God and Evil: A Dialogue

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There is a lot of badness around. And many have concluded that there is, therefore, no God. Why? Because God is commonly said to be omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and good, and because it seems hard to see how such a God could ever permit the existence of the horrors we find in the world. But does evil show that God does not exist? Many people believe that it does. But what might they say to someone who takes the opposite view? Perhaps they might start by arguing as John does with Ron in the following discussion.

I

Ron: I admire your faith in God. Serious commitment is hard to find these days. Lots of people are serious about many things, of course. But far too many engross themselves with what seems, from the long-term perspective, to be transient, passing, or ephemeral. You, on the other hand, set your sights on God, whom you take to abide forever. You believe in something which seems to be of more than fleeting significance. And I respect you for that.

John: You are very gracious. But I think you are really teasing me. For I know you believe that there is no God. You are praising me with faint damns. You compliment my commitment, but you certainly don't share it. In fact, if I understand you rightly, you believe that it is positively irrational.

Ron: There are lots of beliefs which I take to be irrational while also wanting to praise some of the people who hold them. I think that it is silly to believe in reincarnation. But this does not prevent me from venerating people such as the many Buddhist monks who believe very strongly in reincarnation. I think he is wrong in some fundamental ways, but I deeply admire the Dalai Lama, especially when I compare him with some of the people held up for admiration in our society. If I praise you with faint damns, that does not mean that my praise is not sincere.

John: Well, I take your point. But you can't deny that you hold my belief in God to be seriously wrong-headed. And, much as I also respect the Dalai Lama, I would be happier to be praised by you if I thought that you and I were more on the same wave length than you and he seem to be. So can we, perhaps, talk about the differences between us? Would you like to tell me why you reject my belief in God? And can we discuss your reasons for thinking as you do?

Ron: Nothing would please me more.

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II

Ron: There are lots of reasons why people do not believe in God. But mine is a fairly simple one. I just find it impossible to suppose that God exists given the evil that we find in the world around us. I know that you are very fond of the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas. You have often told me that in him you find someone who has helped you to see that belief in God makes rational sense. And, though his popularity among theologians seems to have dwindled in recent years, he still ranks as one of the greatest Catholic thinkers. Ironically, however, he puts into words just why I find belief in God incredible. In his *Summa Theologiae* (Ia 2,3 if, pedant that I know you to be, you insist on the exact reference) he lucidly writes: 'It seems that there is no God. For if, of two mutually exclusive things, one were to exist without limit, the other would cease to exist. But by the word "God" is implied some limitless good. If God then existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. God therefore does not exist'. Of course, John (and I'm sorry about the pedant swipe), I realize very well that Aquinas rejects this argument. But it seems to me a good one. I don't think that Aquinas should have spurned it. And I don't think that you should either.

John: But do you think that what Aquinas says is silly as he briefly tries to respond to the argument you quote him as stating? As you must know very well, just after presenting the argument you quote, Aquinas asserts that God would not permit any evil unless he were able to bring good even from evil. You take evil to count against God's existence. But Aquinas doesn't think that. And why should I suppose that he is wrong here?

Ron: Well, maybe you should start by thinking about what you take God to be. You think of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and good, don't you?

John: Yes, of course, that is how I think of God, as do all Christians (not to mention all Jews and Muslims).

Ron: But is it not obvious that a good God would eliminate evil as far as it could? And is it not equally obvious that there would be no evil at all if God were omnipotent and omniscient as well as good? If God is omnipotent, then there can't be any evil which he could not eliminate or prevent. If he is omniscient, then there can't be any evil of which he is ignorant. And if he is good, as well as omnipotent and omniscient, then does it not stand to reason that there would be no evil at all? But there is evil. So why should we not conclude that there cannot be a God?

John: Well, Ron, 'cannot' is a strong word. Are you suggesting that my belief in God, and my acceptance that evil exists, are contradictory beliefs? If I say that my cat is simultaneously dead and alive, then I subscribe to a contradiction and what I believe cannot be true.

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But do I contradict myself if I say that God (omnipotent, omniscient, and good) exists, and that evil does as well?

Ron: You do. Because a good God (who knew about it, and could do something about it) would automatically prevent or abolish all evil.

John: But is that not an extreme view? Of course, we generally presume that those who are good will prevent or obliterate evils of which they know and over which they have some control. But might there not be exceptions?

Ron: I don't understand what you mean.

