

## MUST GOD DO HIS BEST?

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### I

If there is to be a problem of evil, there must be some ethical requirement which is applicable to divine action, and which arguably is not met in the actual world. Once such a requirement has been identified, it becomes the task of the theodiscist to argue either that the proposed requirement does not hold, or that the requirement is in fact met. One of the most popular candidates for this role has been the requirement that God must create the best possible world. This proposal has undeniable appeal: it has a simplicity and “cleanness” which seems appropriate to the subject-matter, and it lays a burden on the theodiscist which, at least since *Candide*, few have been eager to assume. But the proposed requirement has been criticized on the grounds of incoherence: it seems plausible that, if God is omnipotent, then for each world that he could create, no matter how good it may be, there is another, still better world that God could create. Thus the phrase, “best possible world,” necessarily lacks a referent.

David Basinger has recently pointed out, however, that there are other possible requirements on God’s creative activity which are not threatened by this kind of incoherence. For instance, consider the following three sets of possible worlds: the set of worlds containing self-determining beings and more moral good than evil, the set of worlds containing self-determining beings and less moral good than evil, and the set of worlds containing no self-determining beings. It might be held that God is required to create, if possible, a world which is a member of the first set. It might also be held that, if unable (perhaps due to the free choices of self-determining beings) to create a world of the first set, then God is ethically required to create some world of the third set in preference to any world of the second set. These requirements do not identify any one world as the best, or optimal world for God to create; thus they are not threatened by the incoherence which undermines the “best possible world” requirement.<sup>1</sup>

Of course the mere lack of incoherence does not constitute an ethical requirement as a good candidate for generating a problem of evil. Several qualities are needed in such a candidate: it must impose on God a requirement which is not

self-contradictory or otherwise impossible, it must be *plausible* in the sense that the requirement is one which the theodist can not easily reject as inapplicable, and it must be possible to construct at least a good *prima facie* case that the requirement is not in fact met. So far as I can see, the plausibility needed can be generated in one of two ways. The requirement may be one which is endorsed by the system of theology which the theodist is concerned to defend (for present purposes we shall assume that this is some form of orthodox Christianity), so that the failure of the requirement to be met directly disconfirms the theology. Or, if not explicitly endorsed by theology, the requirement may be one which is clearly implied by commonly accepted moral principles, so that a God who failed to meet the requirement would not be “good” in the ordinary sense of that word.

After some discussion, Basinger concludes that the best approach to such a requirement may be through the notion of an “ideal state” of a self-determining being – roughly, a state in which a being experiences health and fulfillment, is in harmony with its environment, and experiences no gratuitous evil.<sup>2</sup> Armed with this notion, Basinger goes on to propose (in the form of a leading question) the following ethical requirement for God’s creative activity:

- (A) Given that a self-determining being who possesses a given set of properties (P) can be said to exist in an ideal state, is an omnibenevolent God obligated to create a world in which all self-determining beings possess P or at least a world in which he has chosen to help each self-determining being possess P to the extent possible within that world?<sup>3</sup>

Though Basinger intends an affirmative response to his own question, there is an initial obstacle to giving such a response. The question seems to imply that God is obligated to create some world containing self-determining beings, but theology has generally held that God is under no obligation to create any world at all – that God could, consistent with his nature and perfection, have decided to create nothing whatever (see Part III below).<sup>4</sup> We need not linger over this point, however, since Basinger almost immediately restates his proposed requirement as follows:

- (B) A creator would necessarily wrong someone (violate someone’s rights), or be less kind to someone than an omnibenevolent moral agent must be [or would manifest a defect in character] if he knowingly created a world in which he had not chosen to do what he could have done to maximize the quality of life for all inhabitants therein.<sup>5</sup>

Now it seems to me that (B) is indeed a promising candidate for the kind of requirement needed to generate a problem of evil. The requirement is logically coherent and is not open to the charge that it proposes an impossible task for God: whatever limitations there may be on God’s activity, he can certainly do his best! The requirement is strong enough to constitute a real problem for theodicy, though not as strong as the “best possible world” requirement. And while I shall postpone until Part IV a discussion of Basinger’s reasons for thinking that the re-

quirement holds, it may be acknowledged at this point that it is not lacking in initial plausibility.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an examination of the requirement (B). In the next section we shall consider the implications of the requirement: what precisely is it that the principle requires God to do? The third section will consider an objection to (B) drawn from the writings of Robert Adams, and the final section will examine Basinger's reasons for claiming that (B) is a correct requirement.

