

Evil as evidence against the existence of God

NICK TRAKAKIS

Nick Trakakis is in the final stages of a PhD in Philosophy at Monash University, where he is working on a dissertation on the problem of evil, entitled 'The God Beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Arguments from Evil'.

Deception of American Jewry, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1973, p199

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Atheist Society (Victoria) on 9 November 2004.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Elie Wiesel, trans Stella Rodway, *Night*, Penguin, London, 1981, p45

With haunting words such as these, Elie Wiesel reflects on a childhood spent in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, describing in particular the 'flames' that consumed not only his parents, his younger sister and thousands of others, but also his faith in a loving God. For Wiesel, and many like him, God died at Auschwitz. As Eugene Borowitz explains:

The argument against God seemed irrefutable. Any God who could permit the Holocaust, who could remain silent during it, who could 'hide His face' while it dragged on, was not worth believing in. There might well be a limit to how much we could understand about Him, but Auschwitz demanded an unreasonable suspension of understanding. In the face of such great evil, God, the good and the powerful, was too inexplicable. So men said, 'God is dead.'

Eugene Borowitz, *The Mask Jews Wear: The Self-*

But despite the significance and tragic dimensions of the Holocaust, it is merely one of countless horrific evils that have littered our world. History, as Hegel reminds us, is 'the slaughter-bench at which the happi-

ness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed' (Hegel, trans Robert S Hartman, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, The Bobbs-Merrill Co, Indianapolis, 1953, p27). However, one does not need to delve too far back into the past to discern the depth and scope of evil. One needs only to consult the morning newspapers to find out what horrors have been accomplished or befallen us overnight: a suicide bomber kills several people and injures many more in west Jerusalem; a Washington mother, having dressed and fed her three children, smokes some crack cocaine and then strangles two of her children to death with a clothesline, and attempts without success to do the same to her third child; a volcano eruption in Congo leaves 450,000 people homeless; two Kenyan teenagers are charged with murdering sixty-seven of their schoolmates by setting their dormitory on fire. The list could go on and on ad nauseam, literally. In the face of such perplexing evil, how could one accept or retain the belief that the world was created and is governed by an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good God? This, very roughly, is the problem of evil, and it is undoubtedly one of the greatest stumbling blocks faced by those who wish to commend or accept belief in God.

In this short essay, I will examine some responses that have been made to the problem of evil. But before I delve into these responses, it might be helpful to provide some background material to the problem of evil. In particular, it may help to spell

out what exactly is meant by 'God' and what is meant by 'evil'.

The traditional theistic conception of God

The conception of God that is usually presupposed in philosophical discussions on the problem of evil is what's called *the traditional theistic conception of God*. According to this conception of God, there exists just one God, and this God is a person or person-like. The operative notion, however, behind this form of monotheism is that God is *perfect*, where to be perfect is to be *the greatest being possible* or, to borrow Anselm's well-known phrase, *the being than which none greater can be conceived*. Furthermore, it is assumed that God, as a perfect being, must possess the following perfections or great-making qualities:

1. *Omnipotence*: This refers to God's ability to bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible in itself as well as logically consistent with his other essential attributes.
2. *Omniscience*: God is omniscient in that he knows all truths or knows all that is logically possible to know.
3. *Perfect goodness*: God is the source of moral norms or always acts in complete accordance with moral norms.
4. *Aseity*: God has aseity (literally, being from oneself, *a se esse*) — that is to say, he is self-existent or ontologically independent, for he does not depend either for his existence or for his characteristics on anything outside himself.
5. *Incorporeality*: God has no body; he is a non-physical spirit but is capable of affecting physical things.
6. *Eternity*: Traditionally, God is thought to be eternal in an atemporal sense — i.e. God is timeless or exists outside of time (a view upheld by Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas). On an alternative view, God's eternity is held to be temporal in nature, so that God is everlasting or exists in time, having infinite temporal duration in both of the two temporal directions (i.e. he is beginningless and endless).
7. *Omnipresence*: God is wholly present in all space and time. This is often interpreted metaphorically to mean that God can bring about an event immediately at any place and time, and knows what is happening at every place and time in the same immediate manner.
8. *Perfectly free*: God is absolutely free either in the sense that nothing outside him can determine him to perform a particular action, or in the sense that it is always within his power not to do what he does.

