



## INTRODUCTION

# Special Issue: God, Suffering, Sin, and Evil: Editorial Introduction

Brian Davies OP

Editor of 'New Blackfriars'

Email: [bd01725@gmail.com](mailto:bd01725@gmail.com)

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In David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), two of the characters reflect on the world and find it to be in a mess. At one point in their discussion, Demea, one of the characters in the *Dialogues*, observes:

The whole earth ... is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous: fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the newborn infant and to its wretched parent. Weakness, impotence, distress attend each stage of that life: And it is at last finished in agony and horror.

Philo, another character in the *Dialogues*, then develops this tale of misery. He says:

The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation ... This very society by which we surmount those wild beasts, our natural enemies; what new enemies does it not raise to us? What woe and misery does it not occasion? Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud; by these they mutually torment each other. And they would soon dissolve that society which they had formed, were it not for the dread of still greater ills, which must attend their separation.

Demea then responds to Philo and declares:

Were a stranger to drop, on a sudden, into the world, I would show him a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strowed with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. To turn the gay side of

life to him, and give him a notion of its pleasures; whither should I conduct him? to a ball, to an opera, to court? He might justly think that I was only showing him a diversity of distress and sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

The facts noted by Demea and Philo are depressing, but they seem to be undeniable. They also raise questions. How should we think of evil if it is true that God exists? It has been claimed that the universe is governed by an almighty and good creator. Why, then, is there any evil or badness of any kind and to any degree? Following the discussion noted above, Philo concludes ‘Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] 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?’<sup>2</sup> With these lines, Philo is raising what is often referred to as ‘the philosophical or theological problem of evil’, which basically amounts to the question, ‘How, if at all, can belief in the reality of evil be squared with belief in the reality of God?’. Yet, people who believe in God largely acknowledge the reality of evil while also trying to see the place (or any place) for evil in a world governed by God. For them, the question is ‘What role does evil play in God’s world?’. In this special issue of *New Blackfriars*, you will find authors reflecting in several ways on evil and its relation to belief in God.<sup>3</sup>

John Cottingham considers how we should understand what ‘the problem of evil’ is supposed to be and what might possibly be a solution to it. Should we suppose that the problem boils down to the question ‘Can God be morally excused or convicted for allowing evil?’? Should we think that we can settle this question by showing how, given evil, God is morally culpable or morally justifiable?

Drawing on observations of Descartes, Malebranche, and Aquinas, Cottingham suggests that this approach to the topic of God and evil seems to be misleadingly anthropomorphic and does not recognize the difference there must be between the Creator of the universe and the morally accountable persons in it. On the other hand, Cottingham also recognizes that belief in God’s goodness is central to theism. ‘No matter how God is conceived’, he remarks, ‘the goodness of God, indeed the supreme goodness and perfection of God, is fundamental’ while ‘it seems that there is much that is not good’.

So, asks Cottingham, ‘Is the nature of the created world as we find it compatible with its being the creation of a perfectly good God?’. Cottingham agrees that ‘our world may contain much goodness, yet there is much that is amiss: it is very, very far from perfect’. He argues, however, that

it is logically impossible for a perfect being to create something other than itself that is wholly perfect ... something that was wholly and completely perfect would just be identical with God. 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.

<sup>1</sup>David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), pp. 153–55.

<sup>2</sup>*Dialogues*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>The articles in the present issue appear following the alphabetical order of their authors’ surnames.

But why is there so *much* imperfection in the world? In response to this question, Cottingham suggests that ‘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’. He adds that noting the necessary imperfection of a created world may at least ‘point to a way’ of showing how suffering as it has occurred, arising as it does ‘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’. Is it, however, compatible with the idea of a *loving* creator? Cottingham modestly concludes: ‘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’.

While Cottingham’s focus is what might be called the philosophy of God and evil, Ingrid Faro’s contribution to the present issue is that of a biblical exegete. Drawing on her book *Evil in Genesis: A Contextual Analysis of Hebrew Lexemes for Evil in the Book of Genesis* (Lexham Press, 2021), Faro traces the occurrence throughout Genesis of words signifying evil: *ra* as an adjective, *raa* as a verb, and *raah* as a noun.

Faro draws four conclusions from her study: (1) lexically, the Hebrew root word evil (*ra*) is a hypernym, a major category word with a broad range of meaning referring to anything perceived as bad: from unpleasant, ugly, displeasing, deficient, to harmful, sinful or wicked (not simply morally sinister as commonly depicted), with the chief antonym being good (*tov*); (2) exegetically, good and evil play a role in developing the plot conflict in Genesis through linguistic and literary devices; (3) conceptually, evil is closely related to the concepts of death and cursing, in direct opposition to good, life, and blessing; (4) theologically, evil is anything that departs from God and his good ways, as established in creation and in covenant.

