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Jerome I. Gellman

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A NEW LOOK AT THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Jerome I. Gellman

Philosophers have traditionally considered the problem of evil to be constituted by an *argument*, either deductive or inductive. As a result, the task of furnishing a theodicy has been relegated to the periphery of philosophic concerns. I argue that the problem of evil is first and foremost grounded on a type of experience that provides defeasible grounds for believing in the non-existence of God. Thus the problem of evil bears to the philosophers' versions thereof, the same relationship that religious experience bears to philosophers' proofs for God's existence. On this understanding theodicies become central to the solution of the problem of evil.

In the years that I have taught philosophy of religion at various universities, I have included in the basic course a section on the problem of evil. The treatment of the problem would consist in showing how there was no contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of God, as He is conceived in the Judaic-Christian tradition. This would be done via a careful presentation of arguments to be found in the philosophical literature, as well as arguments of my own contribution, employing the most respectable methods of logic and analytic philosophy. Almost invariably the reaction of the students, even the best of them who could be presumed to have followed the line of thought, was one of dissatisfaction. And they found it difficult to articulate clearly just what was bothering them.

In an attempt to meet this dissatisfaction, I would then move to an argument from evil that was analogical or probabilistic in nature, and would show how that too failed to be a reason for thinking God does not exist. But this too was typically met with expressions of restlessness, and unhappiness. The students wanted to know *why* God allows evil. They wanted an explanation for the world's evils.

At this point I would launch into a lecture distinguishing between a *theodicy* for evil, which wishes to provide an explanation for actual evil, and a mere *defense* against the charge of inconsistency, or the charge of implausibility on inductive grounds. I would explain that a defense could stand without a theodicy. True enough, a believer might be *puzzled* by why God allows various evils to occur in the world, and might therefore wish to know why God allows those evils. And, surely, an explanation of the world's evils would render theism more attractive than otherwise to a non-believer, giving another



reason why a theodicy would be desirable. But I would immediately go on to argue that the absence of a theodicy, which I had not given to them, was not a strong reason for rejecting belief in God. At least, it was not as serious a problem for religious belief as would be the absence of a defense. After all, if one were already a believer, one could be expected to live with the puzzle of evil, as opposed to the problem of evil, without losing faith. And if one were a non-believer, although the lack of a theodicy might render theism less satisfactory a theory or hypothesis than otherwise, the lack of a theodicy, I would conclude, would be a weaker consideration against theism than is the problem of evil itself.

When this presentation, too, left the students, as it almost always did, unsatisfied, I consoled myself with the thought that they were, after all, quite fresh to the business of philosophy, and that hopefully, as time went on, they would reach the degree of proper sophistication which would enable them to grasp the logic of what was being presented to them. In short, I attributed their state of non-agreement with me to their present incapacities and inexperience in the proper understanding of philosophical analysis.

I now believe that I was wrong. At some point along the way, I had a Gestalt switch. For I began to consider that if such a reaction was so common, and was so widely spread even amongst the best students over many years, then maybe I was missing something that the students themselves were not capable of articulating in philosophical jargon, but were nonetheless feeling, in that blind spot between knowledge and articulation. So I set about to try to figure out what they might be sensing without being able to put it into words. I think I now know. And that's what this paper is about.

I now believe that philosophers have been missing an important form of the problem of evil, a form which probably is the most common outside of philosophy, and that has a logic different from the forms of the problem we have been dealing with in our classrooms and in the literature. It is for this reason that the students I have known have largely been unaffected by the treatment they have been exposed to. Because I missed what was on their minds, I dismissed their minds.

What I now wish to claim is that there is a problem of evil "out there" in its pre-philosophical form, bearing a relation to the philosophers' problem of evil that corresponds to the relation that religious experience has to the philosophers' proofs for God's existence. Let me explain. I believe that the well-known proofs for God's existence in philosophy are discursive constructions upon fundamental types of experiences of God. Likewise, I now think that the problem of evil that philosophers deal with is an intellectualized construction upon a basic human experience of God's *non-existence*. For I want to argue that just as there is a human experience of God's existence, there is likewise and just as surely a human experience of God's non-existence. And the latter is

to be found in humanity's experience of evil. In this way, in the two cases—arguments for God's existence and the problem of evil—the relationship of the experience to the argument is the same. I begin the story from the arguments for God's existence and their relationship to religious experience.

If we look at the arguments for God's existence, we can appreciate that each of them is an articulation in a discursive, argument form, of a basic mode of experience of God. Consider the cosmological proof. Although it comes in a great variety of forms, it can be thought of in all its forms as articulating a perception disclosed in religious experience. In particular, it can be seen as being predicated upon a sense of utter contingency of one's being and upon the sense of being dependent upon God. It expresses the perception of one's own ephemeral being, held in place by a Being whose existence is neither ephemeral nor in need of support from the outside. At the pre-philosophical level, this is not an argument at all, but something given to experience. The cosmological argument, in its various forms, can be viewed as an attempt to transmit the experience beyond the confines of the person who has had the experience, to others, who have not, via an argument that would convince them in an intellectual way of what others have perceived experientially.

