THE BLACKWELL
COMPANION TO
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Edited by

Justin P. McBrayer
and
Daniel Howard-Snyder

WILEY Blackwell

Contents

1

A Brief History of Problems of Evil

MICHAEL W. HICKSON

Introduction

If we understand "evil" broadly, as most contemporary philosophers do, to mean "all bad things" – for example, physical and mental suffering, intentional wrongdoing, error, and poverty – then it goes without saying that every Western philosopher and religious thinker has found evil problematic and has attempted, at least partially, to explain its origin and the means of overcoming or escaping it. To give an exhaustive survey of problems of evil in the West, therefore, would amount to writing a fairly complete history of 2500 years of philosophy and religion.

In what follows, therefore, I do not attempt to offer such a complete history, but rather to present several important moments of it in an attempt to track the emergence of what philosophers today call "*the* problem of evil." In contemporary parlance, "the problem of evil," despite the definite article, denotes a family of challenges to belief in a God who is supremely benevolent and powerful (van Inwagen 2006, 4–10): how can belief in such a God be justified given the vast extent and often horrendous nature of the suffering and moral depravity of human beings?

This family of problems, depending on logical presentation and authorial intent, can be considered either *aporetically* or *atheologically* (Adams and Adams 1990, 2–3). In the former case, the problems are presented as challenging human reason to think more deeply about the nature of God and his causal relation to the world (see Chapters 9 and 10). In the latter case, the problems are presented such that evil is explicitly offered as strong evidence against the very existence of God (see Chapters 4 and 5). Such atheological arguments, which are the primary focus of contemporary philosophers, have lately been referred to as "arguments from evil" in order to distinguish them from broader problems of evil that do not explicitly threaten belief in God's existence (Howard-Snyder 1996, xi–xvi). The goal of this chapter is to trace the historical origin of arguments from evil. The question I wish to

answer is this: has the existence of evil always been treated by philosophers as a challenge to God's existence, or is this a more recent trend in thinking about evil?

Since authorial intent is very difficult to determine with any confidence, I focus on the presentation of the problems of evil that have been treated over the centuries, and ask whether the authors in question link evil to the denial of God's existence. The problems of evil that must be considered are those in which evil is used as the basis of an objection to an account of the origin of the universe according to which some God is the principal cause. In considering such problems, I return to the same question: is evil being used to discredit belief in the *existence* of God, or is evil being opposed to some other element of the causal theory?

Another Footnote to Plato

Western philosophical reflection on the problem of evil is, not surprisingly, another footnote to Plato (429–347 BC). But a footnote to which dialogue or dialogues? A single passage in the *Republic* has been identified as "the first distinct statement in Greek literature of the problem of evil" (Chase Greene 1944, 298): "since a god is good, he is not – as most people claim – the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god" (Plato [1018] 1997; 379c).

The problem of evil is certainly lurking in the background of this passage, where the concern is to avoid charging the gods with any involvement in evil. However, this text does not yet explicitly state or engage any problem of evil; rather, the text sets up an elegant evasion of all such problems, an evasion that will be elaborated in the sequel to the *Republic*, the dramatic cosmological story of the *Timaeus*. In both dialogues, Plato advances a dualistic account of the origin of the universe. There is not a single, supremely powerful, and perfectly good original cause that is responsible for all that exists, and that must therefore be justified in the face of so much evil in the world; instead, Plato conveniently places all the blame for evil on a second eternal cause, which can be "persuaded" by the power of the good cause only to a limited extent.

In the *Timaeus*, the two original causes of the universe are named "Mind" and "Necessity." Mind acts on Necessity (by which Plato means the eternal disorderly motion of an unformed mass) "persuading it to direct most of the things that come to be toward what is best" (Plato [1250] 1997; 48a). The Demiurge, the anthropomorphic representation of Mind in the dialogue, first created because "He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible" (Plato [1236] 1997; 29e). In so far as the universe was created by the Demiurge, therefore, it is "as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow" (Plato [1236] 1997; 30b). But the Demiurge, though powerful, is not omnipotent, so disease[1] and vice, both of which arise from the eternal and corruptive disorderly motion of matter, still exist. Even moral evil is blamed in Plato's *Timaeus* on Necessity: "[J]ust

---

1 For a discussion of the causes of physical evil, see Plato ([1266]1997 (64c–d)).

about every type of succumbing to pleasure is talked about as something reproachable, as though the evils are willfully done. But it is not right to reproach people for them, for no one is willfully evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing" (Plato [1286] 1997; 86d–e).

Evil is not presented in the *Timaeus* as a possible threat to belief in the Demiurge. Nor is the Demiurge's goodness or activity in the world ever doubted on the basis of evil: "the existence of evil is not of the Demiurge's choosing; it exists in spite of the best demiurgic actions" (Mohr 1978, 575). Plato's *Timaeus* is certainly not, therefore, the first text to raise an argument from evil.

There are at least two separate statements of problems of evil, however, in the later *Laws*, in the theological 10th book of that dialogue. The origin and extent of evil becomes undeniably problematic for Plato in this work because his earlier dualism is largely set aside in this new account of the governance of the universe, summarized in this passage: "A soul or souls – and perfectly virtuous souls at that – have been shown to be the cause of all [celestial] phenomena, and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods" (Plato [1556] 1997; 899b). Whereas in the *Timaeus*, disorderly matter was coeternal with and independent of the benevolent Demiurge, in *Laws* X "soul is prior to matter, and . . . matter came later and takes second place. Soul is the master, and matter its natural subject" (Plato [1553] 1997; 896c).