John: What I have in mind can be illustrated by a simple example. Suppose that Jane is the mother of a four-year-old child called Tim. He is incredibly inquisitive. He gets into everything. He is especially attracted to the stove in Jane's kitchen. And to touch it would cause him pain (something I take you to think of as evil). Now, Mary knows about what the stove can do to Tim, and she could prevent him from touching it. But suppose that she doesn't. Suppose that she lets him touch the stove just to teach him a quick lesson about things to avoid in this life. Should we conclude that Jane is bad?

Ron: Maybe not. Jane is trying to help Tim. And she is doing so as best she can in the circumstances in which she finds herself. So perhaps I should agree that we do not obviously contradict ourselves if we agree that there is evil and if we also say that there is a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God who does not prevent or obliterate it. But I don't think that this helps you when it comes to your belief in God. For, as far as I can see, you still seem to be stuck with what I would call weighty evidence against God's existence. Perhaps there is no formal contradiction in the sentence 'There is a God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and good, and there is also evil in our world'. But, John, have you never taken account of matters to do with evidence and what we should believe on the basis of it?

John: I am not sure as to what you mean by 'evidence' here. Prosecutors offer evidence in law courts? Are you thinking along these lines?

Ron: Yes I am. In courts of law the prosecutors produce what, so they hope, will lead to a conviction reasonably arrived at on the basis of evidence available. And it seems to me that the evidence suggests that there is no omnipotent, omniscient God who is also good.

John: But why exactly do you think that?

Ron: Because I believe that God, as you conceive of him, would never permit the occurrence of pointless suffering. Yet pointless suffering does occur.

John: Perhaps you can give me some examples.

Ron: Are you really being serious here? Isn't it obvious that there are many examples of pointless suffering? What about people dying from cancer? Are they not examples of pointless suffering? Or again, what about animals who die in forest fires? They suffer. But their suffering serves no purpose. No good comes from it. If what I am

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now referring to does not count as evidence against the existence of a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God, then I do not know what could.

John: Well, maybe nothing could. Or, to put it another way, perhaps nothing should rightly be thought of as evidence against God's existence.

Ron: Stop playing with me. I have given you examples which I take to be evidence against the existence of God as you believe him to be. Rather than floating abstract possibilities, you need to engage with my examples. You need to show that the examples I gave you are not what I take them to be.

III

John: You always cut to the quick, don't you? And, of course, I entirely agree with what you have just said. At this point, however, might we, perhaps, back up a little so as to consider what the focus of our discussion really is?

Ron: I don't understand what you mean. We are talking about God and evil, aren't we?

John: Of course we are. But we can hardly make progress if we cannot agree on what we take evil to be. So would you like to tell me how you think of it?

Ron: Well, I shall try. And I suppose that the first thing I would say is that I do not believe that evil is all that common. I take evil to be badness in a horrendous form. I think that the Nazi concentration camps were evil. I think of Jack the Ripper as evil. But I also think that anything evil is bad, and it is, now I come to think of it, badness in the world which worries me when it comes to God.

John: I take your point. We tend to reserve the word 'evil' in order to talk about badness on a grand scale, though any evil is an instance of badness. So let me rephrase my question. Let me ask you what you take badness to be.

Ron: I take it to be something we find all over the place. There are bad people (I'll bet that you know some). And there are bad all sorts of things. Though perhaps I should put that a different way. What I mean is that we can sensibly say that it is bad that such and such is the case. It is bad for someone to be dying of cancer. It is bad for an animal to be burning to death in a forest. This is what I am thinking of when I say that there are bad things in the world.

John: But you have still not explained what you take badness to be. You have given me some examples of it. But what is it in general?

Ron: Why should you suppose that badness is anything in general? Why can't I simply say that something is bad because it is bad? What are you driving at here?

John: I'm thinking that we would not use a word like 'bad', and that we would not use it to describe different things, unless we had

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some sense of what it means in general. And I believe that we do have such a sense. But I also think that the words 'bad' and 'evil clearly do not designate particular properties.

Ron: I don't think I understand that.

John: I mean that 'bad' is different from adjectives such as 'green' or 'triangular'. If I am told that something is green or triangular, I know what it is straight away regardless of what the something in question is. But I do not, in the same way, know what something is if all I am told about it is that it is bad. If people assert 'It's bad', I can make no sense of what they are saying unless I understand what they are talking about. Is it a bad meal? Is it a bad holiday? Is it a bad carton of milk? Is it a bad person? The meaning of the word 'bad' (or, if you like, what the adjective 'bad' is taken to refer to) depends very much on context, does it not?