9. *Alone worthy of worship and unconditional commitment*: God, being the greatest being possible, is the only being fit to be worshipped and the only being to whom one may commit one's life without reservation.

The God of traditional theism is also typically accorded a further attribute, one that he is thought to possess only contingently:

10. *Creator and sustainer of the world*: God brought the (physical and non-physical) world into existence, and also keeps the world and every object within it in existence.

What is evil?

I now turn to the subject of evil. When referring to 'evil', I will be using this word in a slightly technical sense, which differs to some degree from its ordinary or everyday meaning. According to this technical definition of 'evil', anything whatsoever that is negative or destructive in life will be deemed an 'evil'. Therefore, the term 'evil' will cover a very wide range of events or states of affairs, including the following:

- Some physical or psychological harm being done to the well-being of a sentient creature;
- The unjust treatment of some sentient creature;
- Cases of premature death;
- Anything that prevents an individual from leading a fulfilling and virtuous life; and
- A person doing that which is morally wrong.

In ordinary usage, the word 'evil' is usually restricted to horrible acts of immorality or injustice. Acts of terrorism or rape, for example, are often labelled 'evil'. However, the standard practice in philosophical discussions on the problem of evil is to give the word 'evil' a much wider extension so that it covers everything from minor pains (such as a fleeting toothache) to humanitarian disasters (such as cases of genocide). And it is this very broad sense of evil that I will be employing here.

Some different types of evil

At least two important classes of evil need to be distinguished:

Moral evil

This is evil that results from the misuse of free will on the part of some moral agent in such a way that the agent thereby becomes morally blameworthy for the resultant evil. Here are some examples of moral evil:

The murder of an infant in front of its mother

Imagine: a mother stands trembling with an infant in her arms, around her the Turks who have

entered [reference to Turkish occupation of Bulgaria, 1875-1876]. They contrive a merry little act: they fondle the infant, laugh in order to amuse it, they succeed, the infant laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol at it, four inches from its face. The baby boy laughs joyfully, stretches out his little hands to grab the pistol, and suddenly the artist pulls the trigger right in his face and smashes his little head to smithereens.

Dostoevski, trans David McDuff, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Penguin, London, 1993, book v, ch4, p274

The Holocaust of 1939-1945

The Nazis' vast operation in genocide during World War II, now remembered as the Holocaust, involved the systematic murder of approximately six million Jewish civilians as part of a deliberate policy to eradicate all traces of Jewish life and culture. Although Jews were the Nazis' primary victims, millions of others belonging to various groups — such as the gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists, homosexuals, and the handicapped — were also murdered or died of neglect or maltreatment. Some of the particularly chilling features of the Holocaust included:

- *The concentration camps*: In camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka, millions of people were killed by being worked to death, starved to death, beaten to death, shot, or gassed. In many of these camps, sadistic medical experiments were performed, as exemplified by Josef Mengele's 'research' on twins and dwarfs.
- *The 'murder squads' (Einsatzgruppen)*: These squads, made up of German soldiers who were hand-picked for their strong ideological motivation and reliability, would move into captured towns and gather together all the Jews, including women and children. A mass grave was then dug. The Jews handed over any valuables to the commander of the squad, removed their clothing, and assembled on the edge of the grave. They were then shot and their bodies would fall into the grave. More than one million Jews suffered this terrible fate.
- *SS officer Christian Wirth*: Also known as 'Christian the Savage' by his subordinates, Wirth began his career in the German police force, where he became infamous for his brutal interrogation

methods. He later joined the Nazi Party and played a leading role in its 'euthanasia' program, which took the lives of countless disabled and mentally ill people. His expertise in mass murder, particularly via gassing, became a major factor in his subsequent appointment as inspector of the Operation Reinhard death camps in Poland — viz. Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka —

where he introduced new gassing techniques and oversaw the murders of more than 1.5 million Jews. During his time in Poland he was also in charge of a 'Clothing Works' camp at Lublin, where starving Jews were worked to death sorting the clothes of those already killed. The testimony of a survivor of this camp, as quoted by Daniel Goldhagen, epitomises Wirth's brutality:

