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ARTICLE

God, Evil, and Anthropomorphism

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Abstract

In the first part of this paper I draw on some reflections offered by Descartes and Malebranche on the dangers of anthropomorphic conceptions of God, in order to suggest that there is something misguided about the way in which the so-called problem of evil is commonly framed. In the second part, I ask whether the problem of evil becomes easier to deal with if we adopt a non-personalist account of God, of the kind found in Aquinas. I consider the sense in which God is termed 'good' on this latter conception, and while not proposing that it can justify or explain the evil and suffering in the world, I suggest that the world's manifest imperfections are compatible with the existence of a loving creator who is the source of the existence of the world and of the goodness found in created things.

Keywords: anthropomorphism; Aquinas; Descartes; evil; theodicy

It is here that we go completely astray. We think of God as a sort of superman, who thinks up such-and-such a scheme, and tries to realize it by such-and-such a means. This is clearly quite unworthy of God.

René Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* (1648).[1]

Scarcely had they set foot in Lisbon, … when they felt the earth shake under their feet. The sea rose and boiled in the harbour, smashing the ships at anchor. Whirlwinds of flames and molten ash engulfed the streets and public squares; houses fell, their roofs collapsed onto the foundations and the foundations were split asunder. Thirty thousand inhabitants of

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[1] *Nos his maxime erramus. Concipimus Deum tanquam magnum aliquem hominem, qui hoc et hoc sibi proponit, et eo his et his mediis tendit, quod certe Deo maxime indignum* (AT V 158: CSMK 341). In this paper, 'AT' refers to C. Adam & P. Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76); 'CSM' refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, I and II vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

*every age and sex were crushed under the ruins … "Now what', asked Pangloss, 'can be
the sufficient reason for this phenomenon?'*

Voltaire, *Candide* (1759).[2]

1. Standard theodicy and its problems

The so-called 'problem of evil' as it has often featured in the philosophical and theo-
logical literature seems to involve a kind of thought-experiment, whereby God is put
'in the dock', as it were, charged with causing or allowing unconscionable amounts of
suffering. And those who take it upon themselves to defend God against these charges
typically propose certain justifying reasons – certain ends which, it is suggested, God
might have had in mind when creating the world, and which would justify his causing
or allowing such suffering.

Probably the best known such approach, with a very ancient pedigree, is the 'free
will defence': if God wishes there to be genuinely free human beings, then this will
necessarily open the possibility that some of them may make evil choices. And, to be
sure, there is no denying that much of the terrible suffering in human history has been
caused by deliberate human wickedness. The theodicist or 'defence lawyer' then has
the task of arguing that God's permitting such suffering – including even that involving
horrendous evils such as torture and genocide – is justified by the goodness of God's
decision to create a world in which there is genuine freedom.

A second standard attempt to explain the suffering found all around us invokes the
idea that it has been planned by God as necessary for our moral and spiritual growth.
By creating a world in which danger, pain, and distress abound, God intends to create
(in the poet John Keats's phrase) a 'vale of soul-making'[3] – a world in which people
are challenged, and as a result can mature and grow in virtues such as courage and
compassion.

Both the above lines of defence[4] are advanced as central to the task of theod-
icy by one of our most distinguished contemporary philosophers of religion, Richard
Swinburne. Deploying the free will defence, he urges that it is 'a great good' that
humans have 'free and responsible choice' – the power to 'make significant choices
between good and evil, which make a big difference to the agent, to others, and to the
world'. He then invites us to consider the choices God has to make between the kinds

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[2]*À peine ont-ils mis le pied dans la ville … qu'ils sentent la terre trembler sous leurs pas; la mer s'élève en bouil-
lonnant dans le port, et brise les vaisseaux qui sont à l'ancre. Des tourbillons de flammes et de cendres couvrent les
rues et les places publiques; les maisons s'écroulent, les toits sont renversés sur les fondements, et les fondements se
dispersent; trente mille habitants de tout âge et de tout sexe sont écrasés sous des ruines… « Quelle peut être la raison
suffisante de ce phénomène?» disait Pangloss.* Voltaire, *Candide* [1759], ch. 5 (Wikisource text of 1877), transl.
J.C.

[3]The phrase occurs in a passage from Keats's letter to his brother and sister-in-law George and
Georgiana Keats of 21 April 1819. The letter continues: 'Do you not see how necessary a world of pains
and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer
in a thousand diverse ways!'.