Ron: As far as I can see, you are just endorsing what I just said. I suggested that badness is nothing in general. You now seem to be agreeing with me.

John: Well, I am. But only partly. For I also think that 'bad' does have a common meaning. For would you not agree that anything bad, whatever it is, is lacking in some way? Isn't a bad thing always something which fails to match up to what we expect of it?

Ron: I'll grant you that. A bad meal is lacking in what we look for in a good one. And a bad holiday is notable for what it does not provide. And I suppose that the same is true when it comes to milk, people, and other examples. Badness is not a distinct property like being green or triangular. But can you explain to me what all of this has to do when it comes to God and what is bad?

John: I will try. But can you first tell me what you take to be God's role when it comes to what we find around us? What do you think that God brings about?

Ron: I don't believe that God brings anything about. As far as I am concerned, there is no God. You know that very well.

John: Fair enough. But if God really existed, what would he be responsible for?

Ron: Those who believe in God typically say that he is the Creator of everything other than himself. So I suppose that God, if he existed, would be the cause of everything real (apart from himself). Theologians and philosophers often say that God is the reason why there is any world at all, the reason why there is something rather than nothing. So I suppose that God, if there were a God, would be responsible for there being real things apart from himself.

John: But would this make him responsible for badness?

Ron: Well, of course it would. Badness is perfectly real. It's not a mirage. It's very much part of our world. And if God is responsible for the existence of our world, then God is responsible for badness.

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John: In a sense, I agree with you. If God exists, then badness in our world must somehow fall within his creative plan. Some people have denied that badness really exists. They've tried to write it off as an illusion of some kind. But I don't see any mileage in that way of thinking. After all, even if badness is an illusion, it's a painful one, and even a painful illusion is bad, so badness is not just illusory. But I want to be clear as to just how God might be thought of as responsible for evil. For did we not just agree that badness has the character of a lack? Did we not agree that 'badness' names no distinct property of things?

Ron: We did. But I do not see the relevance of that to what we are now discussing.

John: I'd have thought that the relevance was obvious. We call something bad because we find it to be missing something. But something missing is not really anything. Or, at least, it is not something that can be thought of as produced by God. If God is the Creator, then he must make to be all that really exists. But how can God make badness to be if badness, in fact, is only what we have when something is just not as good as we would wish it to be?

Ron: Are you saying that badness is unreal? Because if that is what you are driving at, then I think you must have taken leave of your senses.

John: I am not saying that badness is unreal. I am not denying that lots of things are bad. All I am saying is that 'badness' names no definite property of things. And, since badness is obviously no individual with a life of its own (like you and me), I conclude that it cannot be part of the 'there' we have in mind when we say that God, as Creator, produces what is 'there'. As I see it, God can (and does) make individuals such as us to exist. I also think that God accounts for the existence of the positive properties which things like these have. But badness is not an individual. And it is not a positive property. So it is not created by God. I take God to account for there being things (with all their positive properties). But badness lacks being. In itself, so we might say, it is really nothing at all. But that does not mean that it is, without qualification, unreal. On the contrary, it is very much to be reckoned with, just like the nothing people encounter when they drive their cars over cliffs. When they do that, they run into nothing. But they surely need to worry about the nothing that they are driving into.

Ron: So let me try to get your position straight. You are saying that badness of all kinds (including extreme badness, which we tend to call evil) cannot be thought of as something created by God. You take God to make only what is real. And badness, for you, is, in a serious sense, unreal.

John: You have caught my drift exactly.

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IV

Ron: But I don't see how that idea helps when it comes to there being badness, and when it comes to the question of God's existence. You agree that there is badness since you accept that things lack goodness in various ways. But how do they come to lack such goodness? If God exists, must not the answer lie in what he has decreed should come to pass? When I am attacked by a virus, am I not the victim of one of God's creatures? And when terrorists set to work, are they not doing so as sustained in being by God? Even though you insist that evil is nothing created, you seem to concede that it is somehow a fact of life. And I do not see how you can possibly fail to blame God for it. You, of course, do not want to blame God for anything. You take God to be good. As far as I can see, however, badness serves to show that he is nothing of the kind, which in my book means that he doesn't exist.