I have personally seen that this SS commander led a Jewish boy, who was about ten years old, whom he kept and whom he fed

chocolate and other goodies, to kill with a machine gun here and there two or three Jews at a time. I myself stood about ten metres away when this boy carried out such shootings. The SS commander, who rode a white horse and who had given a horse to the boy, joined in the shooting. These two human beings together killed — in my presence — among the several occasions some fifty to sixty Jews. Among the victims were also women.

Goldhagen goes on to add that:

...this boy was furnished with appropriate accoutrements for his transformation into a slayer of his people. The Germans clothed him in a specially tailored, miniature SS uniform, which he wore when spraying bullets from his lordly perch on his pony. And, if the disclosures of the Clothing Works' denizens are correct, it was not just faceless Jews he killed: he is said to have shot and killed his own mother.

Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Abacus, London, 1997, p309

Natural evil

In contrast to moral evil, natural evil is evil that results from the operation of natural processes in such a way that no human being can be held morally account-



able for the resultant evil. Here are some examples of natural evil:

The brilliant pianist

A pianist at the prime of a brilliant musical career detects, while practising at the keyboard, a trembling of his fingers. The condition of his fingers gradually worsens, rendering him unable to play his beloved instrument, and those close to him notice him becoming increasingly restless, irritable, and aggressive. At the insistence of friends and family, he seeks medical advice and is eventually diagnosed with Huntington's Chorea. He is informed that he has only fifteen years to live, during which time he will progressively deteriorate physically as well as mentally. Half of his four children, he is also told, are to expect exactly the same end.

The rise and fall of Brian Sternberg

By nineteen years of age, Brian Sternberg had established himself as the number one pole vaulter in the world. He was a superb athlete, making sports headlines nearly every week, and often setting and then breaking new world records. Three weeks after his last world record, however, everything changed. While practising on the trampoline, in preparation for a tour to the Soviet Union, he lost his balance in midair and landed awkwardly on his head. Brian sustained a severe spinal injury, and is now paralysed and unable to ever walk again, with little bodily movement remaining in his control. His body is gradually shrinking due to muscle atrophy, and he is almost completely dependent on other people, who must help him to bathe, eat, and drink. The contrast between the athletic Brian and the crippled shell of a person to which he has been reduced is forcefully expressed by Philip Yancey, who visited Brian some years after the accident:

A photo on the wall caught my eye. It showed Brian breaking his last world record at Compton, California. He was sailing against the sky, almost horizontally, with shoulders thrust back and arms outstretched, his hips barely clearing the bar. Every muscle in his body was rippling and tense. The action was frozen by electronic flash, and in a way it's been frozen ever since.

I felt a wash of sorrow — the body of the person I had met and held a conversation with was a pitiful shell of this superb body... I couldn't get the two images out of my mind as I stepped out of the warmth into a chilly Seattle wind. The Brian of the photo. And Brian today — a twisted, helpless body on the bed where it will lie tomorrow, the next day... who knows how long?

Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990, p126

Note that Brian Sternberg's case is one of natural evil because Brian's suffering was not intentionally caused, nor does it seem to have resulted from any culpable negligence on Brian's part. Moral evil, however, is always brought about either intentionally and willfully, or by way of some culpable negligence. It therefore seems best to categorise the suffering occasioned by Brian's accident as a natural evil.

The problem of evil

We come now to the problem of evil, which may be expressed in the following way:

How could a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving allow there to be moral evils and natural evils such as those I have just outlined? Surely anyone who was as powerful, knowledgeable, and loving as God is thought to be would, at the very least, prevent moral evils such as the Holocaust and natural evils such as Huntington's Chorea. The existence of these and numerous other evils therefore shows that it is highly unlikely, if not downright impossible, that our world was created and is governed by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God.