In Genesis, notes Faro, evil is not a privation or something preexisting creation.

Good is a quality of God demonstrated in all he thinks, intends, and does. Evil is a consequence of departing from God and his ways.... Evil is assumed to be part of life. Therefore, the questions addressed are not why there is evil or why evil happens but rather how the person responded. God’s ability to fulfill his promise to humanity in Genesis 3:15 ... is held secure despite human failings ... God interacts with humans to accomplish his will, knowing all have mixed motives and intentions. Yet, in Genesis, God demonstrates that he can bring about his good purposes even through the evil intentions of those acting contrary to his ways through those who turn to him and remain faithful.

With Gavin Kerr’s essay, the center of attention moves to Aquinas’s account of divine providence, which rests on the view that God is the primary cause of all things. Kerr explains how this account employs an understanding of God’s causality that distinguishes between two kinds of causal series: *per se* and *per accidens*. For Aquinas, Kerr notes, ‘unless there is a primary final cause which is not “in order for” anything further but for which all things are in order, there would be no finality and hence no primary efficient causality and hence no causality’.

On this account, says Kerr, ‘all finality is for the sake of something good, in which case the primary final cause will be *per se* good. Hence the primary final cause is the

good itself, and it is that “for the sake of which” all primary efficient causality is exercised’. Kerr also notes that, on this account,

All created things are real created things with their own actuality, not identical to that of any other created thing and not identical to God’s actuality. Hence, whilst created things are secondary and participate in God’s primary causality, they nevertheless specify that actuality given the kinds of things that they are, and so in turn can exercise their own causality given that they are such things.

Kerr also indicates how, on this account,

Any causal actuality involved in creation, whether efficient or final, is derived from God’s creative causality through which He conveys actuality to creation. As both primary and final cause, God exercises His creative causality with respect to the good that He is. Accordingly, He does not act as creative cause except by considering the good of creatures.

This conclusion, Kerr explains, is at the heart of Aquinas’s account of divine providence. According to Aquinas, says Kerr, ‘God orders all of creation to the good, and so individual causal processes in which creatures engage are not free range and independent of God’s providential ordering; insofar as creatures have actuality, they themselves are ordered to the good to which all created actuality is ordered’.

Kerr draws his essay to a close by explaining how this conclusion of Aquinas leads him to see biblical texts and their authors as secondary causes by which God provides creatures with divine revelation. For Aquinas, Kerr observes,

We know that God orders all of creation to the good, so in His providence God can reveal certain realities in scripture that the human writers may not themselves have understood. When it comes to the reality of sin, God reveals that He is attentively aware of the fallen human condition, that He intends to do something about it, and that He has done something about it.

The notion of God working to restore people from a fallen state of estrangement from God to union with God is also very much present in Paul Moser’s essay. Drawing heavily on St Paul, especially on the letter to the Romans, Moser explains how we can develop an account that highlights how God ‘interacts in righteousness with people as their God of promise and voucher in the midst of suffering, sin, and evil’.

With respect to this activity of God, Moser lays stress on resurrection, both ‘bodily’ and ‘spiritually’. ‘Volitional cooperation with God in righteous love’ he says, ‘brings internal resurrection-life, owing to sharing in the enduring moral character of God in the risen Christ.... The power of divine righteousness in God’s grace, with human cooperation, undermines the power of unrighteousness in sin’. There is, says Moser, a ‘knowing of the Lord’, which is ‘not speculative or merely theoretical’. It is ‘a knowledge responsive to, and interactive with, God’s distinctive righteousness expressed in human experience. God self-manifests first, with righteousness to humans, and then they are expected to respond cooperatively, with a kind of reciprocity in righteousness towards God’. Moser therefore argues,

Forsaking (rejecting) the fruit of the Spirit is forsaking (rejecting) God even if we do not know this, because it is forsaking God's unique moral character. Welcoming (appreciating) the fruit of the Spirit is welcoming (appreciating) God even if we do not know this.... The remaining question for us is whether we cooperatively value and fear, with due reverence, God's perfect moral character, even given unexplained evil.

At least this much we can say, thinks Moser, even though he does not take the thesis to amount to a 'full theodicy', even though we have 'gaps in explaining suffering, sin, and evil'.

The quest for theodicy continues to play a role in the writings of many philosophers, some of whom think that there is positive reason for supposing that evil somehow shows that God probably or certainly does not exist. One much discussed issue concerns what is sometimes called 'the problem of divine hiddenness', on which James Dominic Rooney comments critically and in detail in his article. He challenges a line of thought which goes roughly as follows: (1) If God exists, God would desire a personal relationship with all people. (2) However, for no fault of their own, and with no obvious resistance to God, some people reasonably do not believe that God exists. (3) But, this would not be the case if a perfectly loving God exists. (4) So, the evidence is against the truth of 'God exists'.