## II

What exactly is required by (B)? There is no doubt that this principle poses a formidable challenge to the theodist. Basinger, I think, welcomes the challenge: he writes

If God must be omnibenevolent in the sense I have outlined, the theist is again left to affirm that all evil is non-gratuitous (a necessary condition for a greater good) or the undesired, unavoidable by-product of other goods (for example, freedom).<sup>6</sup>

It is possible that Basinger is too sanguine. Exactly what evils could God permit, consistent with (B)? Note first of all that (B) concerns itself only with those evils which adversely affect the quality of life of self-determining beings. (There could of course be additional principles which establish some limits with regard to what is permissible in the way of (for example) animal pain and suffering.) Some of these evils will be "non-gratuitous" — that is, they will be logically necessary conditions for the occurrence of some good which more than outweighs the evil in question. (If the evil is only *causally* necessary for the occurrence of the "greater good," an omnipotent God would be able to override the causal law and to secure the good without permitting the evil.) Beyond this, what additional evils could be permitted? Only those which are the "undesired, unavoidable by-product of other goods." For example: I have the opportunity to decide freely whether to bear some minor annoyance with patience, or to lash out in anger. Unfortunately, I do the latter. My lashing out is not a necessary condition of my having had the opportunity to make that choice, for I could have chosen to control my anger. But God could not both give me the opportunity to choose and prevent my angry response: the latter is an "undesired and unavoidable by-product" of the former. And in general, both the morally wrong choices made by self-determining beings and the immediate consequences of those choices will qualify as "gratuitous evils" which God can permit under (B) — provided always that the "greater good" requirement is satisfied.<sup>7</sup> But so far as I can see, this is the *only* kind of gratuitous evil against persons that could be permitted consistent with (B). To see why, consider Basinger's discussion of an example which he borrows from Adams: Helen Keller's fever at the age of 19 months which resulted in her blindness and deafness. Basinger

thinks the theist can handle this problem by supposing that “Helen Keller’s fever stands as an undesired, but unavoidable, by-product of the significant freedom and/or natural laws which operate in this world.”<sup>8</sup> But it seems to me that this is incorrect. It is most unlikely that Helen Keller’s fever and disability were the direct consequence of a free choice made by some person such that God could not have prevented the disability without depriving that person of significant freedom. To be sure, some of the laws of nature may have had to be suspended temporarily to prevent the disability. But the Christian is committed to the view that God can and sometimes does work miracles of healing – so why not in this case? It is frequently argued that God cannot routinely intervene in natural processes to prevent their resulting in harm without undermining our faith in the order of nature. But while this may well be correct in general, it is difficult to see how it applies in the present case. Even today, our understanding of disease processes is seldom so accurate that we can predict with confidence the precise degree of disability which will result from a serious illness. Surely, God could have intervened so as to leave Helen with only a slight hearing impairment, without anyone’s becoming aware of this intervention. So, why didn’t he?<sup>9</sup>

In general, then, (B) requires God to weigh *in each individual case* the harm that will result from allowing natural processes to take their course against the benefit of confirming our confidence in the regularity of nature’s functioning. In cases where the latter good takes precedence, the resulting harm is “non-gratuitous” because required for a greater good. But there will be very many cases in which everything we know suggests that God could have intervened to prevent the harm at no cost whatever to our faith in the natural order.

