THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: I

Anna Kalypsas: a philosophers and teacher
Mel Etitis: one of her best students
Kathy Merinos: a student of more average ability
Theo Logos: a religious believer with philosophical interests

(A sunny town square somewhere in the Peloponnese. Anna Kalypsas and her two friends are enjoying a leisurely coffee. They're joined by Theo Logos, who pauses on his way towards the church.)

Theo: Good morning to you all!

Anna (lowering her newspaper):
   Yes, it's a beautiful morning, Theo, though I'm afraid not for everyone. Have you seen the news today?

Theo: I heard some of it on the radio this morning just before I left the house. Much of it bad as usual, I am afraid.

Anna: Another earthquake in Turkey, a new mass grave discovered in Rwanda, and some lunatic with an assault rifle in Los Angeles. And that's just the front page.

Theo: Yes, I was just on my way over to the church to pray for all the victims. Would the three of you care to join me?

Anna: I'm afraid, Theo, that I've never really grasped the notion of prayer — it seems to have such different meanings for different people. I'm reluctant to indulge in a practice that I don't really understand. Especially when it involves a deity whom today's news seems to display in rather a bad light.

Theo: Mmmh. Frankly I should need some notice before locking horns with you on the question of prayer — it is much too difficult a topic to discuss unprepared. But I think that I can show you where you have gone wrong on the other matter. I suppose that you are referring to that old chestnut, the problem of evil?

Anna: It might be an old chestnut, but isn't that because it's never really been cracked?

(Theo settles down at the table with a pleased and anticipatory sigh, and allows Kathy to order him a coffee.)

Theo: Not at all, not at all. The answer is simplicity itself, though it has taken many forms. Now, how exactly do you propose to present the problem?
Mel: Well, Dr Logos, it's surely this. There's a contradiction between two sets of facts. On the one hand we have the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent being who created the world, and on the other hand we have a world full of evil.

Anna: True, Mel, but there's more to be said before we can let Theo solve the problem for us. As usual we have to make some distinctions. First, we need to distinguish between different kinds of evil. What kind of evil did you have in mind, Mel?

Mel: I suppose I was thinking of all the pain and suffering — that's what the newspaper's full of, isn't it? I think that that's what most people think of when they ask how a good god can allow so much evil; they're not asking about embezzlement or political sleaze, but about the awful things that happen to people — the Holocaust, the Plague, that sort of thing. For example, it's pain, suffering, and death that led the Buddha to turn away from Hinduism.

Anna: That's true, I think. But if we include the Buddhist response to evil, we'll have to widen the scope of the problem, shan't we? After all, the Buddha's problem wasn't with a creator who had all the properties you mentioned — omnipotence and the rest — but with whether any god or gods deserves worship. He didn't conclude that there were no gods, or that they didn't have one or another divine property; he said that, even if some god exists, it doesn't deserve our worship. That's an interesting line to take, but we shouldn't spread ourselves too thinly — and, as Theo isn't a Buddhist, perhaps we'd better stick to the traditional Judæo-Christian problem of evil.

So let's start with what's usually called physical evil — though I suppose that we should include psychological pain and suffering in that.

Theo: More important for me, though, is the fact that people are sinners. In the case of today's American gunman, or whoever was responsible for the Ruandan tragedy, the religious person must surely ask, not why there is suffering, but why human beings create that suffering.

Mel: Fair enough, Dr Logos, but cases like the earthquake are also important, aren't they? Shouldn't we ask why a good god would create a world that often seems hostile to us? After all, it isn't just earthquakes, but floods, disease, volcanoes, hurricanes...

Anna: Fine — so we also have moral evil and natural evil.

Mel (drily):

Acts of god?

Anna (with a laugh):
Yes, but I don’t think that we should read too much into insurance-company language. There’s one other category of evil that we might mention, though: metaphysical evil. That might sound a bit technical, but in fact it covers one of the most important problems for many theists who find themselves questioning their faith. It’s true, Mel, that most people think in terms of suffering — but I think that many also see death itself as a difficulty. I don’t mean the pain that often accompanies death, but the ending of life itself. Especially when a young child dies, for example, even if there’s no pain, its parents might well ask why a good god would allow such a cutting short.

Kathy: Why is the fact that some day we’ll stop existing any more of a problem than the fact that we didn’t exist before we were born?

Anna: A good question, Kathy, but one that we’d probably better leave for another time. Apart from anything else, it would involve us getting into the nature of time, and that’s a huge question. Anyway, are we now clear about this distinction?

Theo: Yes, I think so. There are moral and natural evil, either of which can lead to physical and metaphysical evil.

Anna: Well, yes, in a way. But metaphysical evil doesn’t so much involve the fact of individual deaths as the fact of death. One might say that it’s the contingency of our existence.

