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DO THEISTS NEED TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL?

I

The problem of evil may be characterized as the problem of how precisely to specify a property, *P*, about which it is possible for a morally sensitive man to believe that (1) a person who possesses it would be morally justified on that account in not preventing instances of intense innocent suffering and (2) it is neither impossible nor unlikely that if there is an omnipotent and omniscient being, he possesses it. Atheists have typically claimed that *P* cannot be precisely specified. Moreover, they have maintained that in view of our inability to give a precise specification of *P*, it is irrational to believe that there is an omnipotent and omniscient being who is perfectly good and, hence, irrational to believe that God exists. In the remainder of this paper, I want to discuss the question whether there is any good reason for believing that this latter thesis is true.¹ If there is no such reason, then no matter how much he may busy himself with an attempt at formulating a precise specification of *P*, the theist can be justifiably contented with the thought that it doesn't much matter whether he succeeds.

II

Let *s* mean the same as 'instance of intense innocent suffering'. Now reflection will show that a human person, *X*, is justified in not preventing an *s* if and only if either (1) *X* is unable to prevent the *s*; or (2) *X* does not know that the *s* exists or does not know that he is able to prevent it and *X*'s ignorance is not culpable; or (3) (a) *X* has a justified belief that (i) it is highly likely that he would greatly inconvenience people to whom he has contractual or paternal obligations or obligations of loyalty and gratitude – e.g. his wife, children, students, employers and friends – were he to attempt

¹ Some philosophers who have recently disagreed with the thesis are: (1) Nelson Pike, 'Hume on Evil' in *God and Evil*, ed. by Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), p. 102; (2) Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, New York, 1967), pp. 115-30; (3) George I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York, 1970), pp. 92-3; (4) M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London, 1971); (5) Keith E. Yandell, 'A Premature Farewell to Theism', *Religious Studies*, 5 (1969), 251-5. Recent advocates of the thesis are: (1) Roland Puccetti, 'The Loving God – Some Observations on John Hicks' *Evil and the God of Love*', *Religious Studies*, 2 (1966-7), 266-7; and (2) Robert J. Richman, 'The Argument from Evil', *Religious Studies*, 4, (1968-9), 203-11.

to prevent the *s* and (ii) the innocent sufferer is a person to whom he does not have the above-mentioned special obligations, and (b) *X* is not directly confronted with the innocent sufferer's plea for help;¹ or (4) *X* has a justified belief that it is highly likely that preventing the *s* would inevitably result in suffering at least as great either for the people to whom he has the special obligations mentioned in (3) (a) or for innocent people to whom *X* does not have the special obligations mentioned there. Call these justifications \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 , \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 respectively.

Now we have good reason to believe that none of these justifications is applicable to God. \mathcal{J}_2 's applicability to God is plainly incompatible with God's omniscience. And God's omnipotence entails that \mathcal{J}_1 does not fit his case. \mathcal{J}_1 is not applicable to God since an omnipotent being is able to do anything such that it is not necessarily false that he does it, and it is not necessarily false that God prevents *s*'s. Or, at any rate, the proposition that God prevents *s*'s appears not to be necessarily false and, hence, there would be an onus of proof on anyone who claimed that it is necessarily false to show that this appearance is misleading. (It is irrational to impute necessary falsehood to a proposition which appears to be contingent in the absence of a proof that it is not really contingent.) Moreover, the proposition that God prevents *s*'s without seriously inconveniencing anyone or bringing about further suffering also appears not to be necessarily false. And, of course, if God can prevent *s*'s without the envisaged disvaluable consequences ensuing, then he knows that this is so. It follows that we have grounds for holding that God's omnipotence and omniscience are incompatible with his being justified in not preventing *s*'s by \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 .

Evidently, then, the theist needs to maintain that it is plausible that $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ do not exhaust the justifications which *any* rational being might have for not preventing an *s*. More specifically, he needs to maintain that it is rational to hold that God possesses some property, *P*, other than the properties referred to by $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$, in virtue of which God is justified in not preventing *s*'s. Can the theist, at this point, legitimately claim that there is no need for him precisely to specify *P*? The following is an argument that he cannot:

Let *M* stand for the property of being morally reprehensible for not preventing an *s*. Now most theists, like most non-theists, agree that we are sometimes justified in judging that a human being has *M*. (Indeed, that we are so justified can be supported by the fact that we can know that $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are all the justifications