The dualistic dissolution of the problem of evil still tempts Plato in *Laws* X, however, where an evil World Soul is posited in addition to the good World Soul: "[Is there] one soul, or more than one? I'll answer for you both: more than one. At any rate, we must not assume fewer than two: that which does good, and that which has the opposite capacity" (Plato [1553] 1997; 896e). This dualism is not exploited by Plato, however, for he believes the whole rational order of the universe points to the predominant activity of the good World Souls, who are described as "supremely good" gods who "know and see and hear everything"; who "can do anything which is within the power of mortals and immortals"; who are "supremely wise, and willing and able to superintend the world"; and who, like a good physician, look after the whole body, but also after every minor detail of it in order to keep it healthy (Plato [1558–1560] 1997; 901d–903a). Goodness is effectively unlimited and omnipotent in *Laws* X.

Given the supremacy of the virtuous gods in *Laws* X, it is unsurprising that Plato was forced to raise explicit problems of evil against this causal theory. The first he puts into the mouths of people who believe that the gods exist, but who claim that they take no notice of human affairs. In other words, the presence of evil is used as a reason to deny divine Providence. The particular evils that drive people to such "impiety" are "the good fortune of scoundrels and criminals in private and public life" and "the many ghastly acts of impiety which . . . are the very means by which some of these people have risen from humble beginnings to supreme power and dictatorship" (Plato [1556–1557] 1997; 899d–900a). When the problem of evil first explicitly enters Western thought, therefore, it has anti-Providential, not fully atheistic, force.

The second problem of evil in the *Laws* likewise challenges divine Providence, but of a more particular sort. Evils such as those just mentioned are indeed reproachable, Plato says, but "the universe has [been] arranged with an eye to its preservation and excellence, and its individual parts play appropriate active or passive roles according to their various capacities." To an imagined "impious" interlocutor, the Athenian sharply asserts: "You

forget that creation is not for your benefit: *you* exist for the sake of the universe." Yet the Athenian understands the basis of his interlocutor's worry: "you're grumbling because you don't appreciate that your position is best not only for the universe but for you too" (Plato [1560] 1997; 903b–d). It is not Providence in general that strikes the alleged impious man as improbable, but rather beneficent Providence *toward himself*.

Following but slightly adapting Peter van Inwagen's terminology, the first problem of evil in *Laws* X might be called "Plato's Global Problem of Evil," while the second might be called "Plato's Local Problem of Evil." The global problem challenges divine Providence in general on the basis of the broad presence of evil in human affairs, while the local variation challenges divine Providence toward certain individuals on the basis of their more-difficult-than-average lot in life (van Inwagen 2006, 56). Plato, like van Inwagen, found the two problems of evil sufficiently different to warrant separate attention; but unlike van Inwagen, Plato did not explicitly link either problem to the question of God's existence.

"Epicurus' Old Questions" and Ancient Skepticism

In his treatment of the problem of evil in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume (1711–1776) repeats what he calls "Epicurus' old questions" about God: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume 1993, 100). This is indeed an elegant and succinct, and therefore eminently quotable, statement of the problem of evil, and so it is unsurprising that since Hume's time it has been customary to begin articles and books on evil with this passage. This puzzle of Epicurus (341–270 BC) is often taken to be one of the first statements of an argument from evil (see, e.g., Plantinga 2004, 3).

A minor problem with this bit of popular history is that there is no extant Epicurean work containing this text. Hume's source for the now-famous passage was probably the *Dictionary* article "Paulicians," remark E, of Pierre Bayle (see Bayle 1991, 169), whose source in turn was chapter 13 of *On Anger* by the ancient (240–320) church Father, Lactantius (see Lactantius 1871, 28). Epicurus was among the most prolific ancient authors (Diogenes Laertius credits him with over 300 books), however, and we possess very few fragments of his works, so he may well have uttered the old questions in a work that is now lost, perhaps in *Of the Gods*, which is referred to by Diogenes Laertius as one of Epicurus' best books (Diogenes 2005, 557).

A more serious problem with this popular history is the supposition, assuming Epicurus framed his problem of evil in the words Lactantius reports, that there could have been atheistic intent behind his questions. For one thing, it is questionable whether anyone could have been an atheist in the Hellenistic period, so pervasive was religion in daily life. The word "atheist," though common in Epicurus' time, was a term of abuse more than an attempt to describe anyone's beliefs.[2] But more importantly, all the evidence available to us suggests that Epicurus believed in God, though he undoubtedly denied divine provi-

---

2 For a discussion and bibliography concerning ancient atheism in general, and Epicurus' alleged atheism in particular, seeBremmer (2007, 11–26).

dence: if the "old questions" belong to him, therefore, their publication had, like Plato's even older questions, antiprovidential, not atheistic intent.

Epicurus' belief in the gods is seen early in his extant *Letter to Menoeceus*, a summary of Epicurean ethics, where this advice is offered before anything else: "First, believe that god is an indestructible and blessed animal, in accordance with the general conception of god commonly held, and do not ascribe to god anything foreign to his indestructibility or repugnant to his blessedness" (Inwood and Gerson 1997, 28). But what ascriptions are "foreign" and "repugnant" to the gods' nature? The faithful disciple of Epicurus, Lucretius (99–55 BC), answers in his poem *On the Nature of the Universe* that both creation and providence are incompatible with the blessedness of the gods: "For what benefit could immortal and blessed beings reap from our gratitude, that they should undertake any task on our behalf? Or what could tempt those who had been at peace so long to change their old life [before creation] for a new?" (Lucretius 1994, 133).

