

Problem of Evil? Or Problem With God?

Robert W. Bertram

[Outline for a presentation at Augustana University College,
Camrose,
Alberta, Canada, 1995]

Session One: Hume on the Problem of Evil: “Why Do You Call Him God?”

1) To be read in unison, please:

“If God is able to prevent evil but does not, he must be malevolent.

If God is willing to prevent evil but does not, he must be impotent.

If God is both able and willing to prevent evil, whence cometh evil?

If God is neither able nor willing to prevent evil, why do you call him God?”

2) The above passage is spoken by one of the three characters (Philo) in David Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. A word about the Dialogue (published posthumously in 1779) and about David Hume (1711 -1776).

3) Please repeat in unison, if possible from memory, the passage from Dialogues. This time, notice how the passage – Epicurus’ “trilemma” – exhausts every reasonable possibility. There is no

fifth option.

4) Each of Epicurus' four possibilities has in fact been advocated, and still is today. Consider the first proposition: a "malevolent" god.

5) Consider the second proposition: an "impotent" god.

6) Consider the third proposition: evil as unreal.

7) Consider the fourth proposition: God as unreal.

8) If Epicurus' four propositions exhaust the possibilities and if none of them is acceptable to Christians, then do Christians have no answer to "the problem of evil?" Granted.

9) But comes now a counter-question: Is this truly "the [the only] problem of evil?" Mightn't there be another, actually a more important problem of evil: not how to explain evil but how to overcome it? And for that second form of the question don't Christians have the answer?

10) "The answer?" Do they? Still, if they do, doesn't the very solution which Christians proclaim (for getting rid of evil) raise a whole new question? If there is a way to rid the world of evil, why isn't that salvation enjoyed by everyone? And since it isn't, doesn't that raise an even more serious question about God than Epicurus' original trilemma did? Luther dared to word the question in his reply to Erasmus, "Why God saves so few and damns so many?"

19) That is a problem, of course, for the "many," themselves. And that problem, as theirs, we shall not tackle in this lecture series. (That does not mean by the way that I regard that problem, as theirs, as a non-problem. On the contrary, it may just be Christianity's most urgent problem today.) On the other

hand, we do plan here to treat this problem – “why God saves so few and damns so many” – as a problem of God, possibly as a problem of God’s “evil.”

20) And when it is a problem of God, it is a problem also for “the few” who believe in God. But more on that as we move into Sessions Two and Three.

21) Meanwhile, before we end this Session One, notice what the significance is, historically, for the modern interest in Criticism. Though “the problem of evil” was formulated classically already by Epicurus (342 – 270 B. C.) it gained a new hearing with the Enlightenment’s interest in critical reason. Yet even the Enlightenment, including its most critical philosophes like Hume, seldom pushed critique as far as the Reformation did.

Session Two: After Auschwitz: Where is God Now?”

1) Reading from Elie Wiesel, Night. NYC: Avon (1960), 75-6.

2) Segue to Theodor Adorno. Moreso than Wiesel, Adorno provides a link with the Enlightenment and David Hume (see Session One) and with Martin Luther (see Session Three), even if only negatively.

3) More to the point, Adorno flirts with the Enlightenment’s tradition of atheism in a way that Wiesel does not. Wiesel may be “with God or against God but never without God.” Wiesel may say, “Where is God? . . . Here He is— hanging here on his gallows.” Adorno would be more apt to say, Where is God? God is nowhere. Notice: not that God is not. Rather: if there is a God, that God is No-Where (Utopia.) Evil is somewhere, probably everywhere, inflicting suffering. But God, if there is one, is

not “where” evil is. “God” is the negating of evil and suffering.

4) A brief biographical word about Adorno.

5) In his 1947 book, Dialectic of Enlightenment (co-authored with Max Horkheimer) Adorno exposes how the Enlightenment, for all its greatness, actually helped to produce its opposite, fascism – and Auschwitz. With the Enlightenment came a trust in “reason”– reason, that is, as a technical, “scientific” instrument for manipulating nature –and the reducing of nature to “things.” Eventually human nature, too, becomes “thingified.”

6) “Fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer argued, could in fact be partly understood as the return of man’s repressed mythic past and the revenge of dominated nature, which employed many of the tools developed by instrumental reason in the service of that domination. ‘Progress’ thus turned out to spawn its antithesis, a barbarism all the more brutal because of its use of modern techniques of control.” (Martin Jay, Adorno, 38)

7) A preliminary question to Adorno. This ironic turn of events whereby the Enlightenment begets its opposite, fascism – this “revenge of dominated nature,” as Jay called it, by which “progress” turns out to “spawn its antithesis” – sounds ominously like poetic justice, as if our modern world is getting its just due, what it has coming to it. Is that the way Adorno sees it? Is this historical development, this “revenge of dominated nature,” a form of divine retribution – in biblical terminology, God’s accusing Law?