¹ Those philosophers to whom this appears too strong a component of the above necessary condition of being justified in failing to prevent an *s* may substitute the following, weaker component: *X* has a justified belief that (a) the innocent sufferer is a person to whom *X* does not have the envisaged special obligations and (b) *X* would have to inconvenience himself (at least) in order to prevent the *s*; and *X* is not directly confronted with the innocent sufferer's plea for help. It is clear that this weakened component is not applicable to God, since an omnipotent and omniscient being would know that he could prevent *s*'s without inconveniencing himself.

which are applicable to human beings who fail to prevent an s . Since we can know that this is so, we can determine that a human being has M if we can show that he failed to prevent an s and that none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ is applicable to his case. And surely it is sometimes possible to do this.) But the claim (call it T) that it is rational to believe that God possesses a property, P , which human beings are unable precisely to specify and in virtue of which God does not have M entails the (to almost everyone) unpalatable conclusion that we are never justified in holding that a human being has M . Anyone who accepts T must admit that there is at least one property, not referred to by $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$, such that if any human being has that property this fact falsifies the claim that he has M . For it is a basic ethical truth that if one person's having property \emptyset falsifies the claim that he is reprehensible for performing action A , then no other person can both have \emptyset and be reprehensible for performing an action of exactly the same sort as A . And it follows from this that if there is a property of an omnipotent and omniscient person which falsifies the claim that he has M then no human person who has this property has M . Now the advocate of T must either maintain that we can know that the property which falsifies the claim that God has M is *not* a property which human beings possess or he must admit that it may, for all we know, be true that when a human being fails to prevent an s and none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ is applicable to him, he is nonetheless justified in failing to prevent the s in virtue of a justification which he has which lies beyond the range $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$. But the advocate of T admits that he is unable precisely to specify the property which falsifies the claim that God has M , and hence he has no grounds for claiming that we can know that human beings who fail to prevent s 's never have that property.

Of course, since $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are the only justifications for not preventing s 's which human beings know of, no human being could *know* that he is justified in not preventing an s by a justification not included in the range $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$. But a person can be justified in failing to prevent an s when he is not cognizant of any justification which he has for his doing so. Suppose that Jones does not know that he is unable to refrain from inflicting extreme pain on Smith (due, say, to the influence of a powerful and diabolical hypnotist). Jones would not be reprehensible because of his deed, despite his not knowing that he is in a certain state which falsifies the charge of moral reprehensibility against him. (Indeed, Jones need not even know that *if* he is unable to refrain from giving pain to Smith, then he is not reprehensible for his behaviour, i.e. he need not know that being unable to do otherwise is a property the possession of which blocks a charge of moral reprehensibility.)

The objection in brief is that anyone who accepts T is committed to the conclusion that it may be, for all he knows, that any human being who fails to prevent an s possesses a property which defeats the claim that he has M . If this is correct, then since most theists believe that they are sometimes justified in holding that a human being has M (namely, when he fails to prevent an s and none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ fits his case), it is not open to most theists to accept T . Is the objection sound? There are a number of responses which the advocate of T might make to it. (1) We can rule out the thesis that there is at least one property, P , possessed by human beings, which is not referred to by any of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ and yet which justifies us in

not preventing *s*'s, by examining all the properties which human beings possess and finding that in fact none except those referred to by $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ counts as a justification for not preventing *s*'s. (2) We can know that human beings do not possess *P* in the way that we know, e.g. that human beings do not have horns. We are entitled to believe that if human beings possessed *P* (or had horns) then at least some people would have observed that this is so (either directly or by observing evidence that it is so); and we are further entitled to believe that no one has made these observations. (3) Though we do not have empirical knowledge that human beings do not possess *P*, we have *a priori* knowledge that they do not, i.e. we know that it is necessarily false that human beings ever possess *P*.

But in fact all of these responses are of questionable plausibility. Regarding (1), it is surely highly dubious that we are fully acquainted with all the properties which human beings possess. And (2) can be called into question on the ground that *P* is insufficiently specified to enable us to tell whether, given that human beings possessed it, at least some people would have directly observed that a human being possesses *P* or would have observed evidence that this is so. (This is not true of the property of having horns.) It might be said here that we do in fact have observational evidence that human beings do not possess *P* since (a) *M* is invariably observed in cases in which a human person, *X*, fails to prevent an *s* and none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ is applicable to him and (b) this would not be so if human beings sometimes possessed *P*. But the trouble with this claim is that it leaves unanswered the question how we *know* that *X* possesses *M* (that we 'observe' *M*) in the envisaged cases. Plainly the following argument is circular and hence entirely unpersuasive: 'We are entitled to believe that *X* does not possess *P* in the envisaged cases because we are entitled to believe that *X* possesses *M* in those cases; and we are entitled to believe the latter because we are entitled to believe that *X* does not possess *P* in the cases under discussion.' (3) is, perhaps, a more plausible response, but it is none the less subject to doubt. God is a person about whom the advocate of *T* alleges that he possesses *P*. So we are entitled to ask the advocate of *T* for an explanation of why it should *not* be necessarily false that *that* person possesses *P* even though it is necessarily false that other (non-divine) persons do so. That is to say, we are entitled to ask for an analysis of the difference between the nature (or concept) of God and the nature (or concept) of men in virtue of which it is possible for the former person, but not for the latter people, to possess *P*. And it is reasonable to believe that no such analysis is available to mortals – especially in view of the fact that *P* is not precisely specified. The unavailability of this analysis is not, perhaps, a conclusive reason for rejecting (3). But it constitutes a ground for viewing (3) with suspicion.

