



6-15-1999

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### Recommended Citation

Bentley, Richard N. (1999) "The Problem of Evil," *Westview*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol18/iss2/3>

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# The Problem of Evil

by Richard N. Bentley

In the middle of his prep school reunion, Wilmerding found himself at a supper where the conversation was beginning to fade. The men sat together in the living room of a faculty residence balancing plates on their knees. A clock ticked on the wall. The room was filled with stiff furniture and dense rugs. Frail curtains framed a window that looked out beyond some shrubbery to a chalk-lined playing field

Their wives, Wilmerding could not help thinking, might have kept the evening more gamesome; women would not have allowed the diminishing conversation that was bringing this occasion to an embarrassing and premature halt. But back when the men attended the school, single-sex education was still the vogue, so it was not surprising that the wives had segregated themselves. Wilmerding could hear them in the kitchen, talking and laughing clamorously together over... what topics? Certainly not their husbands. Perhaps Glanville's wife, an accomplished monologist, was describing her recent trip to China for the foundation she headed. She was making it sound hilarious.

The abandoned husbands had discussed politics, both national, international, and back to national again. They had talked about the sports teams. Complimentary—though imprecise—testimonials had been made to Wilmerding's morning remarks as he accepted a Distinguished Alumnus Award (a crystal salad bowl emblazoned with the school's crest but lacking utensils) and Wilmerding hoped that among the embers of the evening his glow of distinction still lingered, and for that reason he felt an obligation to fan the ashes as best he could, to liven things up.

Gathered around him were a professor, two psychiatrists, the owner of a gourmet pet food company, and pudgy old Delafield who sat cross-legged on the floor. Delafield had become a minister and

was slated to give a guest sermon at the next morning's chapel service. Wilmerding turned to him and said, "There's something I've been wondering about lately, Tom. Perhaps you could touch on it in tomorrow's sermon."

At this Delafield looked amiably bewildered and a knot of muscle between his eyes creased downward. "Well, I'm afraid I've already written the damn thing."

"It's just this," Wilmerding said. "Tomorrow will be an important performance. Impressionable students, parents, faculty, reuniting alumni with ready wallets. How about something grand and sweeping, Tom, like the problem of evil? Most of us have always wondered about evil."

"I wonder about it too," Delafield said, uncertainly, but mildly, as he explored his salad with a tentative fork.

"Then you must at least have some preliminary thoughts," Wilmerding insisted. "How can God be so hard on people who have done nothing to offend him, like little children?"

"Like helpless animals," someone chimed in, not very helpfully. The owner of the gourmet pet food company.

"War?" It was the academic who was speaking, a soft, indifferent man, still too ridiculously pliant after all the years to be considered a Distinguished Professor of anything, in Wilmerding's opinion. Earlier he had predicted that the professor would be the one most likely, as the evening rolled down the blurring vista of drink, to address him by his old nickname, "Slash."

"Plague?" someone murmured.

"Disease? Can anyone remember the rest of them? The four horsemen."

"Sloth."

"Adultery?"



“By their fruits shall ye know them,” someone volunteered.

“Who are ‘they’ and who are the ‘fruits’?” another asked. “Is that anything like the healing power of rocks and crystals?”

“Speaking of rocks,” Glanville said, “my wife and I, when we were in China recently...”

Wilmerding felt the discussion floating off again. This seemed a tendency he had observed all weekend among his classmates, the impulse toward indirect discourse. He imagined the pattern might have to do with a perceived requirement to broaden even the smallest social conversation until its nucleus had dissolved into benevolent vagueness. It was unclear to him whether this discursiveness was a natural accompaniment of aging, or whether it was an infestation from the surroundings, the tight cluster of brick buildings behind an iron gate where the world’s bitter winds seemed never to have raged, and everyone could afford to be indiscriminately tolerant. Despite the width of familiar faces, the courtesy, the school’s willingness to offer up a weekend of institutionalized nostalgia for their comfort, Wilmerding grimly steered back to his original question. “I mean, tomorrow. Will you be prepared to reconcile God’s omnipotence, foreknowledge, and even His love with all the malice in the world?”

The two psychiatrists scowled as if pretending to think, and Delafield looked disheartened—in fact, at that moment, though Wilmerding could not have known it, a slight twinge shot through Delafield’s rib cage, causing him to set down his salad plate abruptly on the coffee table in front of him. The fork clattered and fell onto the carpet, making an oily stain from which eyes were quickly withdrawn.

The owner of the gourmet pet food company jumped in with “Talk about injustice? How about meat inspectors? How about government overregu-

lation by tub-thumping bureaucrats?”

“Hmmm,” said Wilmerding, “the grievances seem endless.” He had always thought of himself as a man given to leadership, to convincing others to see where their self-interest lay, and the forceful thrust of the discussion appealed to his sense of personal enlargement.

A number of additional points were raised. Didn’t the Book of Job provide the answer to all of these questions? Or was it Revelations? What about God’s exhortation, “I am that I am.” Didn’t that really clear everything up? (Gruff laughter here.)

“Hey, lighten up, you guys,” Delafield implored hoarsely, and Wilmerding felt for an instant the hot steam of locker room bullying seep into the room from around the window cracks.

“Lighten up indeed,” sighed the Distinguished Professor. “Which of us, even Slash here, can ever know the unknowable?” He tossed Delafield a soft look. “Immortality, Tom. Could you take a crack at immortality?”

This remark seemed to produce a sudden flush of intimacy. “Well,” one of the psychiatrists said, clearly the cleverer one, “I think this immortality business is overrated. Shouldn’t we talk about just trying to make things tolerable here on earth for everyone? Just last summer, my wife and I...”

Wilmerding thought of his own wife, now enjoying the kitchen laughter with the president of the over endowed foundation. He thought of how she always warned him when he was being argumentative. But she’d been argumentative herself that same afternoon. What are we doing here with these people we hardly know? These people you haven’t seen in years? What kind of person requires a colloquy of strangers, a retreat into distant familiarity? Delafield sat before him now, smiling and perplexed. He suddenly seemed like a Hieronymous Bosch figure sprung to life.



Wilmerding looked at the round face with its open, hefty-eyed proportions and slight jowls. He remembered how Delafield looked in another rendering, an adolescent with mottled complexion beneath a baseball cap with the bill intrepidly stuck out sideways. Wilmerding, then as now, divined in him an anxious groping toward recognition—someone in the same boat, as *he might* have put it—and even a flimsy reaching for love. Speaking from the heart, if he could manage it, what new proofs were needed of the pointlessness of wisdom? The passing years, Wilmerding sadly realized, had neither mellowed his own mind nor given it a philosophic turn. In fact, they had only sharpened the animosity and cynicism of his youth. But even if some of his jokes were still adolescent, they acknowledged the survival in him of that immature, untamed, unwise self that was the parent of any maturity worth having. With that thought he fell silent, at last. He

wanted to go home. He missed his old, blind dog.

Outside the windows one could glimpse a pale evening sky scratched with weather whorls and a campus whose Georgian buildings were gathered in a mild and knowable circle. They all knew, after all, about friendship, that it was dim and unreliable and little more than a curtain on the wall. It was also capricious, idiotic, sentimental, and inconstant, and most often seemed to be the exclusive preserve of others. How could its anchoring force be measured, how could one account for its random visitations? Of course they could not—which was why after a time they began to talk about other things: the stock market, the sports teams again, the weather, would it rain tomorrow, would the wind continue its gusty course, would summer ever come, where were they supposed to be in the morning.