Perhaps Epicurus was the author of the "old questions" made famous by Hume, but perhaps he was not – not enough evidence exists to decide the question. There is evidence, however, that the questions were posed by early Skeptics, and/or perhaps Gnostics (Larimore 2001, xviii–xxii). While the trilemma attributed to Epicurus is found in none of his extant works, or in those of his earliest followers, an expanded version of the old questions is found in the third book of the *Outlines of Scepticism* by Sextus Empiricus (circa 160–210):

[I]f [the gods] provided for all things, there would be nothing bad and evil in the universe; but [people] say that everything is full of evil. Therefore the gods will not be said to provide for everything. But if they provide for some things, why do they provide for these and not for those? Either they both want to and can provide for all, or they want to but cannot, or they can but do not want to, or they neither want to nor can. If they both wanted to and could, then they would provide for all; but they do not provide for all, for the reason I have just given; therefore it is not the case that they both want to and can provide for all. If they want to but cannot, they are weaker than the cause in virtue of which they cannot provide for the things for which they do not provide; but it is contrary to the concept of god that a god should be weaker than anything. If they can provide for all but do not want to, they will be thought to be malign. If they neither want to nor can, they are both malign and weak – and only the impious would say this about the gods.

The gods, therefore, do not provide for the things in the universe. But if they have providence for nothing and have no function and no effect, we will not be able to say how it is apprehended that there are gods, since it is neither apparent in itself nor apprehended by way of any effects. For this reason too, then, it is inapprehensible whether there are gods. (Sextus 2000, 145–146)

The first paragraph of the passage just quoted once again relates the problem of evil to doubt about divine providence. The broader conclusion drawn in the second paragraph is a development in the use of the problem of evil: the existence of the gods is inapprehensible by us once general divine providence is denied. This latter agnostic conclusion is almost certainly not of Epicurean origin. As we have seen, Epicurus himself counseled belief in the gods. Moreover, the context of the earlier passage is an argument *against* the Epicureans, who are counted among the theological "Dogmatists."

Is Sextus Empiricus the first to offer an argument from evil?[3] If arguments from evil are ultimately meant to disprove the existence of a good and powerful God, then the answer is "no." As a Pyrrhonian skeptic, Sextus does not argue for or against the existence of gods, but recommends suspension of judgment on the question. The argument just quoted at length is an objection to dogmatism about the gods and in favor of skepticism about theological claims in general. As such, it is more appropriately called an "agnostic problem of evil," rather than an atheistic argument from evil.

Augustine and the Manichean Problem of Evil

Metaphysical dualism – the claim that there are two irreducible causes of the universe – is an effective means of avoiding the problem of evil, as we have already seen in the case of Plato's *Timaeus* (see Chapter 13). Rejecting dualism in favor of a single ultimate cause invites the problem of evil. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the most formidable opponents of early Christian theologians were dualistic gnostics, who knew that they themselves were immune to the problem of evil, and that their adversaries, monotheistic Christians, were not. The most celebrated of such debates were recorded by St. Augustine of Hippo, who converted from Manicheism to Christianity. Augustine's writings against the Manicheans comprise a massive compilation of problems of evil, all of which share in common that they seek to discredit the view that a single benevolent God created the universe *ex nihilo* without being compelled by some external and independent cause. It is the unity of the ultimate causal principle that is the target of these objections, not the existence of God; so once again, we are not dealing with arguments from evil.

Augustine summarizes the Manichean view he once held as follows. First, "God is incorruptible, absolutely inviolable, and unable to be defiled": that is, a perfectly good and powerful God does indeed exist. However, in addition to God, there has also eternally existed a "nation of darkness," which is sometimes referred to as an evil substance opposed to the substance of God. This nation of darkness rebelled, and "when almighty God saw the great ruin and devastation that threatened his kingdoms unless he set something in the way of the enemy nation and resisted it, he sent forth [h]is power, and this world was fashioned from this power's mingling with evil" (Augustine 1990, 145).

According to the Manicheans, the human soul is consubstantial with God and suffers evil (pain and sin) only because of its mingling with evil through the body. Human wickedness is not the result of any activity proper to the human soul, certainly not of any freedom of the will. Just as God was forced by the rebellion of darkness to send human souls into the fray, so too human souls are bound by necessity whenever their acts have the slightest evil character, as Fortunatus, a Manichean, explains: "We say that the soul is forced to sin by the opposing nature" (Augustine 1990, 156). The Manicheans thus avoid the problem of evil because, on their view, physical and moral evil exist because God was necessitated by the rebellion of an enemy substance to send human souls into the nation of darkness in order to place a limit on it and win victory for God. There are innumerable

---

3 Perhaps not, for there is speculation that "Epicurus' old questions" were pulled by Lactantius from a lost portion of an earlier skeptical work, Cicero's (106–43 BC) *On the Nature of the Gods*. See Lactantius (1965, 93, note 8).

metaphysical problems with this view, which Augustine ably exploits, but as for the origin of evil, the Manicheans were on the offensive against the Bishop of Hippo.