8) Later, in his Negative Dialectic (1966) Adorno does say, even more sweepingly, that there is a unity which – alas! – more and more binds our history together: “the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to [control] over men’s inner nature. No universal history leads from

savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.” (320) Is this another way of saying, “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature?” Or: “God is not mocked; ‘I will repay,’ says the Lord?”

9) Repeat: does Adorno understand this devastating judgment upon modern history to be God’s judgment? Whether he does or doesn’t, he does seem – in the eyes of one of his critics – to be reducing history to “the history of damnation.” Says this critic, not only doesn’t Adorno idealize history or apotheosize it, he “diabolizes” it. “Radical evil – Evil as such – is promoted to the status of the World Spirit. The history of salvation is replaced by the history of damnation.” (Paul Connerton, The Tragedy of Enlightenment: an Essay on the Frankfurt School [1980], 114)

10) How to escape this “history of damnation?” Might we escape its judgment, not by protesting against it but by concurring in it, agreeing with it? If you can’t lick it, join it? Yes, morally we have no choice except to concur in the judgment, to join in the negation. As Adorno makes plain, “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice.” (Neg. Dial., 367)

11) Ah, but look how that sentence continues, “. . . while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be.” (Ibid.) So, whether you go with the flow or oppose it, it seems you’re damned if you do or damned if you don’t.

12) But how can our saying no to this “radically culpable and shabby culture” be just another way of furthering its barbarism? Answer: because saying no to it now, “after Auschwitz,” is to put ourselves in the position of judge against those on whom the judgment was actually –in historical fact – carried out,

Auschwitz' "victims!" (Ibid.)

13) This, says Adorno, is the fallacy of which the Christian "theology of crisis" is guilty, all the more so since Auschwitz. Such theologians like to blame traditional metaphysics for selling out to the prevailing culture, which indeed it did. Yet these Christians do their blaming as if their word of judgment were a "theological one," a "word tinged from on high." Trouble is, their pretending to speak for God only opens them up in turn to the next question, "whether God would permit [Auschwitz] without intervening in his wrath." (Ibid.)

14) For Adorno the question continued to haunt, "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who has escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared." (Neg. Dial., 363)

15) The very least we can do, as we pursue our infinite negations, superseding this criticism with another criticism and that with yet another, is to do so with "sympathy" for the victims. "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all truth." (Neg. Dial., 17-18)

16) Christian theology is disgraced by its lack of sympathy for the victims. Which victims? For example, today's secularists. These "unbelievers" continue to have the "need" to believe in God ("as being good for people") even though they know simultaneously that that belief is untrue. But how do theologians respond to this obvious contradiction? With a "howl of rejoicing at the unbelievers' despair, they . . . intone their Te Deum wherever God is denied, because at least his name is mentioned." (Neg. Dial., 372)

17) Because “the idea of truth is supreme among the metaphysical ideas, . . . [that] is why one who believes in God cannot believe in God, why the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe. . . . The mere thought of hope is a transgression against it.” (Neg. Dial., 401-402)

18) But then is Adorno saying, there must be a “hope,” a “God,” if we can so much as transgress against it? Possibly. However, the way not to transgress against it but to serve it is by denying, negating that there is hope – for example, the Incarnation. To entertain hope in such a “scandal,” as Kierkegaard did, would be – especially “after Auschwitz”! – “blasphemy” and a betrayal of its victims. (Neg. Dial., 375)

19) On second thought, Adorno and Wiesel may be closer theologically than at first appeared. Recall the latter’s recent prayer at Auschwitz.

Session Three. Luther: God’s “Evil?” God’s Problem

1) Historical background of the debate between Erasmus and Luther concerning “free will” versus “enslaved will.” (Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson [editor] Philadelphia: Westminster [1969])

2) Our focus here is on Luther’s reply (On the Bondage of the Will) and, consequently, on his understanding of Erasmus’ position.

3) Why, according to Luther, did Erasmus claim that human beings can act independently (“free”) of God? Because if they cannot, even if only a little, they cannot be responsible for their sin and in that case the responsibility would be God’s. But

obviously God is not to blame for our sin. Granted, says Luther. But why not? Not: whether God is or is not to blame? But: why not? That, for Luther, was the issue. The why makes all the difference.