[4]A prominent feature of recent literature has been the distinction between the 'logical' problem of evil
which charges that God's existence is logically incompatible with the existence of evil in our world, and
the 'evidential' problem of evil, which simply maintains that the existence of evil makes God's existence
improbable. The term 'defence' (as opposed to theodicy) is sometimes reserved for putative rebuttals of
the logical problem.

of world in which we are to live. And he continues, '[I]t seems to me (just, on balance) that [God's] choosing to create the world in which we have considerable opportunity to benefit or harm each other is to bring about a good at least a great as the evil which he thereby allows to occur'.[5]

Having thus set about defending God's choice to allow moral evils (the evils caused by human choices) Swinburne then turns to 'natural evils' (the suffering produced by disease, earthquakes and the like), and he asks us to imagine God creating a world free of such suffering. He continues:

> Many of us would then have such an easy life that we simply would not have much opportunity to show courage, or, indeed, manifest much in the way of great goodness at all. We need those insidious processes of decay and dissolution which money and strength cannot ward off for long to give us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid, to become heroes'.[6]

So again, a putative vindication is offered for God's choice to create our suffering-filled world.

The question of whether either of these types of defence, in respect of moral and natural evil respectively, is sufficient to 'acquit' God from the charge of causing or allowing great suffering has of course generated a vast literature over many centuries of debate. But rather than attempting to revisit these debates, I should like to ask instead if there is not something amiss about the very way in which the problem of evil has traditionally been framed.[7] Is there not something fundamentally unsound about proposing a kind of thought-experiment in which we imagine God deliberating about what type of world to create, and ask ourselves what steps he might reasonably take, or what kinds of disadvantage he might be prepared to countenance, in order to produce certain desirable outcomes?

Certainly Descartes would have considered such thought-experiments about God's imagined purposes fundamentally unsound, as witnessed by the quotation that forms our opening epigraph (taken from an interview he gave to a young Dutchman, Frans Burman, in 1648). Descartes's views in this area have a certain historical interest, but I cite them mainly because it seems to me they remain of considerable relevance for the way in which we should approach the so-called 'problem of evil'.

Speculating about God's purposes was, for Descartes, a futile enterprise. Part of the reason for this is to be found in his new programme for a mathematically based physics which would sweep away the (as he saw it) unproductive appeals to final causes or purposes found in the scholastic models of explanation that he wished to sup- plant. 'The customary search for final causes', he observes in the Fourth Meditation, 'is utterly useless in physics'.[8] But Descartes also has what may be termed a theological

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[5]Richard Swinburne, *Does God Exist?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 6, pp. 88 and 107.

[6]Swinburne, *Does God Exist?*, ch. 6, p. 110.

[7]In suggesting that there may be something wrong with the *framing* of the so-called 'problem of evil', I have been influenced by Brian Davies's argument that many discussions of the problem of evil rest on the questionable presupposition that God is morally good; see Brian Davies, 'Does the "Problem of Evil" Rest on a Mistake?', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 85 (2024), 8–22.

[8]*totum illud causarum genus, quod a fine peti solet, in rebus Physicis nullum usum habere existimo.* Descartes, *Meditations* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], Fourth Meditation, AT VII 55: CSM II 39.

reason for shunning appeals to God's purposes, namely (as he puts it in our epigraph from the interview with Burman) that such appeals risk presupposing an 'unworthy', anthropomorphic conception of God as a kind of 'superman'.

There are, I think, several possible aspects to this charge of anthropomorphism which might be relevant to the so-called problem of evil. In the first place, it may seem presumptuous for puny human creatures, of finite intellect and limited knowledge, to attempt to plumb the infinite depths of the divine mind. This is an idea that figures prominently in Scripture, for example, in Paul's awestruck exclamation in the letter to the Romans, 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!'[9] The Pauline remark echoes an earlier theme in the Hebrew Bible, as in the challenge posed to Job, 'Can you fathom the mysteries of God, or probe the limits of the Almighty?'[10] This kind of consideration was clearly operative for Descartes, when he observed that 'we cannot pretend that some of God's purposes are more out in the open than others; all are equally hidden in the inscrutably abyss of his wisdom'.[11]