The main argument of the Manichean Fortunatus against Augustine, the fundamental "Manichean Problem of Evil," is that it is inconsistent to believe both, on the one hand, that all things exist as the result of a single God's command, and on the other, that the soul does not derive from God its proclivity toward sins, vices, and worldly things (Augustine 1990, 148–149). Either everything is from God, including the human subjection and propensity to evil, or not everything is from God, and there is a second substance opposed to the divine one. Augustine's well-known response is that God gave human beings free will, which was misused by the first man and woman, leading to punishment by God in the form of physical evil.

For their rebuttal, the Manicheans advanced two additional problems of evil: call them the "Problem of Divine Complicity" and the related "Problem of Foreknowledge." Fortunatus puts the former problem as follows: "since you say that God gave free choice, he would already be found to consent to my sin, because he would be the author of my sin . . ." (Augustine 1990, 154). Since free choice is a power that ultimately derives from God's own power, the very power involved in individual human sin stems from God, who is therefore ultimately the author of sin. Even if the power of the soul to sin could be metaphysically distinguished from God's authorship, there is the problem of God's foreknowledge. This divine attribute leads to a more general problem of evil, which Fortunatus pointedly states: "You assert that we say that God is cruel in sending the soul [into the nation of darkness], but you claim that God made man and breathed a soul into him, which he certainly foreknew would be involved in future misery and could not be restored to its inheritance by reason of its evils. This is an act either of someone ignorant or of someone who hands the soul over to these evils . . ." (Augustine 1990, 160–161).

Augustine's reflection on these problems formed the basis for many of the subsequent medieval discussions of evil. As we will see, however, Augustine's writings against the Manicheans were unsuccessful in burying once and for all the dualistic threat to Christian accounts of the origin of evil.

The Argument from Evil in Aquinas's *Summa*

In Augustine's time, evil was not widely acknowledged as a threat to belief in the existence of God. Evil had been invoked in argument against the unity of the creator, divine providence, and the human capacity to know whether any gods existed; but evil had not yet served in an explicit attack on the very existence of God. There is no ancient argument from evil.

The first clear statement of an argument from evil (to my knowledge) occurs in the *Summa Theologica* (*ST*) of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) as one of only two objections raised against the existence of God: "It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word 'God' means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist" (Aquinas 1947, 13; *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1).

The argument from evil therefore dates back to roughly 1266 (the year when Aquinas began writing the *Summa*). But did Aquinas consider his argument from evil a *real threat*

to belief in the existence of God? Here is the opinion of a recent commentator on Aquinas, who has tried to place Aquinas's thought on God and evil in relation to contemporary discussions of the problem of evil:

> In a serious sense, however, Aquinas has *nothing* to say on this topic [the argument from evil]. I mean that he never offers a stand-alone discussion of what contemporary philosophers have come to call the problem of evil. He has no book or essay on it. He offers no full-length treatment starting along the lines "God is X, Y, Z, etc.; yet evil exists; so how can we reconcile evil with God's existence?" In this sense, what now passes as the problem of evil goes unmentioned in Aquinas' writings. These engage in no sustained theodicy or defense of belief in God written with an eye on evil. (Davies 2011, 6)

Davies is right, it seems to me, that despite Aquinas' statement of an argument from evil in the *Summa*, he did not believe that evil posed a serious threat to belief in God. So it is not entirely accurate to date the argument from evil back to Aquinas. Davies' book is the fullest treatment on this topic, but a few points can be added in defense of his thesis. First, in the massive treatise *On Evil*, Aquinas never explicitly mentions evil as a threat to belief in God's existence. Aquinas says much in that treatise that sets up modern discussions of the argument from evil, but he himself never raises the issue of God's existence in this book *devoted exclusively to issues relating to evil* (see Aquinas 1995, xv). Second, Aquinas does explicitly discuss impediments to reason's discovery of the existence of God, but when he does so, the seeming incompatibility of God and evil is not mentioned. The main obstacles in reasoning toward God are lack of philosophical ability, the demands of practical life, laziness, the length of time needed to arrive at that conclusion, and the susceptibility of human minds to error (see Wippel 2000, 382–383). Third, the argument from evil that Aquinas does raise in the *Summa* is, by his own standards, extremely weak. That argument assumes that evil is contrary to goodness, but the second misconception about evil that Aquinas clears away in the opening pages of *On Evil* is that evil is not opposed to goodness as a contrary, but in the way that a privation is opposed to the possession of a quality. To call evil the contrary of goodness must have seemed to Aquinas a metaphysical blunder hardly worthy of the two short sentences that he devotes to resolving the argument from evil in the *Summa*.

So why did Aquinas raise the argument from evil if he did not think it had any merit? There are reasons internal to Aquinas' philosophy and external to it. The internal reason is that the argument from evil gives support to Aquinas's claim earlier in the *Summa* – a claim that many in his day would have been surprised to read – that the proposition "God does not exist" is thinkable by people other than the "fools" of which Scripture speaks. In other words, it bolsters Aquinas' thesis that the existence of God is not self-evident by showing that reasons can be offered against theism. These arguments may be weak, but they are not irrational.

The reason external to Aquinas's philosophy that explains why he invented an argument from evil is the literary form in which the *Summa* was written, namely the Aristotelian-Scholastic form of disputation, which had this formula: question, objections to thesis, thesis, appeal to authority, arguments on behalf of thesis, and replies to objections. Aquinas wanted to demonstrate God's existence, but the Scholastic method demanded that he first begin with an objection or two. The requirement may seem arbitrary, but it was grounded in the advice of The Philosopher himself, Aristotle, who advises in the *Topics*: "In dealing

with any thesis, be on the look-out for a line of argument both pro and con. . . . If we cannot find anyone else to argue with, we should argue with ourselves" (Aristotle 1984, 276; 163a36–163b3).