The idea here, expressed a bit more formally, may be stated as an argument of the following sort:

1. Our world contains numerous moral evils and natural evils which are, most likely, gratuitous or pointless.
2. But if there were a God there wouldn't be any gratuitous or pointless evil.
3. Therefore, it is likely that there is no God.

Is this a compelling argument? How you answer this question will depend, in large part, on what you think of the argument's first premise, which states that there are many evils that are pointless in the sense that they are not necessary for any greater good. But is this premise true?

Theodicy: 'justifying the ways of God to men'

Some theistic philosophers have attempted to rebut this premise by developing a *theodicy*. A theodicy, to borrow John Milton's celebrated words, is the attempt to 'justify the ways of God to men'. In other words, a theodicy aims to vindicate the justice or goodness of God in the face of the evil found in the world, by offering a reasonable or plausible explanation as to why God allows evil to abound in his creation. Those who offer a theodicy are therefore claiming not only that each evil serves some greater good, but that we know or have some rough idea as

to what these greater goods are. Of course, if this claim is true then the first premise of the above argument is false.

Can we, then, develop a theodicy that would provide a plausible explanation as to why God permits the various evils found in our world? To answer this question, I will consider a theodicy that is often used by theists to justify God's permission of evil. This theodicy revolves around three key ideas: soul-making, free will, and heavenly bliss.

Soul-making

In the spirit of John Hick's 1966 classic, *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper and Rowe, New York), it may be postulated that the divine intention in relation to humankind is to bring forth perfect, finite, personal beings by means of a 'vale of soul-making'. Through this soul-making process, humans can transcend their natural self-centredness by freely developing the most desirable qualities of moral character and entering into a personal relationship with their maker. Any world, however, that makes possible such personal growth cannot be a hedonistic paradise in which inhabitants experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. Rather, an environment that is able to produce the finest characteristics of human personality — particularly the capacity to love — must be one in which there are obstacles to be overcome, tasks to be performed, goals to be achieved, setbacks to be endured, problems to be solved, and dangers to be met. A soul-making environment must, in other words, share a good deal in common with our world, for only a world containing great dangers and risks, as well as the genuine possibility of failure and tragedy, can provide opportunities for the development of virtue and character.

Free will

The appeal to human freedom, in one guise or another, constitutes an enduring theme in the history of theodicy. Typically, the kind of freedom that is invoked by the theodicy is the *libertarian* sort, according to which I am free with respect to a particular action at time *t* only if the action is not determined by all that happened or was obtained before *t* and all the causal laws there are in such a way that the conjunction of the two (the past and the laws) logically entails that I perform the action in question. My mowing the lawn, for instance, constitutes a voluntary action only if, the state of the universe (including my beliefs and desires) and laws of nature being just as they were immediately preceding my decision to mow the lawn, I could have chosen or acted otherwise than I in fact did. In this sense, the acts I perform freely are genuinely 'up to me' — they are not determined by anything external to my will,

whether these be causal laws or even God. And so it is not open to God to cause or determine just what actions I will perform, for if he does so those actions could not be free. Freedom and determinism are incompatible.

The theodicy, however, is not so much interested in libertarian freedom as in libertarian freedom of the *morally relevant* kind, where this consists of the freedom to choose between good and evil courses of action. The theodicy's freedom, moreover, is intended to be morally *significant*, not only providing one with the capacity to bring about good and evil, but also making possible a range of actions that vary enormously in moral worth, from great and noble deeds to horrific evils.

Armed, therefore, with such a conception of freedom, the theist may proceed to explain the existence of moral evil as a consequence of the misuse of our free will. This, however, means that responsibility for the existence of moral evil lies with us, not with God. Of course, God is responsible for creating the conditions under which moral evil could come into existence. But it was not inevitable that human beings, if placed in those conditions, would go wrong. It was not necessary, in other words, that humans would misuse their free will, although this always was a possibility and hence a risk inherent in God's creation of free creatures. The free will theodicy adds, however, that the value of free will is so great as to outweigh the risk that it may be misused in various ways.