John: Many, of course, would agree with you. God seems to put up with a lot of badness. Once again, however, I would like to ask about his causal role with respect to it. If I choose to blow your brains out just because I hate you, then I bring about what is bad. And I do so as willing this badness as an end in itself (an end which seems good to me). But can we think of God as willing badness as an end in itself?

Ron: Well, if you are right, God wills badness somehow. So why not say that he wills it as an end in itself?

John: Can I at this point suggest a distinction to you?

Ron: 'Distinction' sounds like a pretentious philosophical word. But go ahead anyway.

John: Sorry to sound pretentious. But I only want to note a difference between kinds of badness (or evil). I like to call them 'evil suffered' and 'evil done'. By 'evil suffered' I mean badness which results from what one thing inflicts on another (your falling ill from a virus would be an example, as would you becoming the victim of a human attacker – me blowing your brains out, for instance!).

Ron: I would prefer not to dwell on those scenarios. Just carry on and tell me what you mean by 'evil done'.

John: Here I am thinking of bad human actions and what it means to say that those who engage in them are bad.

Ron: Isn't it obvious what it means to say that people who do bad things are bad? It seems obvious to me, anyway. I think that bad people are bad because of what they bring about. That's why I do not think well of Adolf Hitler. He was wrongly responsible for the deaths of many people.

John: I agree that Hitler managed to dispose of lots of innocent individuals. But his badness is surely not the sum of what he brought about. Does it not, rather, lie in himself? Are not bad people bad just

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because of what they choose to do, and regardless of whether or not their decisions prove effective? Suppose that I mistakenly think that I could blow the world up by pressing a button. And suppose that I press the button, which has no effect at all. Are we to conclude that I am not bad since I have achieved nothing? Surely not. And this is what I have in mind as I speak of 'evil done'. One can choose to do what is bad even if one's choices get thwarted. But one is still choosing to act badly. Or, as I would prefer to say, evil done lies in the doer.

Ron: So there is evil suffered and evil done. But what are you trying to get at now when it comes to the topic of God and evil?

John: Perhaps I can reply to your question by first asking you to reflect on evil suffered. Could this sensibly be thought of as something willed by God as an end in itself? My own view is that it cannot since it is always consists in nothing but goodness.

Ron: Now I think that you really have taken leave of your senses. You seem to be asking me to believe that everything is sweetness and light when, for example, I fall ill from a virus. But that is obviously false.

John: It is false in the sense that you are doing badly. But your doing badly has a cause in the virus infecting you. And, if it is making you sick, then it must be a pretty flourishing virus. So what is bad with you is a matter of goodness with something else.

Ron: Please elaborate on all that since I am now completely confused when it comes to what you are driving at.

John: I am saying that, when it comes to evil suffered, there is always a concomitant good. There is always something which, by being good in its way, makes something else bad in its way. It is bad for a lamb to be mauled by a lion. But it takes a flourishing lion to maul a lamb. And this, I think, means that, when it comes to evil suffered, God is only responsible for what is good.

Ron: Well try to convince a theologically interested lamb of this. He would laugh you out of court. We could hardly title a painting of a lamb being eaten by calling it 'Nothing But Good'.

John: But why not? The picture would be depicting something which manages to be good enough to make it into existence as a lamb. And it would be also be depicting something which thrives as it tears away at the lamb. There seems to be a lot of goodness around in this picture.

Ron: But the lamb is suffering!

John: Indeed it is. But it is also (though perhaps not for long) managing to be a lamb. And its predator is doing very well. Of course I agree that a suffering lamb is doing very badly. But think back to what we agreed above about badness. We said that it is no positive reality in anything. This seems to imply that a suffering lamb is something that is lacking in some way. And, as mauled by a lion, it is the victim of something which is doing very well considered as what it is. Someone painting a picture of a lamb being eaten by a lion could

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never manage to put onto canvas the badness in such a scenario. But they would certainly be able to paint something with positive reality: a lamb and a lion, each of which, though to different degrees, are succeeding at being what they are.

Ron: Are you telling me that a lamb being eaten by a lion is a successful lamb?

John: In one sense, no. And obviously so. It is a lamb who is perishing. But it is also somehow succeeding. For, until it has perished, it is managing to be a lamb. A suffering lamb is the victim of evil suffered. But evil suffered requires a kind of integrity or success in the victim. If you have a glass of bad wine, you still have wine. A glass of lighter fluid cannot be a glass of bad wine. And, by the same token, for a lamb to be the victim of evil (for it to be in a bad way considered as a lamb), it must succeed in being a lamb. It has the goodness needed to be a lamb.