Mel: OK, I think that’s all clear. Now, don’t we need to say a bit more about the way I described god? Apart from omnipotence...

Anna: Which we’ll probably come back to later.

Mel: ...fine; well, apart from that, what exactly is benevolence? Can we say that a benevolent being would eliminate evil wherever it found it?

Anna: I don’t think so. That would be OK if we were talking about one of us — someone who comes across evil and has to react to it. Theo’s god, though, is supposed to have created the world, not merely come across it. Benevolence in that sort of case must involve not willingly create or bringing about evil.

Theo: I shall accept that definition for the moment, though I should prefer to have time to think about it. But tell me Anna, as someone who is interested in philosophy, you are acquainted with the work of Gottfried Leibniz?

Anna: Of course. But I hardly think you’d want to accept his doctrine — that this is the best of all possible worlds, and that the problem of evil is therefore no problem at all?
Theo: Not precisely, no — and certainly not for his reasons. But Leibniz does point us in the right direction. You see, people like you, Anna, tend to ask the sort of question Mel suggested: how, given that the world contains evil, can it have been created by a god who is benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient? Leibniz suggests that what we should be asking is: how can we reconcile the two facts — that there is evil in the world, and that the god who created it is benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient?

(Kathy breaks in, unable to keep quiet)

Kathy: But the two aren’t at all the same! One’s an undeniable fact — just look at Anna’s newspaper; the other’s just a supposition, open to doubt.

Anna: Well look, forget about Leibniz for a moment, Theo — if this is the best of all possible worlds, how do you account for the fact that it’s full of what most of us would call imperfections?

Theo: It seems to me that there are two reasons. First, a world without evil would be a world without good, and that could not have been what god desired when he created our world. Secondly, if god is a perfect being then he cannot be responsible for the imperfections of the world; where can those imperfections have come from, then? From the human beings whom he placed here, of course.

Mel: But surely, Dr Logos, as their creator, isn’t god responsible for their actions?

Theo: No Mel, for god gave his creatures free will — the greatest gift he could have given them. The evil that we see in the world is our responsibility, not god’s; if god had not given us the freedom to go wrong, then we really should have had cause to criticise him.

Anna: I’m sorry, Theo, I need to try to grasp this better; bear with me while I try to get the whole thing straight. Let’s start with your second point. Your belief is that god is omnipotent and omniscient, so that he could have created the world in any possible way?

Theo: Of course.

Anna: And we can express this by saying that god chose this world out of an infinity of possible worlds which he might have created?

Theo: Yes. Mind you, I do not myself believe in the existence of possible worlds, but they do allow us to discuss matters of possibility and necessity more easily. So using that language, God made actual the best of all the possible worlds.

Anna: Fine; now, let’s take an example. The American gunman whom I mentioned earlier: he in fact killed a lot of people in Los Angeles, but it was possible that he decide not to?
Theo: Precisely. Unfortunately our understanding and wisdom are not always sufficient for us to live up to the great gift of free will which god has given us.

Anna: Well, OK. But we can express this possibility by saying that there are possible worlds in which the gunman did kill those people (and this is one of them, of course), and possible worlds in which he didn’t — in which he chose not to do evil?

Theo: Yes.

Anna: Let’s take one of the worlds in which the gunman didn’t choose to do the evil — we can call it ‘world x’. Why did god bring our world into actuality and not world x? In both worlds the gunman chose freely, but in this world lots of people suffered, while in world x they didn’t. Indeed, we can ask a larger question: why didn’t god bring into actuality a world in which everyone chooses freely to do good all the time?

Theo: I think, if I may say so Anna, that you have completely failed to understand the notion of free will. If god had chosen your world free of evil, he could not have been said to have given us free will, for he would have ordained our choices from the beginning.

Anna: Now I’m really confused. God presumably knew all the possible worlds from which he could choose, for he’s omniscient. We might picture it, in our limited way, like this:

(\textit{She draws a diagram in the margin of her newspaper.})

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
\hline
6/6 evil & 5/6 evil & 4/6 evil & balanced & 4/6 good & 5/6 good & 6/6 good \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Now Theo, imagine these are possible worlds — just seven of them, to keep things simple. In the first one, people choose always to do evil, never to do good; in the second, they sometimes but rarely choose to do good, and so on, until in the seventh world they always choose good and never evil. Our world’s probably somewhere on the left of this diagram (if that’s not too cynical for you); let’s say for the sake of argument that it’s the 4/6 evil world.

All right. Now, god, you say, would have been guilty of interfering with our free will if he’d chosen to actualise the 6/6 good world — if he’d chosen the world in which we always freely choose to do what’s good. If that’s so, then why wasn’t he interfering with our free will when he chose to actualise our world? How can the question of which world he chose have any bearing on whether or not our will is free? Either he chose to actualise
one of the possible worlds or he didn’t; if he did choose one of them, then what we do is his choice rather than ours — but if he didn’t choose one of them, then you surely have a religious problem.