But there is a more radical interpretation of the Cartesian reservation about plumbing the purposes of God, namely that there is something intrinsically misguided about conceiving of God as 'thinking up such-and-such a scheme and seeking to realize it by such-and-such a means' (as Descartes puts the matter in his comment to Burman). On this more radical interpretation, the objection is that it is preposterous to attribute means-ends reasoning to God in anything like the way we would in the case of a human being. Why might this be? Descartes provides the material for a pretty clear answer in his *Principles of Philosophy*, where he warns against an anthropomorphic conception of the mind of God:

> We must in no way think that God understands and wills as we do, by means of operations that are somehow distinct one from another, but rather that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act whereby he simultaneously understands, wills, and brings about all things.[12]

Descartes is here reflecting the standard scholastic doctrine of the complete simplicity of God, as found in Aquinas (who himself traces it back to Augustine): 'God is truly and absolutely simple'.[13] The simplicity doctrine means that distinctions we might apply to human persons, such as the distinction between essence (*what* something is) and existence (*that* it is), just do not apply to God. Or again (to take Descartes's example), in the case of humans we distinguish intellection from volition – someone's *understanding*

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[9] Ὦ βάθος πλούτου καὶ σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως θεοῦ· ὡς ἀνεξερεύνητα τὰ κρίματα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεξιχνίαστοι αἱ ὁδοὶ αὐτοῦ (*o bathos ploutou kai sophias kai gnoseos Theou; hos anexerauneta ta krimata autou kai anexichniastoi hai hodoi autou*). Romans 11:33.

[10] החקר אלוה תמצא אם עד־תכלית שדי תמצא (*hacheqer eloha timtsa; im ad-taklit shadday timtsa*). Job 11:7.

[11] *Nec fingi potest aliquos Dei fines magis quam alios in propatulo esse; omnes enim in imperscrutabili ejus sapientiae abysso sunt eodem modo reconditi.* Descartes, *Meditations*, Fifth Replies (AT VII 375: CSM II 258).

[12] *nullo modo Deum … putandum est intelligere & velle … ut nos, per operationes quodammodo distinctas, sed ita ut per unicam semperque eandem & simplicissimam actionem omnia simul intelligat, velit & operertur.* Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* [*Principia philosophiae*, 1644], Part I, art. 23.

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], Part I, qu. 3, art. 7: *Deus vere et summe simplex est* (citing Augustine, *De Trinitate* (early 5th century), IV, 6, 7).

something is evidently a different kind of thing from their *willing* it; but in God there can be no such distinction.

An example may help here. In the human case, once I properly understand the nature of a (Euclidian) triangle, I understand that its angles must equal two right angles; but it would make no sense to say that I also *will* that its angles add up to two right angles. My assent to the proposition in question does not have to be 'willed', since it follows in the wake of my understanding. One could put the point by saying that for the human mind, the very idea of something's being *true* is typically linked to its being something that *constrains* our will (so that it is not up to us to decide or will that it be the case).[14] What then would it be like to have a 'mind' in which there is no distinction between *understanding* something to be true and *willing* it to be true? We simply cannot say – such a notion completely eludes us.

So given the doctrine of divine simplicity it turns out that the problem about trying to fathom the mind of God is not just that God's mind is inscrutable (hard to fathom, or hidden from us); the deeper problem is that we cannot claim to have any proper grasp of what it means to speak of the 'mind' of God in the first place.

Descartes's disciple Nicolas Malebranche was very much alive to this kind of problem when he warned that even when, following Scripture, we call God a 'mind' or 'spirit', we should use such language not so much to show positively what God is, as to indicate that he is not material. As soon as we go beyond this negative judgement and assume that by labelling God a 'mind' we have a positive understanding of his nature, we go astray:

> We must not hastily imagine that the word 'mind', which we use to express what God is and what we are, is a univocal term … One must not call God a 'mind' to show positively what he is, but only to signify that he is not material … Just as he contains within him the perfections of matter while not being material … so he includes the perfections of created minds *without being a mind in the way we conceive of minds.* His true name is HE WHO IS, that is, unrestricted being, all being, infinite and universal being.[15]

On the Thomistic conception of God that Malebranche implicitly invokes here, God is identified with actual existence: God, as Aquinas puts it, is *ipsum esse subsistens*,[16] which has been variously translated as 'existence itself', or 'subsisting being itself', or

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[14]I add 'typically' to exclude the limiting case of truths that simply record my decisions or intentions.