What kind of theodicy does (B) require the theist to construct? It seems clear that (B) requires the theist to affirm that God exercises, in Michael Peterson’s happy phrase, a *meticulous providence* – that is, a providence in which all events are carefully controlled and manipulated in such a way that no evils are permitted to occur except as they are necessary for the production of a greater good. The only gratuitous evils that could be allowed would be those already mentioned, consisting of the morally wrong choices of free beings and of the immediate consequences of those choices – and even these only insofar as God determines in each particular case that the good involved in allowing the creature to make that particular choice outweighs the evil that results from the choice that is made.

Peterson has argued effectively that a Christian need not and should not defend a theodicy of meticulous providence. Instead, the Christian should promote an understanding of God’s dealing with the world according to which God can, and indeed does, permit very considerable amounts of gratuitous evil in the course of pursuing his overall plan for the world. Peterson’s reasons for this view are complex and cannot readily be summarized here.<sup>10</sup> But significant among these reasons is the *evidential problem* which is encountered by the defender of meticulous providence. In a sense, the debate over the existence of gratuitous evil ends in a stand-off. The atheist can point to many examples of apparently pointless evil but cannot conclusively demonstrate that these evils serve no good purpose. The

theist stoutly maintains that God permits evil only as it serves the purposes of a greater good, but is quite unable to show how this is so in many individual cases. But as Peterson points out, this stand-off really favors the atheist. The general run of human experience strongly favors the view that gratuitous evil not only exists but is abundant, and if the theist holds that gratuitous evil is inconsistent with theism this experience cannot fail to reduce the reasonableness of theistic belief below what it would otherwise be.<sup>11</sup> And so the theist's venture into the arena of theodicy ends rather unhappily. He began by boldly maintaining strong principles concerning God's providential governance of the world, but he is quickly reduced to a stone-walling mode of defense in which he maintains on *a priori* grounds a view which runs against the grain of universal human experience. The truth of (B), if (B) is true, is a burden for the theist to bear, not a cause for rejoicing.

### III

But is (B) true? We now consider an argument against (B) presented by Robert Adams.<sup>12</sup> In his paper, "Must God Create the Best?" Adams says:

One important element in the Judeo-Christian moral ideal is *grace*. For present purposes, grace may be defined as a disposition to live which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved.... A God who is gracious with respect to creating might well choose to create and love less excellent creatures than He could have chosen. This is not to suggest that grace in creation consists in a preference for imperfection as such. God could have chosen to create the best of all possible creatures, and still have been gracious in choosing them. God's graciousness in creation does not imply that the creatures He has chosen to create must be less excellent than the best possible. It implies, rather, that even if they are the best possible that is not the ground for His choosing them. And it implies that there is nothing in God's nature or character which would require Him to act on the principle of choosing the best possible creatures to be the object of His creative powers.<sup>13</sup>

Basinger's rejection of this reasoning is emphatic: he states that "Adams's argument is based upon a perversion of the Judeo-Christian concept of grace."<sup>14</sup> He goes on to say

As understood within the Judeo-Christian tradition, to love other persons requires among other things that one do what one can to meet their physical and social needs . . . Accordingly, if to be gracious is in fact to have "a disposition to love," then it cannot be argued that a gracious being is not obligated *to attempt* to maximize the quality of life for others. In fact, just the opposite would appear to be true. The problem arises, I believe, because Adams fails to make the distinction between the *reasons why* one being might choose to express its love to other beings and the *manner in which* such love should be expressed. . . . For example, it does not follow from the fact that a gracious God can love a being who is mentally impaired as much as a being who is not that such a God is not obligated to do what he can to

help the impaired individual overcome his or her handicap. For God to be gracious (and thus loving) in the Judeo-Christian sense of the term requires God to do what he can to help those in need.<sup>15</sup>