Mel: May I try to answer that, Dr Logos?

Theo: Of course — go on Mel.

Mel: Although god is omniscient, does that mean that he’s forced to know everything, whether he wants to or not?

Theo: I suppose not; after all, he is omnipotent.

Mel: So that god can choose not to know something?

Theo: I should have to think about that; I am not very happy with the idea. Still, for the sake of the argument, let us assume that you are right. Go on.

Mel: Well, that’s more or less it. Couldn’t god have deliberately put aside his knowledge of the moral contents of all the possible worlds, so that his actualisation of one of them wouldn’t involve his deciding whether or not we choose good or evil?

Kathy: But do you have to bring in this business of god’s choosing not to know? I’m not at all sure whether that would make much sense religiously. We’re all agreed, I suppose, that god’s omnipotence doesn’t mean that he can do the logically impossible? I mean, he couldn’t make a table that was both round and square, for example?

Theo: Of course not... for that would mean both that god made the table round and that he did not make it round.

Mel: Well, perhaps it’s logically impossible that god choose between worlds in which there’s free will. That is, once he has decided to grant us free will, that logically rules out his deciding between the different worlds in which we exercise that freedom.

Theo: Of course — for then it would be the case both that he create a world in which our actions are chosen by ourselves alone and that he create a world in which our actions are chosen by him.

Anna: A nice try, all of you, but I don’t think that Theo could really accept such a solution. You see, even if what you say about god’s omnipotence were true, you’d only have succeeded in making his creation of this world a random matter — and that doesn’t seem to say much for our responsibility for our actions. Besides, it’s difficult to see why god would have wanted to create a world on that basis.

Mel: God does not play dice with the universe, as Einstein said.
Theo: True enough, Anna; that is the trouble with philosophy — it seduces one into undesirable corners. Perhaps we could drop free will for the moment and consider the other answer to your question — a conceptual answer which should appeal to your philosophical leanings.

Anna: Well, I’m not sure exactly what you mean by that, but do go on.

Theo: I think that you will agree that there are some notions which do not make sense on their own. For example, the notion of a peak only makes sense if we also have the notion of a trough; the notion of brightness only makes sense if we also have the notion of darkness.

Anna: Fair enough, if only for the sake of argument.

Theo: My contention, then, is that the notion of good makes no sense without the notion of evil. That is, for the world to contain goodness, it must contain evil. Now, you have been assuming that god’s benevolence implies simply that he wishes the absence of evil, but I take it to mean equally that he wishes the presence of good. The sort of world you posit, in which no-one ever does evil, would be a world in which goodness was meaningless. God would naturally choose to create a world in which there was goodness, rather than one that was morally blank.

Anna: Hah, we’re getting close to Leibniz again. This is the best of all possible worlds, because a world with no evil would be a world without good. There seems to be an obvious problem, though: why do we need so much evil? Couldn’t god have made the world with just enough evil to make the concept of goodness meaningful? I don’t just mean the quantity of evil, though that’s clearly a problem, but its quality. Why does evil have to be as foul as it actually is?

Theo: I do not know about the quantity, but the question of quality seems clear enough. The goodness involved in, say, deciding not to be slightly selfish is much less than the goodness involved in deciding not to torture and maim a hundred people. A world in which evil was little more than minor nastiness would be a world in which goodness was little more than minor niceness. All rather insipid.

Anna: Again, I’m somewhat handicapped by my ignorance as to god’s purpose in creating the world, but it does seem to me that you’re describing a situation in which god’s choice is simply inexplicable. Look at my diagram again.
If good and evil are meaningful only when they co-exist in a world, then they’re meaningless in the first and last worlds here, right?

Theo: Precisely.

Anna: And in the worlds second from each end of the scale they’re reduced to rather petty, insipid levels of niceness and nastiness?

Theo: I suppose so...

Anna: I can understand your hesitation, Theo. It seems a little odd to say that the 6/6 evil world doesn’t contain any evil at all, given that it’s full of murder, rape, torture, and so on. In fact, it would even be odd to say that it was merely insipid.

Theo: Yes, I know. Still, we have to remember that we are looking at these worlds from our own viewpoint, in a world that contains good and evil; we get our moral criteria from our world, and apply them to other possible worlds.

Anna: But surely god is choosing from a position outside these worlds; his criteria are transworld, and don’t rely upon which definitions make sense within worlds. So he understands that in the 6/6 good world there is goodness, because he can compare its inhabitants’ actions with the actions of the inhabitants of the other worlds. To put it in terms of the inhabitants themselves, all that’s necessary for the concept of goodness to make sense is that evil is possible — and it is, for it exists in other possible worlds.