[15]*Il ne faut donc pas s'imaginer avec précipitation que le mot d'esprit, dont nous nous servons pour exprimer ce qu'est Dieu et ce que nous sommes, soit un terme univoque …; et on ne doit pas tant appeler Dieu un esprit pour montrer positivement ce qu'il est, que pour signifier qu'il n'est pas matériel. … comme il renferme dans lui-même les perfections de la matière sans être matériel … il comprend aussi les perfections des esprits créés sans être esprit de la manière que nous concevons les esprits; que son nom véritable est CELUI QUI EST, c'est-a-dire l'être sans restriction, tout être, l'être ínfini et universel.* Nicolas Malebranche, *Search after Truth* [*La recherche de la vérité*, 6th ed., 1712], bk 3, pt 2, ch. 9; transl. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (adapted).

[16]Thomas Aquinas, *On Existence and Essence* [*De ente et essentia*, 1252–6], ch. 3. Elsewhere Aquinas says that in God there is no distinction between existence and essence, and that God is 'his own existence' *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 3, art. 4.

'the pure act of existing'.[17] As 'existence itself', God is present in all created things,[18] the active power that makes all created things exist.[19]

If God is conceived of in this way, as existence itself, the mysterious source of the existence of all created things, then this is immediately going to rule out the kind of anthropomorphic conception that sees God as a being alongside other beings, a being whose mind we might fathom, or whose purposes we might challenge, or vindicate. In short, it seems to undermine at a stroke the very framework within which the standard debates over the problem of evil are typically conducted.

For as we noted at the outset, in these debates the defenders of God typically attempt to point to purposes God might have had in mind which would justify the amount of evil caused or permitted; yet if, given the kinds of concern raised by Descartes and Malebranche, mentalistic language of this kind cannot be properly applied to God – if God cannot be understood as 'a mind in the way we conceive of minds' – then the proposed defence will not easily get off the ground. And equally, those who make a case *against* the existence of God on the basis of the suffering found in the world may also find the ground cut from under their feet. For the way the negative argument is framed also seems to see God in anthropomorphic terms. God is typically construed as some kind of powerful spirit that the believer calls on to intervene, for example, to alleviate sickness, so that, if the patient doesn't get better, there is a problem for the believer – why did God not step in to prevent the suffering? This is precisely how David Hume presented the problem in the eighteenth century, tracing it right back to pre-Christian times, to what he called the 'yet unanswered' questions posed by Epicurus: 'Is he willing to prevent evil but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?'[20] Yet if God is not an item in the world alongside items such as pathogenic viruses and antibiotics, and doctors – if (as the title of a recent book by Rupert Shortt has it) 'God is No Thing'[21] – then the questions posed by Hume no longer seem apposite, since they implicitly seem to challenge God in just the kind of way we would challenge a human agent ('Doesn't he care? And if so, why doesn't he act?'). The point is nicely summed up by the philosopher Brian Davies, who in a number of writings has strongly criticised the tendency to see God in anthropomorphic terms: 'if God does not exist in space and time, then God is not "someone" alongside us who can acknowledge requests "coming in" while consequently doing something to try to deal with them. God is not Santa Claus, or even Amazon'.[22]

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[17]This is the rendering given by the contemporary Catholic preacher, Bishop Robert Barron https://stmarkov.com/news/september-27-what-are-the-most-common-views-of-god, accessed 11 March 2023. For God as *actus purus* (pure actuality, or pure act), see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 3, art. 2.

[18]*Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 7–8.

[19]*Summa theologiae*, Part 1, qu. 25. See also Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 91–2. Elsewhere Aquinas says that God is 'existing outside the order of entities, like a cause that pours forth all being and all of its specific properties' (*extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias*); Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* [*Sententiae super Peri Hermeneias*, 1270–71], I, 14.

[20]David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* [*c.* 1755; first published posthumously, 1779], ed. by H. D. Aiken (New York: Haffner, 1948), part x.

[21]Rupert Shortt, *God is No Thing: Coherent Christianity* (London: Hurst., 2016); see also Shortt, *The Hardest Problem* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022).

[22]Brian Davies, 'Comment: The Power of Prayer', *New Blackfriars*, 102 (2021), 3–5, at p. 4.

