The Intractable Puzzle:
recent work on the problem of evil*

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Why should an all-powerful and loving creator permit all the suffering we find in the world? To quote the title of the just-published book by Rupert Shortt, Research Associate at Cambridge's Von Hügel Institute, this is *The Hardest Problem* faced by believers. As well as the hardest, it is also one of the oldest problems. In the eighteenth century, the philosopher David Hume traced the puzzle 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?"

Over the years, the "problem of evil" has become one of the stock topics that every undergraduate course in the philosophy of religion has to cover. But the standard attempts to solve the puzzle found in the philosophical literature have on the whole failed to carry conviction. One such, with a very ancient pedigree, is the "free will defence": if God is to create genuinely free human beings, then this will necessarily open the possibility that some of them may make wrong 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. But many will be repelled by the argument that permitting horrendous evils such as torture and genocide is a price worth paying for allowing freedom into the world. And in any case, this would still not account for what philosophers call "natural evils" – all the suffering not due to human agency, but caused by earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics, and the like.

A second standard attempt to explain the suffering found all around us invokes the idea that it is necessary for moral and spiritual growth. By creating a world in which danger, pain and distress abound, God creates (in the poet John Keats's phrase) a "vale of soul-making" – a world in which people are challenged, and as a result can mature and grow in virtues such as courage and compassion. But like the free will defence, the "vale of soul-making" defence does not seem strong enough to explain the extent and depth of the horrendous evil we find in the world. Hence we find Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's novel pointedly declaring that if the creation of the world by a supposedly loving and all-powerful God has to involve the unbearable suffering of even one single innocent child, then "I most respectfully return him the ticket."

Passions can run high here, and the more one actually confronts the horror of the suffering endured by humanity down the ages, the more it starts to seem distasteful, even repugnant, to address the problem of evil in terms of clever moves and counter-moves in an academic debate. As a result, some recent philosophers of religion have come to feel that confronting the problem requires richer resources than can be supplied by logical analysis alone. A magisterial study entitled *Wandering in Darkness*, by the American philosopher and Catholic thinker Eleonore Stump, though most certainly not short of intricate and technically expert argument, injects fresh insights into the debate by offering detailed reflection on some key Scriptural narratives – those of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany (the sister of Martha and Lazarus).

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These are not just passing "examples" in the service of some abstract argument. Rather, Stump invites us to inhabit the narratives in all their "disorderly richness" in order to deepen our understanding of what the protagonists endured. Each character undergoes appalling suffering: Job, physically and emotionally tormented and stripped of all that has given his life meaning; Samson, fallen from his former glory as champion and become an object of scorn; Abraham, confronted with the horrifying command to sacrifice his beloved son; and Mary, prostrate in the desperate grief of bereavement, her earlier pleas for help having been apparently ignored by the one she most trusted. Yet in all these cases, Stump suggests, the suffering, terrible as it is, ends up playing a role in the person's ultimate flourishing by bringing them, in the end, closer to God. What happens as a result of their terrible suffering is that they are somehow brought to a "gloriousness" that could not have been achieved had their goals, as they originally envisioned them, been brought about.

The title *Wandering in Darkness* is from a fragment of a poem by an anonymous inmate found on a wall at Auschwitz; and at the close of her book Stump frankly admits that it will sometimes be the case, for those who are compelled to wander in darkness, that "the suffering a person endures breaks that person past healing". So her book does not attempt the impossible task of explaining away all suffering. But at least it locates the problem within a richer awareness of the emotional and spiritual complexities of human life. In a certain way Christianity, in its central narrative of the Crucifixion, acknowledges these complexities from the outset: the path of redemption is never free from anguish.

In today's largely secular culture, many will be disinclined to (as they see it) waste their time listening to considerations of this sort. As Rupert Shortt observes in his *Hardest Problem,* "legions of people plainly view evil and suffering as merely confirming atheistic beliefs reached on other grounds." But the God many contemporary atheists summarily dismiss can often seem a crude caricature of the God who is the object of authentic religious belief. On the caricature view, God seems to be some kind of magical supernatural force that the (misguided) believer calls on to intervene when other expedients fail. So if the medicine doesn't work, God can be invoked; and if the patient doesn't get better then there is a problem for the believer – why did God not prevent the suffering? There are many things wrong with this crude version of the problem of evil, but one of the most important is that (as the title of another book by Shortt has it) *God is No Thing.* Authentic religious belief does not regard God as an item in the world, alongside forces such as gravity or electromagnetic radiation. Rather, as the Dominican philosopher Brian Davies puts it, "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."

So God is not properly understood as an item in the world. Rather, God is, as all the Abrahamic faiths affirm, the creative source of all that is good. But does this not bring us back to the question we started with: *Whence then is evil*? The question will not go away, yet as we have already suggested, it cannot, and perhaps should not, be 'solved'. But a different type of response has recently been articulated by Karen Kilby, Professor of Catholic Theology at Durham University. In her *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology,* Kilby bites the bullet and rejects the whole project of 'theodicy' (attempting to vindicate the goodness of God in the face of evil and suffering). "Christian theology", she argues, "ought to acknowledge itself to be faced with questions it cannot answer."

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." In rejecting the demand for explanation, Kilby explicitly follows the great medieval English mystic Mother Julian of Norwich, whose profound reflections on sin and suffering continue to inspire. Julian's *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."

Pondering on these words leads us, as Kilby shows, to confront perhaps one of the most profound and 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 towards – 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?

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