4) Erasmus, so Luther charged, was slave to that age-long “sweating and toiling to excuse the goodness of God and accuse the will of man.” (244, 227) What! Erasmus, the devoted humanist, the great forerunner of the Enlightenment, “accus[ing] the will of man?!” Isn’t that the very opposite of what he and his heirs have intended, namely, to emancipate humanity from accusation? Yet here Luther casts him as humanity’s accuser, and all in order to exonerate God.

5) But then why, the question returns, was Erasmus so anxious to “excuse” God of the world’s evil? Simply put: if God were not excusable, then God, by definition, would not be God. By whose definition? Answer: by all that is right and reasonable. Ah, but then isn’t that the “god” whose “goodness” Erasmus is ultimately trying to defend, not the biblical God but rather a god who fits our own standards of what is right and reasonable?

6) Notice then what Erasmus’ “sweating and toiling to excuse the goodness of God and accuse the will of man” boils down to. He is accusing humanity, yes, but by what standards? By all that is right and reasonable, brightest and best, in humanity! Humans are being criticized, all right, and often severely so. But by whose criteria? Their own.

7) The upshot is, no matter how devastating is our critique, the criterion which does the devastating is merely that which is highest and best in ourselves. So that which is “best” in ourselves, our rational-moral egos, always hovers above the criticism and emerges unscathed. By castigating ourselves – in the light of our selves – we “save” ourselves.

8) In the process – that is, in our “sweating and toiling” to preserve ourselves – we drastically constrict the biblical God as well. We fantasize our own phoney “freedom” from God. And the freedom we deny is the freedom which God enjoys – from our categories.

9) Luther’s intention in On the Bondage of the Will is largely negative, to prove – mostly from Scripture but also from “reason” – how offensive God is to all that is right and reasonable about us: for instance, that “God saves so few and damns so many,” that the innocent suffer and the evil prosper, that much more is demanded of us than we are able to do or think, that the very gospel which softens some hearts hardens others, that the very best of human beings – Erasmus’ model of the person who at least “tries” to please God – are the selfsame ones who are disabled from believing that they do please God.

10) Why is Luther so intent upon showing God at God’s “worst?” Most immediately, I suppose, because it is true. But more practically, because of the false antithesis which Erasmus and the whole prevailing theology of the church establishment is defending. The alternative against which Luther is inveighing is not God’s goodness but rather the conventional religious folklore (*opinio*) about God’s “goodness,” so flattering and lulling to all that is humanly reasonable and right.

11) Luther’s final intention in his On the Bondage of the Will is, may we say, pastoral. But “pastoral” here includes being negative, perhaps brutally negative – in one word, nihilating. Presumably the only constructive purpose in facing up to “the problem of evil,” which is really a problem of God, is a destructive purpose: to annihilate those categories of rationality and justice by which humans exclude the truly free God, and to annihilate them if necessary by adducing the very scandalous evidence that is available right from within our own

rational and ethical experience.

12) Understand, no matter how pastoral Luther's purpose, there is no question in his mind that, by all that is right and reasonable among us, God does indeed appear unjust – that is, if God is dealt with apart from Jesus Christ. Aside from the “preached God” of the cross, any justice or fairness in God is simply “hidden” from us. But notice what it is about God that is hidden: not whether God can reasonably be said to be unjust –that much is inescapable – but why God is unjust. For Luther (and maybe even for Erasmus) it is all too true that “God saves so few and damns so many.” The answer which, for now at least, is hidden is why (*cur.*)

13) And it does nothing for our “despair,” when like the pot we protest to the potter, “why did you make me so” and are rebuffed by, “who are you to answer back to God!” In other words, we are told, “None of your business!” But then whose business is it?

14) If the problem of evil is in truth a problem of God, then, Luther advises us, let it be God's problem!

15) However, in order to let it be God's problem, what is needed is faith –actually, whole new believing selves, new creations by God's Holying Spirit.

16) And isn't that why even something so destructive as the problem of evil/problem of God can be simultaneously constructive? By demolishing the last, “best” vestiges of our old selves it makes room for the creation of new persons. Remember, Luther reminds Erasmus, this is a Creator who enjoys creating everything *ex nihilo*.

17) Luther sympathizes with those who, like the great atheists and the Hebrew prophets, have been offended by God's “evil.” “And who would not be offended? I myself was offended more than

once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created a man – before I realized how salutary that despair was, and how near to grace.” (244)

Robert W. Bertram

Camrose '95

[ProblemofEvil \(PDF\)](#)