That Aquinas presented an argument from evil in the *Summa* is not necessarily evidence that evil was at that time considered a plausible threat to belief in God's existence. It is rather an example of Aquinas needing to "argue with himself" in order to fulfill the strict demands of Aristotle's philosophical methodology. Is it possible that in this way Aquinas, or some earlier Scholastic philosopher, unwittingly introduced into the West the argument that is today taken to be the strongest support for atheism? Such a historical thesis is plausible, and would amount to a particular instance of Alan Charles Kors's broader thesis that atheism was introduced to the West largely and inadvertently through the writings of defenders of religious belief (see Kors 1990, 81–110).

Calvin, Descartes, and the Early-Modern Obsession with Evil

Problems of evil were not felt to be as urgent in later medieval philosophy as they were in Augustine's time, when the threat of Manicheism was looming large (Kent 2007, 178). To be sure, evil was a central philosophical topic for over a thousand years after Augustine. But evil was not primarily an objection to anything; it was instead a subject, like virtue, to be explicated and placed within a wider moral and metaphysical framework.

Objections based on evil became an important polemical device again, however, during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Core Christian beliefs were under attack for their apparent incompatibility with the evil in the world, but this attack was not from outside the fold, as it was in Augustine's time. Instead, Christians raised problems of evil against other Christians in an attempt to undermine their opposing sect's theology.

No theologian was spared such objections, but Calvinists were most often on the defensive because of their doctrine of predestination. This doctrine of "double predestination" is summarized by John Calvin (1509–1564) in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

> [I]n accordance with what scripture clearly shows, we say that the Lord once established in His eternal and immutable counsel whom He would take to salvation and whom He would leave in destruction. We say that He receives those whom He calls to salvation by His free mercy, without any regard for their own worth; on the contrary, that the entrance into life is closed to all those whom He wishes to give over to damnation and that this is done by His secret and incomprehensible but righteous and fair judgment. (Calvin 2009, 417)

Calvin's doctrine of predestination was controversial because he taught that God predestined *both* that certain people would be saved *and* that certain people would be damned. Divine election to salvation was a common doctrine, but the addition of divine reprobation from all eternity was found scandalous. Calvin might have assuaged his readers' anxiety by teaching that God predestined certain people to damnation because He had foreseen that they would sin; but this was just the opposite of what Calvin taught. In the *Institutes*, he teaches that God foresaw that people would sin precisely because He had foreordained all events. In other words, the predestination of the damned is the reason why God knows the damned will sin (see Klooster 1977, 60–79).

Calvin was well aware of the grumbling his view would cause, and so he anticipated his opponents' principal objection, which we can call the problem of double predestination:

"First they ask why God is angry with His creatures who did not provoke Him by any offense, for to destroy whomever He pleases is something more fitting to the cruelty of a tyrant than to the uprightness of a judge. Thus it seems to them that people have good reason to complain about God if by His pure will, without their own deserving, they are predestined to eternal death" (Calvin 2009, 423).

A century of obsession over problems of evil commenced in the early 1600s when Jacobus Arminius, previously an orthodox Calvinist, published his famous "Remonstrance" of five points against the theology of Calvin (for Arminius' motivation, see Bangs 1971, 138ff.). The main problem Arminius and his followers (the "Arminians" or "Remonstrants") found with Calvin's theology was that its "insistence ... upon God's omnipotence and man's helplessness . . . led immediately and necessarily to the conclusion that God Himself was responsible for man's sins and was the cause of his damnation" (Rex 1965, 80). Calvin's God, in other words, was a cruel tyrant. The Arminian controversy led the Dutch Calvinist church to hold a Synod at Dordrecht in 1618, at which the orthodox Calvinist teaching, and *not* the Arminian teaching, on predestination was upheld. This validation of "Counter-Remonstrant" Calvinism was a political revolution of great importance (Israel 1995, 465), and more importantly for our purposes, put the origin of evil at the center of theological debates for the next hundred years.

Several decades after the Synod of Dordrecht, problems of evil would likewise take front-and-center in philosophical debates, thanks in large part to the publication of René Descartes' (1596–1650) *Meditations*. The *Meditations* seeks to attain unshakeable certainty at the foundations of knowledge. The linchpin of the Cartesian system is the existence of a benevolent God: since God is perfect, He can be no deceiver, and so whatever He has endowed human beings with, particularly intellect and will, must be good and reliable. There is consequently hope – *pace* early modern skeptics like Montaigne – that humans can attain sure knowledge. But the fourth Meditation raises an objection against Descartes' claims about God's benevolence and the goodness of His creatures' intellects. It is naturally the problem of error: if God's gift of intellect to human beings is good, then how does it happen at all, let alone so frequently, that humans go astray in using the intellect? Whence error? Why are humans not omniscient, or at least unerring?

Descartes' solutions to these worries (to be treated later in this volume) hardly put an end to these questions. Not surprisingly, then, philosophers who wrote immediately after Descartes, such as Arnauld, Spinoza, Bayle, Malebranche, and Leibniz, all wrote extensively on the fourth Meditation topics of the nature and sources of error, and broader problems of evil raised earlier that Protestant–Catholic polemics had again brought to the fore.