What shall we say to this? First of all, Basinger is simply wrong in saying that Adams has failed to make the distinction in question — roughly, the distinction between *what* God does for people and *why* he does it. Adams *does* see this distinction: in the passage quoted he states that God's graciousness in creation does not necessarily imply that he will *not* create the best possible creatures (*i.e.*, it may not affect what God *does*), but that if God *does* choose to create them, the fact that they *are* the best possible is not the ground of his choosing them (the fact that God is gracious in creation means that his *reasons* for doing what he does are different than they would otherwise be). So it is not Adams who fails to grasp this distinction; rather it is Basinger who fails to comprehend the force and significance of the distinction, as shown in the following statement from Adams:

God's graciousness in creation . . . implies that *there is nothing in God's nature or character which would require Him* to act on the principle of choosing the best possible creatures to be the object of His creative powers.<sup>16</sup>

That is to say, there is *no moral requirement* for God to act on this principle; his creation is an act of *grace*, which is to say it is a demonstration of God's goodness which *goes beyond* any moral requirement and indeed beyond anything which God's own nature requires him to do.

And of course, what holds of God's selection of creatures to create holds also for his dealings with them once they have been created. Indeed, by far the majority of the Biblical references to the grace of God deal with the latter topic rather than the former. Adams well says that "The man who worships God does not normally praise Him for His moral rectitude and good judgment in creating *us*. He thanks God for his existence as for an undeserved personal favor."<sup>17</sup> It is if anything even more evident that the penitent sinner does not commend God for meeting the minimum acceptable standard of divine behavior by offering us redemption! "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the *gift* of God."<sup>18</sup>

Explanations on a couple of points may be in order. First, I do not mean to say, as Basinger's comment suggests, that it would be possible for God to love people while doing nothing whatever to meet their needs. Rather, the point is that God's loving us *is itself* a gracious act on his part, one which goes far beyond our expectations, our deserts, or any moral requirement. Second, I do not mean to say, and I am sure that Adams does not mean, that God has no moral responsibilities to the self-determining beings he has created. But insofar as God's dealing with us is a matter of grace, it exceeds all requirements and becomes a free and generous gift.

I conclude, then, that requirements such as (A) and (B) are incompatible with the theology of grace. This is not to say that God may not *in fact* do the things he

is required to do according to those principles: he may, or he may not. But to say that he is *morally required* to do them is not consistent with the recognition that God is gracious. The Christian theodist, then, is obliged in consistency to reject such principles as unsound.

#### IV

But of course this does not suffice to dispose of (B). Such ethical requirements as (B) may be sought by the theodist as principles on which to base his explanation of God's dealings with the world, and the inconsistency of (B) with Christian theology disqualifies it from playing this role. But the atheist seeks such requirements in order to demonstrate the non-existence of God; for this purpose, the inconsistency with theology is no hindrance. So we need to see what can be said in favor of (B).

Basinger's defense of (B) centers around a certain principle of morality which he considers to be acceptable and which, if applied to God's actions, will yield (B) as a consequence. The principle is as follows:

- (C) One ought not knowingly and voluntarily attempt to lessen the amount of happiness or satisfaction experienced by another person over whose life one has control solely (or even primarily) for the purpose of increasing one's own happiness or satisfaction.<sup>19</sup>

It will be noted that (C) is a principle of a generally utilitarian type; it differs from utilitarianism by being somewhat less restrictive with regard to the sorts of reasons for which one might justifiably lessen another's happiness. Utilitarianism would allow this only if doing so brought about an increase in the general happiness, while (C) stipulates only that another's happiness should not be lessened in order to increase one's own. It is important to see that (C) states a *categorical* obligation: it claims that *anyone* who *at any time* performs an act of the proscribed type is acting wrongly.

Why should (C) be accepted? Basinger believes that (C) is implied by Christian moral teachings: he says, "the violator of [(C)] would appear to be a paradigmatic example of the type of selfish individual the Christian Canon condemns."<sup>20</sup> Now if this is true — that is, if it is true of *every* person who acts in the way prohibited by (C) — then the Christian theodist will not be able to reject (C) as a moral principle. But before we decide about this I think we need to get a better understanding of exactly what it is that (C) requires of us.