Consider, next, the argument from design. This, too, can be viewed as an intellectualized attempt to reconstruct what is given to experience. When the heavens speak of the glory of God, they speak, not a series of premises for a proof for God's existence, but of God Himself. The heavens are experienced as God's handiwork. They mediate the presence of God for the one who hears their speech. The same may be said for an experience of the intricacy of the human eye, the beauty of a snowflake, and for the birth of a baby. The argument from design may be understood as an attempt to bring the content of such experiences to those without the appropriate experiences, via an attempt to construct an argument, based on evidence, pointing to the same empirical facts that the said experiences are based on.

Similar comments could be made concerning other arguments for God's existence, including the ontological argument, and the argument from morality. The ontological argument formalizes the sense of God's absolute necessity, given to some in experience; and the argument from morality builds upon the sensing of God as the author of moral values, as experienced within moral intuitions themselves. What we are saying may even apply to the argument, now fairly poor, from the common consensus of humankind. For that argument may be seen as attempting to articulate the fact that the experience of God is so all-pervasive, that it therefore deserves credence even from those who have not been blessed with such perceptions.

So this is what was meant when I said that the philosophers' arguments from God's existence stand in relation to experiences of God as intellectualized reconstructions thereof. And I want to make a similar claim for the

relationship between a certain kind of experience of evil, and the philosophers' versions of the problem of evil with which we are familiar. I want to claim, that is, that the pre-philosophical relevance of evil to belief in God is in an experience of God's non-existence. That is to say: there is a type of experience in which a person experiences evil and right there in the evil perceives that God does not exist. I would go so far as to claim that this is the most standard form of the relevance of evil to belief in God, speaking on the pre-philosophical level.

It seems to me, for example, implausible in the extreme to suppose that someone who endured the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust in the extermination camps of World War II, is *arguing*, either inductively or deductively, from the *fact* of those evils to the non-existence of God. Rather, what seems highly more plausible to say is that such a person has lost his or her faith because in experiencing those evils he or she has had an experience of God's non-existence. And in general, it seems correct to say that there are kinds and degrees of evil in this world which tend to elicit such "non-religious" experiences on the part of those who either endure them or witness them, or even just know of their existence. What they perceive in the evil is that the world is Godless, without a God. God's non-existence is made manifest to them. And they perceive this non-existence of God in the utter repugnance and revulsion of the evil that they know. This is not unlike the poet who sees infinity in a grain of sand, or ordinary mortals who see God in the beauty and symmetry of a snowflake.

Perceivers of God's non-existence do not *argue* philosophically, and neither do they conclude from the mere *existence* of the evil to there being no God. They perceive what they believe in the evil they know. Philosophers then come along and give an articulated argument meant to point to the *fact* of evil, or quantities and kinds of evil, that will prove in argument form what others have already experienced for themselves. Thus the relationship between evil and the philosophers' forms of the "problem of evil," both deductive and inductive, is the same as the relation between the pre-philosophical perceptions of God, and the philosophers' "proofs" for God's existence.

Now there may be some readers who object to the above line of reasoning on the grounds that it is just not possible to have an experience of God's non-existence. They might argue this in various ways, but basically the possibilities are two: they may argue that in general it's not possible to ever have an experience of something's non-existence, or they may argue that there is something about the concept of God that precludes such an experience. But in reply it should be said that it's hard to see how such a position could be defended, for it's hard to see how one could defend the claim that we can know *a priori* which experiences are possible and which aren't (short of self-contradictory ones). Such claims smack of the claims that humans would never fly, would never hear each other from miles away, and the like. Con-

sidering claims made for religious experience, for example, who would have thought *a priori* that a person could have been converted to religion just by the experience of having taken a walk in the forest and coming, merely through seeing the trees, to sense one's utter dependence upon God? Who would have imagined that one could perceive in experience that God was infinitely powerful? Who would have thought in advance that a Jew born in poverty would have been experienced as God Himself? It doesn't seem, aside from special pleading, that any of these things could have been either known or ruled out in advance. And neither does it seem plausible to rule out as impossible the experiences of which I speak, in which evil mediates the non-existence of God.

In order to relate these experiences of evil to my unhappy students, let us consider the epistemological status of such experiences. What do experiences of God's non-existence show, if anything? Happily, here we can be helped by recent developments in the analysis of the epistemological status of religious experience of God, especially as admirably worked out by William Alston in a number of important papers. For I will be wanting to make claims for "non-religious experience," exactly analogous to those that Alston makes for religious experience.¹

Alston defines what he calls "M-beliefs," or "Manifestation beliefs," as beliefs "about what God is doing or how God is 'situated' *vis-a-vis* one at the moment."² His examples of such beliefs include: that God is sustaining one in being, pouring out His love to us, or simply presenting Himself to us as perfectly good or powerful. And what Alston is interested in claiming is that: "the experience of God provides *prima facie* epistemic justification for M-beliefs."³ To say that the justification is *prima facie* is to say that it justifies the belief, but that the belief is defeasible. It can be defeated, for example, by other experiences that outweigh it, by more plausible interpretations of the experiences in question themselves, or by overarching conceptions which have plausibility of their own and which neutralize the experiences in question. Given the experiences, the M-beliefs are justified until defeated. In the face of defeaters, the possessor of such experiences need only be able to neutralize the former in order to continue to be justified in the M-beliefs. She need not disprove the defeater, only show that its force is yet to be shown.