2. Divine goodness and manifest evil

Which conception of God is more defensible from a philosophical and/or theological point of view – the conception of God as a great and mighty person with plans and purposes, or the non-personalist conception suggested by many of the ways in which Aquinas talks about God? This is a large and complicated question that cannot be adjudicated here. But let me just observe in passing that the difficulties connected with the problem of evil are not the only worries that beset a personalist conception of God. Anthony Kenny has drawn attention to a more general difficulty that applies to our thinking of God in personal terms:

> the language that we use to describe the [operations] of human minds operates within a web of links with bodily behaviour and social institutions. When we try to apply this language to an entity … whose scope of operation is the entire universe, this web comes to pieces, and we no longer know what we are saying.[23]

However that may be, for the purposes of the present paper the question that now needs to be addressed is the following. If we adopt a non-personalist conception of God, of the kind suggested by many texts in Aquinas, does the so-called problem of evil become any easier to deal with? I have suggested so far that if we take on board the warnings against anthropomorphism expressed by Descartes and Malebranche, this will undercut the terms of the standard debates about whether God can be 'acquitted' of the charge of unwarrantedly permitting suffering he could have prevented. But suppose that we reject the anthropomorphic view, and adopt instead the Thomistic view of God as *ipsum esse*, the fount of actuality, or the source of the existence of all created things. How far does this still leave us with a problem of explaining the evil and suffering to be found in the world?

The short answer is that the most basic form of what Hume called 'Epicurus' old question' – 'if God is good, whence then is evil?' – still stands. The theistic worldview may take many forms and be interpreted in different ways, but no matter how God is conceived, the goodness of God, indeed the supreme goodness and perfection of God, is fundamental.[24] Thus Aquinas explicitly affirms that 'whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God in a more excellent and higher way'.[25] And he goes on to say that 'God pours forth goodness in things because he is good'.[26] Moreover, the creation story in Genesis famously declares that when God beheld everything he had made he 'saw that it was very good'.[27] Yet as we look around us at the pain and suffering in the world, the disease and injury and decay, it seems that there is much that is not good. So it seems that there is still a problem to be addressed. But nevertheless, as regards

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[23]Anthony Kenny, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 11. For several other difficulties with the personalistic conception of God, see Brian Davies, 'Comment: Is God a Person?', *New Blackfriars*, 103 (2022), 433–35.

[24]The perfection of God is affirmed in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu.4; and in Part I, qu. 6, God is identified as supremely and essentially good.

[25]*id quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis, praeexistit in Do, et hoc quidem secundum modum altiorem.* Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 13, art. 2.

[26]*quia est bonus, bonitatem rebus diffundit. Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 13, art. 2.

[27]Genesis 1:31.

the *nature* of the problem that has to be addressed, the terms of the debate will be significantly shifted. Instead of the problem of 'theodicy' – putting God 'in the dock' and asking why he allowed so much suffering, why he did not intervene, what might have been his reasons, and so on – the problem facing us will be in a certain sense a more abstract one, namely: Is the nature of the created world as we find it compatible with its being the creation of a perfectly good God?

Well, given the beauty and goodness to be found in the world, the theist will certainly be able to affirm God as the creative source of this beauty and goodness. The believer may be able to express, with the poet Wordsworth, the 'cheerful faith that all which we behold is full of blessings',[28] or will be able to view the natural world, with Gerard Manley Hopkins, as 'charged with the grandeur of God'.[29] Non-believers will of course reject such theistic language, but whether believers or not, few will be able to deny that they have ever experienced the kind of exaltation of spirit that the poets have described in recording their response to the wonders of the cosmos and of the natural world that is our home. Of course it is logically possible that properties such as beauty and goodness are merely human projections, whereby we 'gild and stain' (as David Hume put it)[30] a cosmos whose ultimate nature is void of all such qualities. But phenomenologically at least, the relevant experiences present themselves to us as *responses* – spontaneous reactions to something outside ourselves that is good, and that calls forth our awe and admiration.[31]

Yet even if all this is granted, it is plain that this is only one side of the story regarding the created world. The canvass is a mixed one. We may not be able to deny the good, but we also have to acknowledge what another great poet, John Keats, so vividly discerned: 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;/ Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,/ Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies …'[32] Our world may contain much goodness, yet there is much that is amiss: it is very, very far from perfect.