Kathy: Does that matter, Anna? I mean, the people at the 6/6 good world don’t know that other worlds contain evil — and they wouldn’t understand what ‘evil’ meant anyway. So even if evil is possible at their world, that can’t help them to develop the notion of goodness.

Anna: True enough — though if it’s important to god that they have moral concepts, he could surely give them to them. That wouldn’t affect the freedom of his creatures’ will.

You see, we have to make a distinction between different kinds of those relative notions you mentioned earlier. On the one hand, the notion of a peak is reliant upon the notion of a trough in that you just can’t have one without the other — rather in the way you can’t have a Euclidean triangle which doesn’t have internal angles adding up to 180°. That’s got nothing to do with our knowledge.
On the other hand, insofar as the notion of darkness relies upon the notion of brightness, it does so only in terms of our understanding. You can imagine a world in which there’s no light, and you can meaningfully describe that world as dark; all that’s needed is that you have the notion of light from your knowledge of other worlds.

Mel: I see — the relation between good and evil is like that between brightness and darkness: as concepts they may be necessarily linked, in that someone who had never experienced any evil wouldn’t be able to – wouldn’t have any need to – form the concept of good, but as properties of actions or choices they can occur separately.

Anna: Right... but because god has knowledge of all worlds, he’s never in that position. It’s only we world-bound creatures who might fail to have a concept of something that’s all around us.

Theo: I am not at all convinced by this. Surely, what counts is whether or not evil exists for and in oneself and one’s world — only if it does can one begin to understand goodness, and only then can one be said to choose good rather than evil.

Anna: But doesn’t that position leave you with an even greater problem? We’ve said that good and evil acts exist within the worlds between which god has to choose. How, then, does god develop the concepts of good and evil?

Theo: Now I am afraid that you are being absurd. God is omniscient; we agreed that that was one of our premises.

Anna: That’s as may be, but you claim that the concepts of good and evil are logically dependent upon one another — that it’s logically impossible to develop or to understand either of them unless they’re both present. Yet you surely don’t want to say that god is partly evil; evil exists only in the worlds between which he has to choose. How can god use a pair of concepts that make sense only within worlds as a criterion for choosing between worlds?

But you look rather pale, Theo; let me get you another cup of coffee, and then perhaps we should pause for a moment in order to clarify our problem.

(She orders more coffee, and carries on with the discussion.)

Now, you’ve been talking primarily about moral evil; that’s odd in itself, of course, because as I said some time ago, most people who raise the problem of evil worry about pain and suffering – about physical evil – and at least as often about natural as about moral causes. But before we go on to talk about natural evils (which seem to me to be at least as much as a problem for you, Theo, as moral evils), perhaps we should look more closely at moral
evils themselves. What exactly is it about moral evil that creates a problem? Is it that people choose wrongly, or that their wrong choices affect others?

Mel: The latter, I suppose. It’s not the fact that god let the gunman make an evil decision which strikes people as worrying, but the fact that he let so many innocent people suffer as a result.

Anna: So moral evils and natural evils are similar in that it’s their effects on the innocent that seem to conflict with god’s benevolence. Again, we’re really concerned with physical evil. Now, supposing for the sake of the argument that we allow Theo’s free-will defence to stand: does it solve the problems?

Kathy: Well, not for natural evils, of course, but why not for moral evils?

Theo: I think that what Anna is suggesting is that god could have given us free will without giving us the capacity to hurt others in our exercise of it.

Anna: That’s right. After all, there are many ways in which I can choose to do evil without hurting anyone — or, at least, without hurting anyone but myself. In your own religion, I believe, not attending church at certain times or worshipping false gods is considered to be at least as sinful as murder. In any case, whatever god’s purposes are (and I’m still not clear on that point), wouldn’t they be served by a world in which the only moral choice open to people was to accept or reject god? No-one would be hurt, except possibly the person doing the rejecting; god would still have good and evil acts by which to judge people.

Theo: This is something that I shall have to think about before I can respond properly. Besides, I am supposed to be at church, praying for the earthquake victims — and whatever we decide about the problem of evil will help them and their relatives not at all. Will you come?

Anna: No thank you, Theo; perhaps we can talk about prayer some time?

(Theo exits with a wry smile, leaving the three friends to order replacements for their cups of cold coffee.)

[“It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive.” (W. Somerset Maugham)]
Some suggestions for further reading


G.W. Leibniz – ‘Discourse on Metaphysics’ (especially §§30–31); ‘Necessary and Contingent Truths’; ‘On Freedom’

J.L. Mackie – ‘Evil and Omnipotence’ (*Mind* 64, 1955; also in *The Philosophy of Religion*, Mitchell [ed.])

Alvin Plantinga – *The Nature of Necessity* (OUP; 1974)

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