Another reply to the envisaged objection to *T* is as follows:

By 'a *B*-belief of *X*' let us mean 'a belief which it would be irrational for *X* not to hold'.¹ And suppose that *X* fails to prevent a certain *s*. Now it is not sufficient for refuting the claim that *X* has *M* merely to cite the fact that abolishing the *s* would result in some such undesirable state of affairs as the production of further *s*'s. Rather, in order to be part of a *bona fide* justification of *X* this claim must be coupled with the further claim that *X* has a *B*-belief that the former claim is true. Now what we know about justifications for failing to prevent *s*'s is this: the only justifications which are applicable to any persons, human or non-human, who fail to prevent *s*'s are \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and \mathcal{J}_3' – having a *B*-belief that abolishing a given *s* would inevitably result in the bringing about of *some* undesirable state of affairs, including the undesirable states of affairs referred to by \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 , which *B*-belief is such that holding it is incompatible with having *M*. However, we do *not* know that the *only* undesirable states of affairs, a person's *B*-belief in which could be a justification for his failing to prevent an *s*, are those referred to by \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 . Now since God, if he exists, is omniscient and human beings are not, it is rational to believe that if God exists, then he knows (and hence has a *B*-belief) that he cannot abolish *s*'s without bringing about undesirable states of affairs² such that (1) anyone who had a *B*-belief that he could not abolish an *s* without bringing about one of those states of affairs would be justified in not preventing the *s* and (2) human beings cannot guess their precise nature and do not have *B*-beliefs that the abolishing of *s*'s by God or man would bring them about.³

Call the thesis that God is justified in not preventing *s*'s because he has the envisaged *B*-belief *T'*. The claim that it is rational to believe that *T'* is true entails *T*. For the disvaluable states of affairs referred to by *T'* are not precisely specified. (Even after they have been described as (1) and (2), we are still in the dark as to their precise nature.) Now a person who accepts *T'* is very plainly not committed to the conclusion that we are never justified in ascribing *M* to anyone. For the states of affairs referred to by *T'* are ones about which human beings know that they do not have *B*-beliefs that those states of affairs would be brought about by the abolishing of *s*'s; and, as has been said, a human being, *X*, cannot be justified in not preventing an *s* just on the ground that in fact *X*'s abolishing it would inevitably lead to a further disvaluable state of affairs; the latter fact must be coupled with the fact that *X* has a *B*-belief about it.

Of course, the theist cannot claim to know (or to have a *B*-belief) that *T'* is true (because the disvaluable states of affairs to which it refers are *ex hypothesi* ones about which human beings do not have *B*-beliefs that abolishing *s*'s brings

¹ On this definition, it is possible for there to be mistaken *B*-beliefs, and hence *X* may have a *B*-belief that something is the case without knowing that it is the case.

² Since God is omnipotent, this could be so only if God's abolishing *s*'s were (not just causally but) logically sufficient for those states of affairs.

³ The theist might claim instead that he has a *B*-belief that God's abolishing *s*'s which he does not in fact abolish would bring about the envisaged states of affairs but that he does not have a *B*-belief that the abolishing of *s*'s by human beings would have this consequence. However, in the absence of a more precise specification of the undesirable states of affairs under discussion, it is surely highly implausible that the theist should have the former *B*-belief even though he does not have the latter one. Or, at any rate, this is so unless the theist knows a cogent demonstration of God's existence. Such a demonstration, coupled with the knowledge that \mathcal{J}_1 .. \mathcal{J}_4 are all the justifications for not preventing *s*'s which are applicable to human beings, would lend strong support to the claim that the theist has a *B*-belief that God's abolishing *s*'s would have the consequence under discussion but does not have a similar *B*-belief about himself. But (as many theists admit) it is highly doubtful that anyone has constructed a cogent demonstration of God's existence.

them about).¹ But it is open to the theist to maintain that he believes T' on faith (assuming that there are some beliefs such that it is rational for a person to hold them even though it would also be rational for him not to hold them. If this assumption is false, then, barring cogent proofs of God's existence, the theist can be convicted of irrationality without recourse to the problem of evil).