The imperfection of the world, however, is by no means incompatible with its being the creation of a perfectly good God; indeed, viewed in a certain light the former can be shown to be a necessary consequence of the latter. This point was nicely articulated by Leibniz in the early-modern period (though it has more ancient roots),[33] and although Leibniz included it in his *Essays on Theodicy*, it lies outside the kinds of moral and forensic considerations to do with the accusation or exoneration of God which are typical of the theodicy literature, and indeed of many of the other arguments Leibniz produced

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[28]William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey [1798]', lines 134–5, in *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. by S. Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 135.

[29]Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' [1877], from *Poems (1876–1889)*, in *The Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 27.

[30]'Taste … [is] a productive faculty [which], gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation'. David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], Appendix I, final paragraph.

[31]See further John Cottingham, 'Spiritual Experience: Its Scope, its Phenomenology, and its Source', *New Blackfriars*, 104 (2023), 414–27.

[32]John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale' [1820], in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by J. Barnard (London: Penguin, 1977).

[33]For example in Plotinus, *Enneads* [c. 250 CE], I, 8. See further John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* [1966] (London: Macmillan, 1985), ch. 3, §2.

in the work in question.[34] Instead, it is a purely logical point, relating to what Leibniz calls *metaphysical evil.* Even before any putative moral evaluation of what is done or permitted by God, there will inevitably be, as Leibniz puts it, an 'original imperfection' in the created world.[35] It is logically impossible for a perfect being to create something other than itself that is wholly perfect; for by the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (that if X and Y are exactly identical in all respects they are one and the same thing),[36] something that was wholly and completely perfect would just be identical with God. It follows as a corollary from this principle that if God and his creation are to be genuinely distinct, they must be 'discernible', and hence the creation cannot have all the perfections of God. If there is to be any creation at all, it has to come about (as indeed a long tradition going back to Augustine affirms) by a kind of diminution, or subtraction from divine perfection.[37] This is an idea that finds theological expression in the work of the sixteenth-century Jewish theologian, Isaac Luria, who envisaged creation as a *withdrawal* by God, a kind of shrinking whereby God, instead of filling all the available space with his supreme and perfect existence, gives way, in order to allow for something *other*, something imperfect, to unfold.[38]

That the creation cannot be perfect might not be thought to get us very far, since one can readily imagine a less-than-perfect world that is still a great deal better than our own, and which is not subject to the *degree* of suffering (decay, destruction, sickness, and mortality) that marks our human existence (indeed, one can imagine a world that is less than perfect, but which still lacks any of these sources of suffering).[39] One could respond to this, as Descartes did, by saying that there is no reason to suppose that things ought to be arranged for our benefit: 'It is a common habit of human beings to suppose that they are the dearest of God's creatures', but 'it would be the height of presumption to imagine that all things were created for our benefit alone'.[40] And indeed the truth is that we find ourselves caught up in, and wholly dependent on, the unimaginably vast and complex system that is the physical universe, of which we appear to

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[34]Including his claim that ours is the 'best of all possible worlds', and that there is a 'sufficient reason' for everything that occurs, even of the most terrible kind – a position satirized by Voltaire in the passage about the Lisbon earthquake that forms the second of our opening epigraphs, above.

[35]*Il y a une imperfection originale dans la créature … parce que la créature est limitée essentiellement limitée…. Le mal métaphysique consiste dans la simple imperfection.* Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy* [*Essais de théodicée*, 1710], Part I, §§ 20–21. For further discussion of this argument in this and the following paragraph, see John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 2, sectn 3.

[36]The principle has been challenged, e.g. by Robert Adams, 'Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity', *Journal of Philosophy*, 76 (1979), 5–26, but the challenge does not in my view cast doubt on the claim that the creation of an unsurpassingly perfect God, in order to be distinct from God, must be less than perfect.

[37]Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* [*De civitate Dei*, 413–26] xiv, 13, cited in Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, ch. 3, §4.

[38]The ideas of Isaac Luria (1534–1572) are known through the work of his disciples Hayim Vital and Joseph ibn Tabul. For the central idea of *tsimtsum* (withdrawal), see Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* [1993] (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 308.

[39]Indeed, one can on the face of it conceive of a world that is still less than perfect, but in which all such distressing sources of suffering are absent. The 'dust of the earth' argument that follows in this paragraph suggests, however, that such a world would be unimaginably different from the world in which creatures like us have a place.