Bayle and the Insolubility of the Problem of Evil

First published in 1697, the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) would become the philosophical bestseller of the eighteenth century, exceeding the sales of works by Newton, Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau, and it has since been recognized as "the arsenal of the Enlightenment" (Lennon 1999, 7). Hume knew it well, and recommended a close reading of certain sections before approaching his own work (Hume 2007, 203–204).

The *Dictionary* is difficult to navigate. Articles are devoted to authors or sects, and are arranged alphabetically, while over three-quarters of the millions of words of the *Dictionary*

are contained in dual-columned footnotes treating various philosophical topics only loosely related to the subjects of the main articles. However, even random forages through the volumes quickly reveal that the problem of evil is a dominant theme of the *Dictionary*, which contains enough relevant material spread throughout to be considered the first, and even today the most complete, history of problems of evil to 1700.[4]

Since both Calvinism and Cartesianism marked his early education, it is unsurprising that the controversies and problems treated earlier fascinated Bayle. As he saw it, both the theological and philosophical debates over evil had reached a stalemate. First, the theological debates: "Since Luther and Calvin appeared on the scene, I do not believe a year has gone by without someone accusing them of making God the author of sin. . . . [Pierre Jurieu] admits the accusation is just against Luther. The Lutherans nowadays make the same claim about Calvin. The Roman Catholics make the claim about both of them. The Jesuits say it is the case with Jansenius" (Bayle 1991, 183).[5] The philosophical stalemate was witnessed by Bayle between 1684 and 1686, as he reported in his academic journal, *News from the Republic of Letters*, the debate between the two most famous philosophers of his day, Antoine Arnauld and Nicolas Malebranche, over the nature of divine providence, natural evils, and human error.[6] The two philosophers each built brilliant systems for dealing with problems of evil, but each also successfully undermined the other's work in Bayle's view.

After decades of studying the history of problems of evil, Bayle declared his own position: complete skepticism (see Chapter 29). "[T]he way in which evil was introduced under the government of a supreme, infinitely good, infinitely holy, and infinitely powerful being is not only inexplicable, but also incomprehensible. And all that can be opposed to the reasons why this being has allowed evil agrees more with the natural light and the ideas of order than do the reasons themselves" (Bayle 1991, 168–169). Bayle proved this thesis in the *Dictionary*'s most notorious articles, "Manicheans" and "Paulicians." His strategy is to show that if Manicheism existed in the seventeenth century, a proponent of it could easily overwhelm Christians in debates over the origin of evil. In other words, Bayle resurrected the ancient Manichean problems of evil in order to uphold his skepticism.

Bayle's goal was not thereby to undermine monotheism or support Manicheism; it was instead to demonstrate that reason was at odds with itself. *A priori* reason, in Bayle's view, reveals nothing more clearly than the existence of a perfect, and therefore benevolent, God. From this perspective, then, there is no problem of evil: everything created by God must be good, not only in general, but also for every individual. *A posteriori* reason conflicts with *a priori* reason, because on the basis of the evidence of human experience, the hypothesis of two gods, one good and one evil, is far more probable than the hypothesis of a single, infinitely good, God. Columns and columns of footnotes to "Manicheans" and "Paulicians" show how dualist Manicheans would outdo monotheistic Christians in accounting for the experiences of pain and moral wickedness (see Bayle 1991, 144–154, 166–194). What is left can be called Bayle's skeptical problem of evil. It is a second-order problem (a problem

---

4 To begin, see "Arminius," "Gomarus," "Epicurus," "Helen," "Manicheans,"* "Marcionites," "Origen," "Paulicians,"* "Pericles," "Pyrrho,"* "Synergists," "Zoroaster," and the "Clarification on the Manicheans."* Unfortunately, only articles marked with "*" are in the Popkin translation. We need a new English translation of the entire *Dictionary*, but for the time being, see Bayle (1984) for the other articles.

5 Bayle, *Dictionary*, "Paulicians," remark F. Pierre Jurieu was a Calvinist theologian and polemicist.

6 The occasion of the dispute was Malebranche's 1680 *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. SeeMalebranche (1992).

about problems), and states that the various problems of evil treated earlier cannot be solved by human reason.

The question of Bayle's intentions in these articles has been much debated. Bayle's contemporaries, Jean Le Clerc and Isaac Jaquelot, feared that Bayle had launched an assault against basic Christian beliefs. Most famously, G.W. Leibniz, especially in response to Bayle's *Dictionary* and *Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius* (1707), wrote the *Theodicy* (1710) in an attempt to solve, or at least insert optimism again into, the debates over the origin of evil. Recent commentators have been less confident that Bayle intended to undermine religion,[7] but they have not then agreed about his true intentions: "To take just the twentieth-century literature, the suggestions are that Bayle was fundamentally a positivist, an atheist, a deist, a sceptic, a fideist, a Socinian, a liberal Calvinist, a conservative Calvinist, a libertine, a Judaizing Christian, a Judaeo-Christian, or even a secret Jew, a Manichean, an existentialist . . ." (Lennon 1999, 15).

Yet Bayle could not have expressed his intentions more clearly: "All of this warns us that we should not dispute with the Manicheans until we have established the doctrine of *the elevation of faith and the abasement of reason*" (Bayle 1991, 176–177). The problem of evil is insoluble in Bayle's stated opinion, and this insolubility is a reminder to humans of the weakness of reason, and the need for faith. We can all at least agree that there is, again, no explicit argument from evil here, since Bayle's arguments everywhere concede that God exists, though perhaps in the company of an opposing, malevolent deity.