Heavenly bliss

Theodicy sometimes draw on the notion of a heavenly afterlife to show that evil, particularly horrendous evil, only finds its ultimate justification or redemption in the life to come. Accounts of heaven, even within the Christian tradition, vary widely. But one common feature in these accounts that is relevant to the theodicy's task is *the experience of complete felicity for eternity brought about by intimate and loving communion with God*.

According to some theists, this experience of 'face-to-face' intimacy with God vindicates God's justice and love toward his creatures. For such an experience outweighs any evil, even evil of the horrendous variety, that someone may suffer, thus ensuring a balance of good over evil in the sufferer's life that is overwhelmingly favourable. An everlasting, post-mortem beatific vision of God would therefore provide anyone who experienced it with good reason for taking their life to be a great good, thereby removing any grounds of complaint against God.

The question, now, is: Can this theodicy adequately explain why God permits evil? Well, recall the two instances of moral evil I mentioned earlier: the murder

of an infant in front of its mother (as recounted by Dostoevski), and the case of the Holocaust. The theodicy I have just outlined may be used to justify God's permission of these moral evils in the following way:

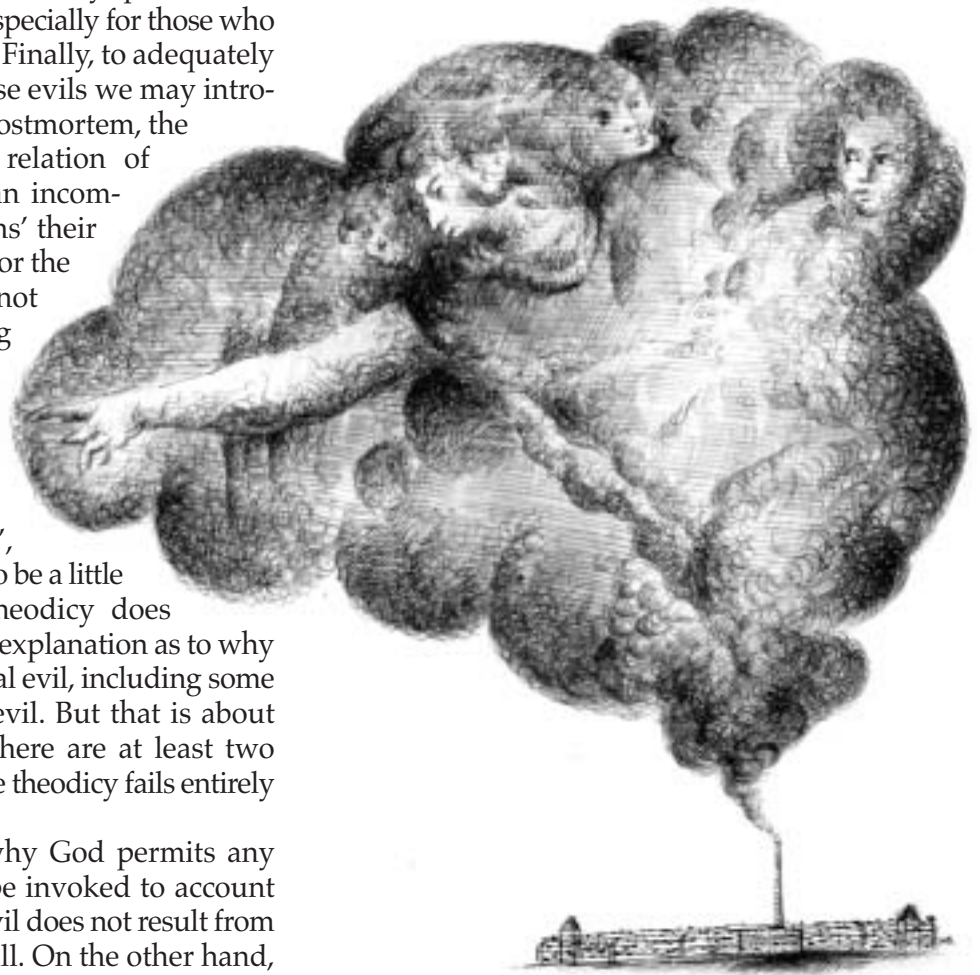
Notice, first, that these two evils clearly involve a serious misuse of free will on behalf of the perpetrators. We could, therefore, begin by postulating God's endowment of humans with morally significant free will as the first good that is served by these evils. That is to say, God could not prevent the murder of the infant and the terrible suffering and death endured by the millions of Holocaust victims while at the same time creating us with morally significant freedom — the freedom to do both great evil and great good. In addition, these evils may provide an opportunity for soul-making, especially for those who cause or witness the suffering. Finally, to adequately compensate the victims of these evils we may introduce the doctrine of heaven. Postmortem, the victims are ushered into a relation of beatific intimacy with God, an incommensurable good that 'redeems' their past participation in horrors. For the beatific vision in the afterlife not only restores value and meaning to the victim's life, but also provides him or her with the opportunity to endorse their life (taken as a whole) as worthwhile.