[40]Descartes, *Conversation with Burman*, AT V 168: CSMK 349, and *Principles of Philosophy*, Bk III, art. 2.

be a tiny and insignificant part. And whether we like it or not, the decay and destruction that threatens our lives is an inherent part of this process. The material world at the micro level consists of a series of fleeting energy-interchanges, with each rapidly decaying particle or sub-particle scarcely qualifying as an enduring thing at all. What is more, the whole system, even at the macro level, seems to be driven by a process of decay, a slippage from higher organization to lower, from greater amounts of heat to lesser, all on a downward path to eventual extinction. Hydrogen in the stars decays to helium, and occasionally supernova explosions produce heavier elements, out of which, by long and tortuous chains of events, planets and eventually living forms are produced. And we humans, as we now know, are one such life form, able to flourish for a time in an environment that provides a certain temporary stability, but only at the cost of drawing on the entropy going on elsewhere. That is the human condition, the condition of creatures formed 'of the dust of the earth', as the Genesis story has it.[41] But now that we understand a bit more about the nature of this 'dust', this material substrate on which we depend, we are able to see that all life, including our own, must operate in accordance with the principles of change and decay whereby the entire cosmos develops and evolves. 'Change and decay in all around I see', wrote the Scottish cleric, Henry Lyte, as he was dying of tuberculosis.[42] But to wish for a world in which there was no change and decay would be to wish for a world in which there was no human life. Any creatures inhabiting a material planet and themselves made of matter, will necessarily be mortal. Like the sun and the stars, and everything else in the cosmos, their life span will be finite, and in an important sense precarious, depending on a delicate balance of fluctuating forces, subject to change and decay, potentially prey to instability and collapse. And this, to be sure, is simply to state an all too familiar fact: that the human condition is inherently vulnerable, inherently subject to the possibility of decay or extinction, just as is the entire cosmos of which it is a part.

The thought is an ancient one. 'Look up at the heavens, and down at the earth beneath', says the prophet Isaiah, and you will find that the 'the heavens will vanish like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment'.[43] Coming to terms with the human condition and its mortality, and the ultimately corruptible nature of the cosmos we inhabit, does not, of course, eliminate or reduce the distress and suffering that so often arises in human life; but the argument from 'metaphysical evil' may at least point to a way of showing how such suffering, arising from the necessarily fragile and imperfect nature of the world we live in, might at least be compatible with the idea of a good and perfect creator.

But is it compatible with the idea of a *loving* creator? Is it compatible with one of the fundamental tenets of the theistic world view, that God loves the world – that, as Aquinas puts it, 'God loves all existing things'?[44] To try to offer a full 'explanation' of why so much suffering exists in a world that is taken to be the work of a loving creator seems to me a project that is not only beyond the powers of human ingenuity, but also a project that it is almost repellent to attempt, when faced with the horrendous evils to which so many human beings are subjected. Here I am sympathetic to

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[41]Genesis 2:7.
[42]The lines are from the famous hymn 'Abide with me', composed by Lyte in 1847.
[43]Isaiah 51:6.
[44]*Deus omnia existentia amat.* Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 20, art. 2.

the position taken by the Catholic theologian, Karen Kilby, who argues that Christian theology 'ought to acknowledge itself to be faced with questions it cannot answer'.[45] She continues:

> Christians … trust that ultimately God will bring good out of all conceivable evils, but this does not make these evils goods, nor render their presence explicable, nor allow us to understand how they can take place in the good creation of a loving and faithful God.[46]

Kilby is not here denying that God can overcome evil, but she wants to insist that 'when we see good coming out of evil we can see this as the beginning of the hoped-for work of God, not the beginning of any kind of explanation'.[47] In rejecting the demand for explanation, Kilby explicitly follows the great medieval English mystic, Mother Julian of Norwich, whose reflections on sin and suffering, the *Revelations of Divine Love*, record an intense struggle with the puzzle of why there is sin, culminating in the mysterious pronouncement 'sin is *behovely*'. Sin is somehow 'necessary' or 'fitting' – but why? We are never told; but instead what follows are the famously moving and uplifting lines 'but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'.[48]

Pondering on these words leads us, as Kilby shows, to confront perhaps one of the most perplexing questions to be faced by the Christian believer. In acknowledging that our human lives must contain a residue of suffering and loss that cannot be 'justified' or explained away, is the right stance to embrace that suffering and loss as a mysterious corollary of divine love? This appears to be what T. S. Eliot meant at the end of *Four Quartets* by the lines 'Who then devised the torment? Love./ Love is the unfamiliar Name/ Behind the hands that wove/ The intolerable shirt of flame'. Or alternatively – and this is the position that Kilby herself moves toward – is the good news of the Gospel *not* that suffering is to be sought or embraced, but rather that is it to be treated as if it had no ultimate weight, because it cannot fundamentally touch the power of goodness and love?