Alston has deftly defended this position on experience of God. And he has skillfully argued for a correspondence between the justifiability of physical object beliefs and sense perception, on the one hand, and M-beliefs and experiences of God, on the other. I believe that this position has great merit to it (although elsewhere I have criticised it with regard to the use Alston makes of his view for the issue of religious pluralism).⁴ But in exactly the same way, I would wish to defend the *prima facie* justifiability of what I shall call "N-beliefs," for "non-existence beliefs" concerning God. The experience of evil provides *prima-facie* justification for God's non-existence, in the way

that other experiences provide such justification for M-beliefs. Which means that they are justified until defeated.

Now how could an N-belief be defeated? One way would be by other experiences drowning out its claim to truth. Such would be, typically, experiences which support M-beliefs greater in number or more strongly felt than the N-belief in question. But another way would be via an explanation of the evil that has been experienced, an explanation that was at least as plausible and hence of at least as much claim to credence as the N-belief itself, and which was perfectly compatible with the existence of God. (Notice that in its role as a defeater, such an explanation need not be more plausible than the N-belief, only at least as plausible.)

In other words, what could defeat an N-belief grounded on an experience of evil is a *theodicy*. A theodicy attempts to give not just a *possible* explanation of evil, but a *plausible* explanation. And if I am right that evil is generally perceived as a ground in experience for disbelief in God, then we can well understand a decisive and central role for theodicies in the mental life of persons possessed of such experiences.

The felt need for a theodicy may be understood, then, not only as arising from a puzzlement on the part of the believer as to why God allows evil in the world, or as a tool to render theism a more attractive theory to the non-believer. The most urgent need for a theodicy can be interpreted as a need for an explanation of evil that is at least as plausible as the N-beliefs supported by experiences of evil. So to think, as I used to, that the issue of providing a theodicy was a side-show to the endeavor to defend religious belief from the problem of evil, is a mistake. For such an attitude fails to realize that without a theodicy N-beliefs might well remain justified by experiences of evil, without being defeated by counter-considerations. Theodicies are needed to defeat the "experience of evil."

This understanding of theodicies can also help explain why some people are simply not moved by any theodicy. This is especially typical of people who have experienced particularly horrifying evils, such as Holocaust survivors who are often not moved in the least by theodical stories. Such persons need not be branded as simply irrational. Instead we should see them as possessed of such a variety and strength of experiences of evil that the *prima facie* justification for their N-beliefs is *stronger* than any theodicy they have ever heard. Persons not themselves possessors of such experiences do not have the same strength of justification as these Holocaust survivors do for their N-beliefs (recall that it's not the mere existence of evil that counts here, but its experience!), and thus the rationality of the former might differ from those whose N-beliefs are more strongly grounded.

Which brings me back to my students. It seems to me now, as opposed to what I thought all those years, that my students' reactions to my teaching of

the problem of evil were perfectly understandable and intellectually respectable. For I now am inclined to believe that the experience of evil as a "non-religious experience," is very widespread and deeply felt. At the same time there are few individuals without good philosophical training who could say what the issue of evil was about as I have described it here, who could, amongst other things, articulate the distinction between an argument, on the one hand, and prima-facie justified belief based on experience, on the other.

So, I believe that quite often my students, without being able to say so, were entering the topic of the problem of evil from the point of view of someone who has had experiences of evil which mediate for them God's non-existence, and who thus either has an N-belief on that basis, or is threatened in her belief in God by such experiences, because of the prima facie justification of non-belief. Thus above all they stood in need, in the context of the discussion, of a plausible theodicy that would be at least as plausible as the N-belief, which was threatening or actual. When they were shown, with some degree of sophistication, that there was no logical contradiction between God's existence and the fact of evil, they were dissatisfied without being able to say why. They were dissatisfied because no N-belief, actual or threatening, had been defeated in the process. The same occurred when they were shown that there was no inductive proof from evil to God's non-existence. The issue for them was not an inductive sort of evidence against God, but a prima facie justified belief, on the basis of an experience or series thereof. So when the inductive argument was disposed of, they remained perplexed. Finally, my discussion of theodicy, in which no theodicy was offered, failed to produce any explanation of evil which to them was at least as plausible as the N-beliefs in question, formed on the strength of experiences of evil. So in the end they were left without a full, relevant treatment of the problem of evil.⁵

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-sheva, Israel

NOTES

1. See William P. Alston, "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Nous*, vol. 16 (1982), pp. 3-12; "Perceiving God," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 83 (1986), pp. 656-66; and "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5 (1988), pp. 433-48. The latter shall be referred to below simply as "Alston."

2. Alston, p. 434.

3. Alston, p. 434.

4. In my, "Religious Pluralism and Truth," unpublished.

5. I am grateful to the former editor of *Faith and Philosophy* for criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.