I think this theodicy 'works', but only up to a certain point. To be a little more precise, I think this theodicy does manage to provide a plausible explanation as to why God permits *some* cases of moral evil, including some very horrible cases of moral evil. But that is about all that this theodicy does. There are at least two important classes of evil that the theodicy fails entirely to explain.

Firstly, it fails to explain why God permits any *natural evil*. Free will cannot be invoked to account for natural evil, since natural evil does not result from the misuse of anyone's free will. On the other hand, the idea of soul-making may be of some help, since natural evil often provides opportunities for moral and spiritual growth. But what this overlooks is the fact that we have already agreed that if a world is to be a 'vale of soul-making' it must include a certain level of moral evil. And if there is moral evil in the world there is no need for natural evil in addition to moral evil for the purposes of soul-making. Finally, the doctrine of a heavenly afterlife is also of little help here, for it makes no sense to say that God allows people to suffer from, say, leukaemia or Huntington's *so that* they can go to heaven. In other words, a

heavenly afterlife may be offered as a compensation to victims of evil, but it cannot be the reason why they are allowed to be victimised in the first place.

But the theodicy I sketched earlier not only fails to explain why there is any natural evil; it also fails to explain why God has created *people who lead utterly miserable and immoral lives and who (in virtue of their immorality) have no chance of going to heaven*. Obviously, the doctrine of heaven is irrelevant in this case, since the individuals in question have chosen to reject God and heaven. In addition, no appeal can be made to the idea of 'soul-making', since the 'souls' or characters of these individuals do not grow or mature, but are being destroyed. And, finally, even if the indi-



viduals in question have freely chosen their way of life, and so are fully responsible for their miserable state of existence, this in no way justifies God in allowing such people to exist. For the lives of these people are in an important sense 'not worth living', and so it would have been better had they never been born. There is no reason, then, for God to put them on earth, especially since he knew beforehand what kind of life they would have.

In short, it seems that, at least with respect to some cases of evil, we simply cannot find any good reason

why God would allow such evils to occur. At this point, the theist is likely to say that God may very well have good reasons for permitting these evils, but his reasons are too complicated for us to understand. What are we to say about this kind of response to the problem of evil?

The problem of divine hiddenness

Those who offer this kind of response usually make the following assumption:

Even if God did have good reasons for permitting evil, it is highly unlikely that we would discern or understand his reasons.