The First Logical and Evidential Arguments from Evil

With the *Dictionary* articles concerning evil close at hand, two eighteenth-century philosophers set about removing all ambiguity from Bayle's arguments, and demonstrating that the existence of God is cast into serious doubt by the evil in the world. The first writer, the anonymous author of the French work (despite the Latin title), *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (written between 1760 and 1770), sought to demonstrate the logical incompatibility of the existence of a good God and the existence of physical and moral evil. This author is to my knowledge the first to sincerely advance a logical argument from evil of the sort that J.L. Mackie (1955) most famously defended in 1955. The second author, David Hume (1711–1776), in the 10th and 11th chapters of his posthumous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, offers the humbler argument that the existence of a morally good first cause of the universe is highly improbable given the evidence of our senses. Various rival hypotheses incompatible with traditional theism, such as the existence of a morally neutral first cause, are far more likely. Hume is to my knowledge the first to offer an evidential argument from evil of the sort Paul Draper and others have more recently offered (see Draper 1989, 331–350).

The *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (*JBR*) begins by expounding the Epicurean theses, recast by Giordano Bruno (once a Dominican friar, and eventually burned for heresy in 1600), of the infinite vastness of the universe and the plurality of worlds. Epicurean antiprovidentialism early in the work turns to outright atheism beginning in the third chapter, "On the Existence of God," which offers a natural history of belief in God, and finally a philosophical attack on that belief.

---

7 My own interpretation is that Bayle was arguing for religious toleration by undermining traditional theodicies. See Hickson (2010; 2013).

The fifth and final chapter is devoted to proving that because evil exists, God does not. It begins: "There is evil in the world, and yet there is a God: is this believable? No. One must consent to the annihilation of one of these two things in order to conserve the existence of the other" (*JBR*, 96–97).[8] The argument is basically the Thomistic one considered earlier. The majority of the fifth chapter considers the most important responses to this argument, particularly the free will theodicy. The anonymous atheist finds none of these convincing, attempts to refute them all, and concludes with his main case against God: "An infinitely good being who is all-powerful must neither commit nor permit anything but what is good. Now if there were infinite goodness in the world, there would be no evil, not even the shadow of evil. Yet there is evil: I leave you to derive the logical conclusion" (*JBR*, 110). The conclusion is obvious in the context of the *JBR*'s brazen atheism: there is no God.

The intent behind Hume's *Dialogues* is more difficult to discern. What is incontestable, however, is that an argument from evil that aims to render the existence of a good God improbable culminates in that work's 11th chapter. It seems very likely, though it cannot easily be proven, that Hume, through his carefully crafted and balanced dialogue, wished to render God's existence improbable. That Philo, his skeptical interlocutor, offers an argument to this effect is, however, beyond all doubt.

Hume has Philo repeatedly assert that God and evil are consistent, so the argument from evil that is eventually offered is not of the logical, but rather of the evidential variety: "however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference" (Hume 1993, 107). Philo's strategy in reflecting at length on evil is to show that a hypothesis that is inconsistent with that of a good God, namely the hypothesis of a nonmoral first cause, is more probable than the hypothesis of a good God. Philo's argument involves enumerating four principal causes on which all the natural evil in the world depends, and showing that none of these is necessary. A better world than this is possible, and so it seems from the standpoint of reason that a good and powerful God ought to have created that other better world. Philo concludes:

> There may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness, *that* they have perfect malice, *that* they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, *that* they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (Hume 1993, 114)

Like Bayle, Hume believes that the mix of good and evil in the world, not just the presence of evil, is the real problem for theists. "Mixed phenomena," thinks Hume, render belief in a single good God, or a single evil God, improbable. Unlike Bayle, Hume finds Manichean dualism improbable on the basis of the apparent order in the universe. Strong probability, therefore, rests with the hypothesis of a nonmoral first cause of the universe, and so Hume, or at least Philo, renders the existence of God improbable.[9]

8 All citations of the *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus* (*JBR*) will refer to the 1771 edition. All translations of *JBR* are my own.
9 For an argument that *Hume* aims to establish atheism, see Holden (2010).

Conclusion

Problems of evil are indeed ancient, but *the* problem of evil of contemporary philosophy – a set of arguments targeting the existence of God – is very modern. It is noteworthy that even the expression, "*the* problem of evil," is a latecomer; it was not common in English until the middle of the nineteenth century. However, when it began to appear frequently in print, it did not refer to any single problem. The expression certainly did not refer exclusively or even predominately to a threat to theism. In 1847, one of the earliest authors that I have found mentioning "the problem of evil" in fact goes out of his way to distance this problem from any concern for the existence of God: "It certainly does not touch the question of existence at a single point whatsoever. The dullest intellect must perceive this at once, without illustration, on the bare statement. The problem of the origin of evil has positively nothing to do with the proposition, that God is. It belongs to a very different category, the inquiry as to whether God is good" (Arrington 1847, 261).[10]

In 1849, another early author to use the expression "the problem of evil" also associated the subject with something other than atheism, in this case dualism. The first sentence of the author's article entitled, "Evil," reads: "We have no doubt that dualism, the doctrine of a good and an evil principle, rather than monotheism, a belief in one God, is the natural result of a philosophy unenlightened by revelation" (A.P.P. 1849, 227).[11] In attempting to explain the origin of evil, this Christian author is engaged in a project closer to Augustine's or Bayle's than to that of contemporary philosophers of religion.