The essential point here is this: It is open to the theist to accept the proposition (a) that human beings have no B -beliefs about disvaluable states of affairs which are attendant upon preventing s 's – citable in a *bona fide* justification of a person's failure to prevent an s – other than those referred to by \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 and the further proposition (b) that we know that \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and \mathcal{J}_3' are the only justifications which any person, including God, could have for not preventing s 's. These two propositions entail that we are warranted in affirming that a human being has M when he fails to prevent an s and when none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ is applicable to him. However, T' entails that we are *not* warranted in affirming that God has M on the ground that he fails to prevent s 's and none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ fits his case. So the conjunction of (a), (b) and T' (which is surely logically consistent) gets the theist to the desired goal, namely, being able consistently to deny that God has M and to agree that it is possible to discover that some human beings possess it. (The advocate of T' must accept (b) in order clearly to achieve this goal. If there are justifications for not preventing s 's other than \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and \mathcal{J}_3' – if there are properties of persons, not referred to by any of \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and \mathcal{J}_3' , which justify anyone who possesses them in not preventing an s – then, since human beings do not know what they are, it looks as though we could not know that any human being who fails to prevent an s does not possess at least one of these properties.)

III

The obvious answer to this reply is that we know more than just that \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and (the relatively imprecisely stated) \mathcal{J}_3' are all the justifications a person could have for not preventing an s – that in fact what we know is that \mathcal{J}_1 , \mathcal{J}_2 and (the precisely formulated) \mathcal{J}_3 and \mathcal{J}_4 exhaust all of the justifications in the area under discussion. This answer does not, of course, entail that we know that it is false that there are disvaluable states of affairs which would be brought about by the abolition of any s . It entails only that we know that no matter how disvaluable these states of affairs may be, one's being motivated not to prevent an s by his B -belief that one of them would be produced by its prevention would not justify him in not preventing the s . (Analogously, we know that even if a person were motivated not to prevent the intense and prolonged suffering of a few slaves by his B -belief that abolishing their suffering would lead to a considerable diminution of the happiness of thousands of non-slaves, he would still not be justified on that ground in failing to prevent the suffering of the slaves.)

Now there is, I think, no formal demonstration that the answer just given is correct. If this is so, then the advocate of T cannot be conclusively refuted. Still, it is far from clear that no theist need be seriously troubled by the problem of evil. For surely at least some theists will find highly

¹ See p. 387, n. 3.

plausible on its face the claim that $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are all the justifications which it is rational to believe that a person (human or non-human) might have for not preventing an s . In more detail, what these theists will find *prima facie* correct is the following thesis: ' $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are all the justifications which any person could have for not preventing an s ' either expresses an *a priori* proposition or it is an expression of a commitment which we have made¹ or an intention with which we find ourselves negatively to evaluate not just human beings but *any* persons we may believe in or confront who do not prevent an s when none of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ is applicable to them.

Theists who do find this thesis plausible on the face of it ought to admit that, in view of its *prima facie* correctness, there is an onus of proof on them to show that, appearances to the contrary, it is false. One way to show that it is false is to set out a cogent demonstration that there is an omnipotent and omniscient being who is perfectly good.² But (as many theists will concede) it is doubtful that this can be done. And the only alternative way of shouldering the burden of proof here seems to be to give a precise specification of a property, P , which is not referred to by any of $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ and which is such that morally sensitive men could hold that its possession by a person is a *bona fide* justification of his not preventing an s . Needless to say, this specification will serve the purpose of the theists whom we are presently considering only if P is specified in such a way that (a) we cannot know that an omnipotent and omniscient being would not possess it and (b) the claim that its possession is a justification for not preventing an s is compatible with the claim that $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are the only justifications which are applicable to human beings.

¹ Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, may be making such a commitment when he says 'I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be, when everthing in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud "Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed"... it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest... "Thou art just, O Lord!" but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child...' Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett (Random House, New York, 1950), p. 290.

² Nelson Pike (*op. cit.*) is correct in maintaining that an *a priori* proof of God's existence would render the problem of evil 'a noncrucial perplexity of relatively minor importance'. But it is much less clear that he is right in claiming that holding God's existence as an item of faith also takes the sting out of the problem. For holding God's existence as an item of faith is hardly a demonstration that it is false that $\mathcal{J}_1 \dots \mathcal{J}_4$ are the only justifications for not preventing s 's which are applicable to any persons.