Rooney's response to this reasoning is to deny that 'there is at least one such non-resistant non-believer who is capable of relationship with God'. Rooney appeals to the notion of original sin so as to suggest that there is an explanation for there being people who, for no fault of their own, and with no obvious resistance to God, do not believe that God exists. This explanation, thinks Rooney, is compatible with belief in God being perfectly loving. He suggests that 'if the possibility of original sin-type scenarios is compatible with God's perfect love, then the phenomenon of apparently nonresistant nonbelievers would push us toward considering the possibility that humans have lost those capacities for relationship with God by a Fall-like event in the past'. In Rooney's view: 'The situation in which there can be non-resistant non-believers can be merited or deserved by human resistance to God' and

this situation results in an incapacity to form relationship with God on the basis of intuitive awareness of His openness to relationship with them.... We live in a tragic situation where God's openness to relationship is not intuitively obvious or apparent, and this was due to episodes of human resistance to God in the past.

Rooney takes this suggestion, which he develops and defends in considerable detail, to cohere with ideas to be found in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo.

In his contribution to the present issue, Louis Roy homes in not on original sin but on what he calls 'the supreme importance of the demonic *in human experience*'. By 'the demonic', Roy is not referring to Satan, or a cohort of evil spirits. He is talking about 'evil of gigantic proportions', which requires 'a far-reaching system'.

In ways reminiscent of Cleanthes and Philo in the *Dialogues* of Hume, Roy draws attention to the malevolence and monstrous actions of which people seem to be capable – evil on a grand scale, evil that has been practiced communally as well as by individuals, evil that has had massive impacts in societies, evil that can spread like

an infection, evil that is cross-cultural, evil that has existed on a large scale and also among small groups, ‘authorized’ evils and evils promoted and supported by ignorance.

All of this evil falls under what Roy understands by ‘the demonic’. In his article, he attempts briefly to describe it, to consider its effects. He also finds grounds for hope in the face of it. He writes:

One of the deleterious factors in the perpetration of evil is the fact that, in their state of confusion, human beings are unable to question their evil forms of behaving.... Yet evil forces are not totally compelling. Against them, a resolute trust in the forces of goodness are not ineffective if they are accompanied by an intelligent realism, an open-eyed practicality and a courageous determination regarding what can and must be attempted. Amidst the victory of evil – either patent or ignored by most people – a mediocre faith will not suffice. An anemic faith or a loss of faith, which sadly characterizes our twenty-first-century world, brings about, in certain quarters, a severe diminution of collective meaning, a forgoing of community and despair in the presence of evil, especially in difficult circumstances such as the worldwide pandemic that we experienced in 2020–22 and that recurred in 2023–2024.... Fortunately it happens, more often than we are perhaps capable of imagining, that what Heschel calls the ‘power of love’, namely the structures of grace, created by both God and human agents, withstand the structures of sin, which embody the demonic. At time’s end, that is, at the Last Judgment, earthly solidarity in goodness will prove to have been stronger than the powers of evil. God and human agents, withstand the structures of sin.

Roy’s essay and all of the others noted above are favorable to belief in God’s existence. The final essay by James Sterba is unfavorable. In ‘God and Purported Logical Arguments from Evil and Suffering’, Sterba defends the claim that certain evils definitively rule out the truth of ‘God exists’. ‘The all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism’, he argues, ‘is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world’. This claim is the main conclusion of Sterba’s book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Palgrave, 2019), to which his article in the present issue serves as a helpful introduction.

The core of Sterba’s argument lies in three principles, which he takes to be morally necessary: (1) prevent horrendous evil consequences when one can easily do so without violating anyone’s rights and no other goods are at stake; (2) don’t secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means; (3) do not permit especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on would-be victims when a greater good would result from preventing them. Sterba’s view is that, having created people, God would be morally obliged to act on these principles but has clearly not done so.

Sterba takes the principles just noted to be ‘exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle never to do evil that good may come of it’, and he defends his overall conclusion with great clarity and with much reference to lines of thought which conflict with it. Sterba also notes that his position on God and evil has been

discussed by a number of philosophers, to whom he draws attention in his article. He also draws attention to ways in which he takes his position to mark a change in the focus of discussions of the problem of evil among contemporary philosophers of religion.

God, suffering, sin, and evil are topics of enormous theological and philosophical importance. That is why they continue to be discussed. I hope that readers will find the contents of this issue of *New Blackfriars* to be a helpful contribution to the debate.