We can best do this by considering an example provided by Basinger. The example is described thus:

Assume that a Mr. Jones knows that his son has an interest in medicine and has no doubt that his son could become a doctor and in this capacity lead a very satisfying, fulfilling life. Let us also assume that Mr. Jones wants very

much for his son to become part of the family business and has no doubt that if his son does so, he will lead a satisfying life, although not as satisfying as he would lead if he became a doctor. And, finally, let us assume that Mr. Jones's influence over his son is such that his son will in fact do whatever he wants him to do. Has Mr. Jones wronged his son if he brings it about that he becomes part of the family business?<sup>21</sup>

My initial response is to concede that in such circumstances we would tend to think that the father does wrong if he keeps his son at home. But does principle (C) really illuminate this situation? Does it bring into focus the moral factors which are relevant here? On the contrary, I intend to argue that there are at least three additional questions which must be asked, questions which are highly relevant to the moral evaluation of the situation, but which would be totally overlooked by anyone who tried to evaluate it solely on the basis of (C).

First, *what are our assumptions concerning the mutual responsibilities of parents and children?* In contemporary American society we tend to place emphasis on the responsibility of parents to assist their children in the "pursuit of happiness" or at least not to impede that pursuit. And we tend to take a low view of parents who would assert their own wishes in such a matter as the child's choice of a career. In traditional Chinese society, on the other hand, the suggestion that a son might be justified in thwarting his father's wishes in such a matter would have been incomprehensible. Probably most human societies have fallen somewhere between these extremes. The first-century Palestinian Jewish society, for instance, would seem to have had a view of the prerogatives of fathers which was considerably higher than the American view but probably lower than the Chinese. My purpose in saying this is not to absolutize these cultural standards, and certainly not to judge between them. But they do exist, and they are morally relevant — they form part of the moral "ground rules" by which, in a given time and place, the game of life is played.

Second, *what costs are imposed on the father if the son goes to medical school?* Basinger's description tells us something about the consequences of the decision for the son, but little about the consequences for the father. Is the father, also, looking forward to a happy and prosperous old age in either case, only somewhat more agreeable if his son remains at home? Then he probably should give precedence to his son's satisfaction in a more challenging career. Or is the father, after years of toil, looking forward to a bleak and lonely life if his son leaves? Or is the son able to afford medical school only if his father liquidates the business and spends the remaining years of his life in near-poverty? In either of these cases, the father *may* decide in favor of the medical career as an act of extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice. But to say that he *must* do so, that he is *morally required* to decide this way, would reveal a great lack of moral sensitivity.

Third, *what has been the son's past behavior towards the father?* Utilitarianism, in general, holds that historical considerations are irrelevant to moral evaluation, but for non-utilitarians they make a difference. Suppose, for instance, that the son has spent the last several years in exhausting and back-breaking labor in order



to build up the family business to the point that the father can afford to hire additional help and run the business without him. Under these circumstances, for the father to insist on his son's remaining at home would be a most reprehensible betrayal of trust. Suppose, on the other hand, the son has spent the past few years spending wildly and depleting the family coffers to the point that only extreme sacrifices by other members of the family would allow the medical career to be pursued? Surely considerations such as these are relevant? Yet there is no mention of them in principle (C).

To sum up on the Jones case: If we start from American assumptions about family responsibility, if the son's past behavior towards his father has been exemplary or at least within the bounds of acceptability, and if the decision to attend medical school does not impose extraordinary personal costs or sacrifice on the father, then that decision should be encouraged. If on the other hand Chinese assumptions about the family prevail (and remember that (C) is supposed to be an *absolutely general* principle of morality) *or* if the decision to attend medical school will impose extreme costs on the father and/or the son has in the past acted against the father in some way that undermines his claim to give first consideration to his own happiness — if any of these conditions prevail, it seems to me that Mr. Jones might decide to keep his son at home without being morally at fault. To be sure, he might all the same decide to encourage the medical career — but to say that he is *morally required* to do so seems unacceptable.<sup>22</sup>