These are profound and important questions the exploration of which would take us outside the terms of the present paper. So let me close instead by returning to the subject that has been our main theme – the danger of framing the 'problem of evil' in terms which risk an anthropomorphic conception of God. To avoid anthropomorphism it is necessary, as we have seen, to reject the idea of God as an item in the world, a being whom we might expect to act as a separate agent alongside the other causes which operate in our world. God's goodness is not to be understood as the goodness of a morally good agent whom we might ask to intervene on our behalf; rather, God is *goodness itself*, the creative source of all that is good.

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[45] Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), ch. 6, p. 67.

[46] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, ch. 6, p. 81.

[47] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, ch. 6, p. 81.

[48] 'but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and all manner of thinge shalle be wel'. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*. [*c*. 1400], ed. by N. Watson and J. Jenkins (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2006), ch. 27, p. 209.

But what of God's love? Scripture of course contains many passages where God is described as, for example, full of loving kindness, mercy and compassion. Typical is Psalm 103 [102]: 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him'. So the theist will certainly want to say with Aquinas that 'God loves all existing things'.[49] But if we read what Aquinas goes on to say in this passage, we will encounter a recurring leitmotiv in his philosophy – that our understanding (such as it is) of God is radically unlike our understanding of created things. God loves, says Aquinas, but '*not as we love*'.[50]

There follows something that might remind us of Descartes's comment (referred to earlier) about how our will and our understanding are radically different from God's, insofar as our will follows in the wake of our understanding, whereas in God the will and the intellect must be regarded as part of a single indivisible creative act. In a somewhat similar way Aquinas points to a radical difference between human and divine love. When *we* love, says Aquinas, 'our will is not the *cause* of the goodness of things, but is *moved* by it'. In other words, when we love some object, it is the goodness of that object that calls forth our love. But the love of God is utterly unlike this, since his love is that which 'infuses and creates goodness in things'.[51]

In short, God's love should not be construed as the sort of 'benevolent concern' that might be felt by a kind of cosmic superman who could respond to distress by trying to alleviate it, and who might then be accused (in line with the 'problem of evil') of failing to do so. God's love is not that of a being in the world, but a radically different kind of love – the love that is manifest in God's being the loving creative source of all that is good. None of this explains or justifies the unchecked evil and undeserved suffering that abounds in our world. But it does offer a picture of the world where, in the words of the Epistle of James, 'every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of lights, in whom is no change or shadow of turning'.[52] To put it in less poetic language, the claim is that there is an objective and transcendent source of being and goodness that sustains in being all that is good. Such a picture does not remove or explain evil, but it may be enough to sustain and nourish our lives and give them meaning. For it suggests that we live in a world, imperfect though it is, in which goodness may be found, and in which our human minds are shaped and configured in such a way as to make them responsive to this goodness. Our human will cannot create goodness, but we can rejoice in our power to recognize it, to be drawn to it, to love it, and to direct our lives accordingly.[53]

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[49] See note 44, above.

[50] *Deus omnia quae sunt, amat. Non tamen eo modo sicut nos.* Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 20, art. 2.

[51] *amor Dei est infundens et creans bonitatem in creaturis.* Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 20, art. 2.

[52] πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δώρημα τέλειον ἄνωθέν ἐστιν καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ Πατρὸς τῶν φώτων, παρ' ᾧ οὐκ ἔνι παραλλαγὴ ἢ τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα (*pasa dosis agathē kai pan dorēma teleion anōthen estin katabainon apo tou Patros tōn photōn, par' hō ouk eni parallagē ē tropēs aposkiasma*). James 1:17.

[53] I am grateful to David McPherson and Jim Stone, and also to the Editor of *New Blackfriars*, for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.