Studying the history of philosophical problems often illuminates contemporary treatments of those problems. What might be the lesson of this history, which has shown us that evil has posed many problems in the last two millennia in the West, but has only recently been linked to atheism? The lesson might be that we confine ourselves to narrower conceptions of the first cause(s) today, that we have a more limited theological imagination, than our predecessors. Today, the problem of evil basically argues: *If there is a God, then He must possess attributes X, Y, Z. But evil shows that the first cause of the universe positively cannot (or probably does not) possess attributes X, Y, or Z. Therefore, there is (probably) not a God.* Evil calls God's existence into question only if God's nature can be pinned down ("He *must* possess attributes X, Y, Z"). With greater humility in our theological speculation, however, evil would not call the *existence* of a God immediately into question, but only our understanding of the ultimate cause or causes of the universe.

Acknowledgments

---

10 Arrington goes on to use the expression, "the problem of evil," in the next sentence: "The problem of evil has been professedly solved in many opposite ways. Every creed presents its own solution" (Arrington 1847, 261).

11 "The problem of evil" is used at the later in this section.

Further Reading

Anonymous. (1771). *Jordanus Brunus Redivivus*. SLSN.

References

Adams, M.M. and Adams, R.M. (eds) (1990). *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A.P.P. (1849). Evil. In *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, Vol. XLVII, edited by O. Everett, pp. 227–238, Boston: W.M. Crosby and H.P. Nichols.

Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa Theologica*. New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc.

Aquinas, T. (1995). *On Evil*. Translated by Jean T. Oesterle. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Aristotle. (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by J. Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Arrington, A. (1847). The Existence of a Deity. In *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. XXI, edited by T.P. Kettell, pp. 102–115 and 253–266. New York: Langtree and O'Sullivan.

Augustine. (1990). *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Volume I/19: The Manichean Debate*, edited by B. Ramsey with an Introduction and Notes by Roland Teske, S.J. Brooklyn, NY: New City Press.

Bangs, C. (1971). *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*. Nashville, TN; New York: Abingdon Press.

Bayle, P. (1984). *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*. Translated by Pierre Des-Maizeaux. New York; London: Garland Publishing.

Bayle, P. (1991). *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*. Translated, edited, and introduced by Richard H. Popkin with assistance from Craig Brush. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

Bremmer, J.N. (2007). Atheism in Antiquity. In *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, edited by M. Martin, pp. 11–26, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Calvin, J. (2009). *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*. Translated by Elsie Anne McKee. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

Chase Greene, W. (1944). *Moira: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Cicero. (1998). *The Nature of the Gods*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by P.G. Walsh. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davies, B. (2011). *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Diogenes, L. (2005). *Lives of the Great Philosophers*. Translated by R.D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library 185, Vol. II. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press.

Draper, P. (1989). Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists. *Nous (Detroit, Mich.)* 23(3): 331–350.

Hickson, M.W. (2010). The Message of Bayle's Last Title: Providence and Toleration in the *Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste. Journal of the History of Ideas* 71(4): 547–567.

Hickson, M.W. (2013). Theodicy and Toleration in Bayle's *Dictionary. Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51(1): 49–73.

Holden, T. (2010). *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howard-Snyder, D. (ed.) (1996). *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Hume, D. (1993). *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and *Natural History of Religion*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hume, D. (2007). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, edited by S. Buckle, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Inwood, B. and Gerson, L.P. (eds) (1997). *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

Israel, J. (1995). *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kent, B.D. (2007). Evil in Later Medieval Philosophy. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45(2): 177–205.

Klooster, F.H. (1977). *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

Kors, A.C. (1990). *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lactantius. (1871). *The Works of Lactantius*, Vol. II, edited by W. Fletcher, Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Lactantius. (1965). *Lactantius: The Minor Works*. Translated by Sister Mary Francis McDonald, O.P. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press

Larrimore, M. (ed.) (2001). *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Malden, MA; Oxford; Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.

Lennon, T. (1999). *Reading Bayle*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Lucretius. (1994). *On the Nature of the Universe*. Translated by R.E. Lathan with an Introduction by John Godwin. London: Penguin Books.

Mackie, J.L. (1955). Evil and Omnipotence. *Mind; a Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 64(254): 200–212.

Malebranche, N. (1992). *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Translated with an Introduction by Patrick Riley. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mohr, R. (1978). Plato's Final Thoughts on Evil: Laws X, 899–905. *Mind; a Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 87: 572–575.

Plantinga, A. (2004). Supralapsarianism, or "O Felix Culpa." In *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, edited by P. van Inwagen. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Plato. (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN; Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.

Rex, W. (1965). *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Sextus, E. (2000). *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by J. Annas and J. Barnes, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

van Inwagen, P. (2006). *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wippel, J.F. (2000). *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.

Dr. Hickson's 3-year review

McBrayer, Justin <jpmcbrayer@fortlewis.edu>

Mon 17/08/2015 11:54 AM

To:Michael Hickson <michaelhickson@trentu.ca>;

Dear members of the tenure review committee,

I, Justin P. McBrayer, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Fort Lewis College, am happy to report that Michael Hickson's chapter, "A Brief History of Problems of Evil," in the *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, edited by Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 3-18, was accepted only after a rigorous peer-review process that included two outside referees in addition to review by both of the editors for the text. Indeed, a 4-person read is more strenuous than the standard, 2-person review that occurs for most journal papers. His paper strengthened the overall volume considerably, and we are grateful for his submission.

Sincerely,

Justin P. McBrayer