Ron: And what do you take this to imply when it comes to evil suffered in general?

John: I take it to imply that, strictly speaking, in cases of evil suffered the only reality present is good. Of course, it is bad for victims of evil suffered to be as they are. They are lacking goodness in some respect. But a lack of goodness (badness or evil) is no positive substance or property. And I take all this to mean that, when it comes to evil suffered, we cannot accuse God of creatively producing badness.

Ron: And I suppose you'd say the same when it comes to evil done. I suppose you think that God can't be creatively involved in that either.

John: Well, in one sense I would.

Ron: Don't tell me! You are going to claim that evil arises from human free will and that God is therefore not responsible for it except in the sense that he permits it to occur. I've heard that line before. But it has never convinced me.

John: How interesting. As I am sure you know, you are here in disagreement with some pretty eminent thinkers. But you were always someone with a mind of your own. So perhaps I should let you tell me just what you have against the position you mention.

V

Ron: It is somewhat ironic that you should ask me to do this since my view on God and evil done depends on the supposition that there is a God, a supposition that I actually deny.

John: You seem to be apologizing for yourself. But I am not sure that you should be. I take it that you wish to take your stand on what philosophers call an *ad hominem* argument. If I say that such and such is the case, you might argue against me by showing that what I say conflicts with something else I believe. And you might argue in

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this way even though you do not yourself accept the belief which you take to conflict with my original assertion. Suppose I say that there is no moral objection to abortion. And suppose I also say that murder is wrong, that murder is the killing of an innocent person, and that the human foetus is a person. You might actually believe murder is not wrong, or that the human foetus is not a person. But you would be quite in order to use my beliefs to the contrary against me when it comes to my claim that there is no moral objection to abortion. Here you would be noting that I am ultimately committed to an inconsistent set of beliefs. And why should you not note that?

Ron: Why not indeed! And you're right. It is an *ad hominem* argument I have in mind now. For I do not see how someone who believes in God can consistently hold that evil done is not God's responsibility since it arises from human free will. I know that lots of people who believe in God say that this is just what evil done is. It comes from our choices, they say, and not from God. But are not our choices perfectly real? And is God not supposed to account for the existence of everything real other than himself?

John: That is certainly a traditional way of thinking about God. According to this view, there is God, and there are creatures, and everything creaturely is entirely dependent for its existence on God for as long as it exists.

Ron: But free human choices exist as they occur. They must be as creaturely as anything else. So I do not see that their occurrence can be thought of as something independent of God, as something to be written off as due to free will considered as something in which God is not creatively involved. There are people called 'deists' who say that God got the world going in the past and has since been standing back letting it go its own way. But those who believe in God as Creator do not seem to be thinking along these lines. I take them to be saying that if it's not God, and if it's real, then God is making it to exist. So I do not see how God can fail to be involved in evil done.

John: Well, Ron, I think we are in fundamental agreement here, though you might be surprised to learn so.

Ron: 'Surprised' is hardly the word. I am amazed! So please explain why you agree with me. Then get to the catch, for I am sure you don't really agree with what I have just been saying. I distinctly get the sense that you are playing with me again.

John: I am certainly serious in conceding that there can be no free human actions in which God is not intimately involved as Creator. When I choose to do something, my choosing is a real process in a real me. How could it (and I) exist if God were not making it to be? If it could, then I see no reason to believe in God at all. If I, and not God, could bring about the existence of my free choices, then something can exist without God accounting for this. And if that is so, then belief in God as Creator seems to me to be undermined. If

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something other than God can exist as uncaused by him, then why cannot everything we know about exist in the same way?

Ron: So you really do not think of human freedom as causally independent of God?

John: Indeed I do not, just like many other Christians. Here I agree with authors like Aquinas (to whom you referred earlier in our discussion). According to him, a free human choice is a change in a person caused by God. For Aquinas, we are free not in spite of God but because of God, who works in every creature to make it what it is, and what it is doing, at any given time.

Ron: O.K. Well, one to me (a gift that I didn't expect). But now you must surely also concede that God is responsible for the evil in evil done. Or, perhaps, this is where the catch comes in.