We have then the following result: (C) implies, and was intended to imply, that Mr. Jones is morally obligated to send his son to medical school. But we have seen that is perfectly possible, under certain conditions, that Mr. Jones is justified in making the opposite decision. It follows that (C), considered as a principle of categorical obligation, is false. ((C) may still be true, and no doubt is true, considered as a principle of *prima facie* obligation.) And since (C) is the only reason which has been given in support of (B), it follows that (B) also should be rejected. The role of the moral requirement which is to be the basis for a problem of evil is still unfilled.

But our consideration of Mr. Jones and his son does more than enable us to reject (C); it also illustrates considerations which are extremely relevant to the discussion of grace in the previous section. For it is the belief of Christians that we have to do with One whose morally rightful claim upon us far exceeds that of the most loving and devoted human parent, that we have offended and rejected him in such a way as to forfeit utterly any claim on his further concern for us, and that we have imposed on him, and he has willingly accepted, the incalculable cost involved in the Incarnation and Passion of Christ. We may, if we choose, ignore these matters as we undertake the task of theodicy. But if we do, the resulting system will have little to do with the theology of grace.

## NOTES

1. David Basinger, "In What Sense Must God Be Omnibenevolent?" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983) pp. 3–4. Let me state that I dislike the term "omnibenevolent," which does not occur in classical listings of the divine attributes, and I shall not use it in this article. So far as I can see, this should make no difference to the argument.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. Of course, (A) may be consistent with this possibility if it is allowed that the universal quantification in (A) may be satisfied vacuously.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 8. I have modified Basinger's formula by inserting the phrase in brackets: he has a separate principle dealing with the possibility of a defect in God's character. Combining the two principles into one allows greater economy in my exposition without, so far as I can see, any corresponding disadvantages.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. If the evil that results from a free choice is greater than the good achieved by allowing the choice, then God if he allowed it would not be doing all he could to maximize the quality of life for self-determining beings, and (B) would not be satisfied. To be sure, God cannot deprive self-determining beings of *all* choices without their ceasing to be self-determining. But this by no means implies that God could not *on occasion* prevent such a being from making a choice that it could otherwise have made.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. In Helen Keller's case, it might be thought that her suffering and disability were outweighed by the heroic achievements of her later life, and would thus qualify as non-gratuitous. But of course the majority of cases of severe disability do not have such a triumphant ending: if they did, we would not be so astonished at Keller's accomplishments.
10. Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) pp. 79–99.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–88.
12. Basinger also considers another argument from Adams, found in his "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," (*Nous* 13 (1979) pp. 53–56). The relationship between this argument of Adams' and Basinger's position seems to me to be rather obscure, so I shall not discuss it here.
13. Robert Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972) pp. 323, 324.
14. Basinger, p. 13.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 13f.
16. Adams, p. 324.
17. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
18. Ephesians 2:8, RSV (emphasis added).
19. Basinger, p. 10. It will be noted that (C) does not, by itself, entail (B). In order to get the entailment we must assume that God's possible reasons for lessening the happiness of some person must consist either of a desire to increase the happiness of some other person or persons (in which case the lessening will be permissible under both (C) and (B)), or of a desire to increase God's own happiness (in which case the lessening will be impermissible under both principles). Whether such an assumption is justifiable is left as an exercise for the reader.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
22. It may have occurred to the reader that the circumstances in the Jones case which are overlooked by (C) are precisely those which would be urged by an advocate of non-consequentialist ethics in opposition to utilitarianism: special obligations based on per-

sonal relationships, the claims of fairness and justice in the light of past conduct, and the difference between minimum requirements and sacrificial generosity. Basinger recognizes that a theodist may object to a utilitarian view of God's obligations, and apparently is trying to formulate his requirements in a way that does not presuppose utilitarianism. But on close examination his requirements (A), (B), and (C) turn out not to differ substantially from utilitarianism.