The idea here is that there is a great gulf between our limited cognitive abilities and the infinite wisdom of God, and this great gulf prevents us (at least in many cases) from discerning God's reasons for permitting evil. And so even if God did have good reasons for permitting evil, we should not expect to be the first to know what his reasons are. To make this view plausible, theists sometimes draw the following analogy between God and human parents:

The gap between the vision and wisdom of God and the cognitive capacities of human beings may be compared to the gap between the cognitive abilities of a parent and his or her one-month-old infant. But if this is the case, then even if there were greater goods connected in the requisite way to the instances of suffering we observe in the world, that we should discern most of these goods is just as likely as that a one-month-old infant should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer — that is to say, it is not likely at all. And so, even if some evils appear to us to be pointless, this does not mean that they are in fact pointless. For even if the evils did have a point, we would not be able to discern it. In short, given that God is all-knowing and given our severe cognitive limitations, our failure to find God's reasons for permitting evil is exactly what we should expect.

I have some sympathy with this line of thought. For it would be strange, to the say the least, if we could fully understand God's reasons for permitting each and every evil we see in the world — it would be like a primary school student understanding Einstein's reasons for putting forward the special theory of relativity. However, if we accept this response to the problem of evil we will be led to the far greater problem of divine hiddenness.

Two levels of divine hiddenness may be distinguished:

- *Level one:* God's reasons for permitting evil are hidden from us.
- *Level two:* God hides from us the fact that he has a reason for permitting evil and/or the fact that he exists or loves us and cares about us.

‘It would be strange, to the say the least, if we could fully understand God’s reasons for permitting each and every evil we see in the world.’

Now, I have granted that, at least with respect to some instances of evil, we would expect there to be divine hiddenness on level one. But if there is level-one divine hiddenness, would you also expect there to be divine hiddenness on level two? Surely, you wouldn't. To see this, consider again the parent analogy I mentioned earlier, which is intended to highlight our cognitive limits in understanding God's reasons for permitting evil:

We know that when a good, loving parent permits his or her child to suffer severely for the sake of some outweighing good the child *cannot comprehend*. The

loving parent then makes every effort to be consciously present to the child during his period of suffering, giving special assurances of his/her love, concern, and care. So, on the basis of this analogy with a good parent, we should infer that it is likely that God, too, will almost always be consciously present to humans, if not other animals, when he permits them to suffer for goods they cannot comprehend, giving special assurances of his love for them.

Another reason why we would expect there to be no divine hiddenness on level two, if there already is divine hiddenness on level one, is based on the following analogy between divine love and human love:

Human love at its best clearly involves reciprocity and mutuality. If I love you and so seek your well-being, I wish to make available to you all the resources at my disposal for the overcoming of difficulties in your life. But then I must also make it possible for you to draw on me *personally* — to let you benefit from my listening to your problems, from my encouragement, from my spending time together with you, and so on. In other words, I wish to make available to you the resources of an intimate personal relationship with me.

Now, our understanding of divine love may be modelled on the nature of human love at its best. And so if God is a perfectly loving being, he would — like a human lover — desire personal relationships with

his beloveds (i.e. his creatures) both for their own sake and for the benefits such a relationship would make available to the beloveds. Clearly, the benefits of a personal relationship with God are many and varied. It is often said, for example, that a relationship with a perfectly loving God would provide us with a sense of peace, joy, and security, and would also offer us the resources for dealing with the moral weakness that is endemic to humanity. But a further benefit is that we would gain the experience of God's loving presence, so that we would not be inclined to doubt his existence or love for us. This, in turn, would provide us with the assurance that, despite all the horrendous evil we face, there is a greater purpose served by such evil, even if we do not know what that purpose is. This knowledge would be enormously comforting to many people, enabling them to better bear their suffering and perhaps even preventing them from losing their faith. And so we would expect a loving God, like a loving parent or partner, to pursue a personal relationship with us, to seek us out and draw near to us — an expectation that is magnified when we take into account that it is God who permits our suffering, and magnified further when we do not understand why he allows this suffering to befall us.

The point behind these analogies is that if there is level-one divine hiddenness, there would not be divine hiddenness on level two. The problem, however, is that there clearly is divine hiddenness on level two. For it is undeniable that countless numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of God's presence or any special assurances of his love and comfort. And so if theists attempt to solve the problem of evil by appealing to our cognitive limitations and the inscrutability of God's purposes, they will find themselves faced with the even more troublesome problem of divine hiddenness.

