacies of the theistic arguments become very clear: all of the phenomena commonly adduced in favour of theism could just as easily be accounted for by many alternative theories, and even, in particular, by the theory that there is a Supreme Being who is thoroughly evil.

If this is correct, then the traditional debate between the theistic arguments and the Problem of Evil becomes very much more one-sided. If the theistic arguments tell no more in favour of God than they do in favour of Antigod, then for all their intuitive appeal, they do *nothing whatever* to oppose the overwhelming evidence of evil. And that evidence itself is at least as straightforward and immediately compelling as any of the theistic arguments: the quantity of pain and sin which we see around us is simply far too great to be easily reconciled with the world's having been created by a perfect Deity. This is not to say, however, that we should swing over to the other extreme and embrace antitheism - on the contrary, our discussion has indicated that the ambiguous data with which we are faced will cause serious difficulties for either extreme position, and that the Problem of Goodness is likely to be as intractable a problem for antitheism as the Problem of Evil has proved to be for theism. It is indeed obvious after even a cursory examination that *Antitheism is a preposterous theory, which has no adequate basis in our experience of the world, and which will be able to explain away the conflicting evidence only by building on a tissue of ad hoc sophistries and unsubstantiated conjectures*. My purpose in this paper has been to show that, although its familiarity and our social conditioning make us less able to assess its plausibility objectively, nevertheless *exactly the same condemnation may be applied, with at least equal justice, to theism*.

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