Two further responses to the problem of evil

By way of conclusion, I will briefly consider two further responses that can be made to the problem of evil.

Firstly, a theist may say that the problem of evil — as I have formulated it — only shows that one particular version of theism, rather than every version

of theism, must be rejected. A process theist, for example, may agree that the existence of evil shows that there is no omnipotent being, but would add that God, properly understood, is not omnipotent, or that God's power is not as unlimited as is usually thought. An even more radical approach would be to posit a 'dark side' in God and thus deny that God is perfectly good. Theists who adopt this approach (e.g. John Roth, Bishop Spong) would also have no qualms about rejecting traditional theism in the face of evil.

The major problem with this strategy is that God, on these alternative conceptions of theism, is no longer a being worthy of worship and unconditional commitment. For example, would someone who is not perfectly good and hence capable of evil be



worthy of worship? Similarly, why place complete trust in a God who is not all-powerful and hence not in full control of the world?

A second possible response to the problem of evil is to agree that evil does provide some evidence against theism, but to then go on to argue that there is independent evidence in support of theism which outweighs the evidence against theism. Such a response is entirely legitimate, but only if the theist can provide strong evidence in support of the existence of God. My own view is that such evidence in support of the existence of God is available, but it is not easy to find and to defend from criticism. So, this kind of response to the problem of evil, although entirely effective, leaves a bitter taste in one's mouth. For one is left wondering why a loving God would not provide us with clear and unambiguous evidence that he exists.

Iran: keeping up 'public morality'

The short life and cruel death of Atefeh Rajabi

This article first appeared in the *Rationalist International Bulletin* #131, on 9 September 2004.

When she was executed on 15 August 2004, Atefeh Rajabi was only sixteen years old. She was hanged from a crane in the main square of the small town of Neka in the Mazandaran province and kept dangling high above the shocked and weeping crowd for forty-five minutes. Her crime was 'an act incompatible with chastity', says the judgement of the local court, which had been confirmed by the Supreme Court. It is claimed that she had sexual contact with an older man. Most likely she was raped, but the court was not interested in these details. Atefeh, who had no access to a lawyer, tried to defend herself, but that made things worse for her. She 'undressed in court' (removed her headscarf) and she had a 'sharp tongue', said the judge, one Haji Razaie, and sentenced her to death. He got so agitated that he put personally the noose around the young girl's neck. When the case went to the Supreme Court, he travelled to Tehran to convince the Supreme Court judges to uphold his decision, it is heard. They did so. Iran's judiciary is ruled by Islamic fundamentalists. After Atefeh's execution, judge Haji Razaie received a letter of congratulations for his 'firm approach' from the Governor of Mazandaran.

An unnamed Iranian journalist of *Iran Focus* talked to some of Atefeh's classmates, friends, relatives and neighbours to shed light on the gruesome fate of the young girl. They described Atefeh as intelligent, lively, but rebellious. She lived in extreme poverty. Her father, an unemployed drug addict, vanished before she was born. Her mother died when she was a very small child and left her an orphan in the care of her old grandparents, who were already in their seventies at that time. She became a victim of violence and exploitation by relatives and by local officials. At least one of her relatives used to rape her, but she did not dare to accuse him, as she knew that nobody would support her. When she was sixteen, she had already been five times convicted for immoral behaviour. Every time, she got 100 lashes and was taken to prison for some days, where she was abused by the Islamic moral police. She was terrified about those prison days. Behshahr prison in Neka is hell, she told a close friend.

Iran has for years been under pressure by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations to end child executions. Under this pressure, the old parliament tabled a bill in 2003 to raise the minimum age for execution to eighteen years, but the bill was rejected by the all-powerful Guardian Council. According to Amnesty International, there are ten documented cases of child execution since 1990. In 2004, the case of Atefeh Rajabi is already the third known case (among 108 known executions in total). These numbers may be only the tip of the iceberg.

The fundamentalist clerics in Iran's judiciary are not the only ones sentencing minors to death. So does, for example, the judiciary of the USA.