John: Yes, I am afraid that you are right. There is a kind of catch. For, so I think, the evil in evil done is no more a positive matter than is the evil in evil suffered. And, considered as such, it is not created by God and is certainly not willed by him as an end in itself. The evil in my evil done is a matter of what I should be doing but am not doing. In a sense, it is not even done by me. It is a failure in action: a failure to avoid evil, a failure to turn to what is good. As I see it, a bad human action is always one by which the agent is not doing something appropriate. Of course, one can hardly manage not to do something without doing something (even if the something in question is sitting in a chair while trying not to move). But this does not mean that bad human choices are not essentially failures to act in some respect. And, so I say, considered as such, their badness is not something created by God even though, as Aquinas says, God operates in every operation, including the activity of the human will.

Ron: So you think that there is no difference as between evil suffered and evil done when it comes to God's causality?

John: In one sense I don't. For I take God to be creatively active in all that is real in each of them. But in another sense I do. And that's because, as I said earlier, I think that in the case of evil suffered there is always a concomitant good that God is bringing about. In the case of evil suffered, however, there is no concomitant good, except accidentally. My unjust murder of you might, as it happens, lead to all sorts of good results. But these results would not be concomitant goods of my evil done in the way that the goods that accompany evil suffered are. Taking my evil done strictly on its own leaves us confronted by nothing flourishing. It leaves us confronted with a dead loss.

VI

Ron: So you deny that God creates evil. You think that he makes things which sometimes flourish at the expense of others (evil suffered) and that this always amounts to him creating what is good. You also

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think that God brings it about that people act freely (a good thing) and that people sometimes fail to act well. But you take failing to act well to be not doing something, so you say that the badness in people's failure to act is not created by God. Your view is that God makes to be what is good and positive in a free human action. And you seem to hold that what is lacking in such an action is not God's doing.

John: I think that you have caught my drift pretty well.

Ron: In that case, however, who is responsible for a bad human action? Who is to blame for it? Given your account of things, doesn't it have to be God?

John: Well, suppose that the branch of a tree knocks me out in a gale. Instead of saying that I was knocked out by the branch of a tree, should I say that God knocked me out?

Ron: Given that the branch rendered you unconscious, I suppose you should say that it was the branch that rendered you unconscious even though it (on your account) falls under God's providence in directing the course of history.

John: In that case, however, why not say the same when it comes to human actions? It seems odd to suggest that people don't brew coffee even though their existence from moment to moment depends on God their Creator. And it seems equally odd to say that God is to blame when it comes to a bad human action. Such an action is the doing of a human being. Insofar as it is bad, then, so I claim, it is a failure in action and its badness is not something created. But it is still the action of a human being. And we can sensibly hold a human being responsible for it.

Ron: Ah, but can we on your account of things? If I hit you, then it is I who hit you, not God. That, I take it, is what you have just been trying to suggest. And I am prepared to buy into that idea. But you claim that God makes my free actions to be. And this appears to make God responsible for them. On your account, so it seems to me, I can really do nothing freely. I am always a puppet of God. You think that God makes me to be all that I am. And you think that what I am includes the choices I make. But doesn't this mean that God determines me to act as I do? And if God does that, then how can he be anything but responsible for what you call evil done? How can there be any human freedom if God is the Creator of everything other than himself?

John: These, of course, are very good questions. And, like all good questions, I think that they have answers. But may I first put another question to you?

Ron: I am beginning to get a little tired. And I have an engagement to attend. So we may have to end this conversation before long. For the moment, though, please go ahead. What's your question?

John: It's one that occurs to me because of your use of the word 'determined'. I am wondering what you would take to be the

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difference between a human action which is determined and one which is not. What do you take the difference here to be?

Ron: Now you make me feel even more tired. For the question you ask makes me think about the many debates in which people have engaged when it comes to the question 'Does anyone act freely?'. And I am already beginning to yawn as I think of all these. Not because the debates are boring, of course. My problem is that they are very complex and hard to follow. And I am not sure that I am up to considering them seriously at present. I am, as I say, tired.

John: Fatigue, I sometimes think, can make one clear headed. In particular, it can help one to focus on what is most clearly true. So, tired as you are, tell me about the difference between an action that is determined and one which is not?

Ron: Well, first of all, I think that there are, strictly speaking, no non-determined human actions. To my way of thinking, actions are what people do voluntarily. So they are all freely chosen. I might slide down a staircase because someone has pushed me. But that, I think, would not be an action of mine. I take a human action to be something for which someone could always, in principle, provide a reason by way of explanation. If you push me, and if I then slide down the stairs, it would be wrong for an observer to ask me 'Why are you doing that?' For I am not really doing anything. My bumping down from stair to stair is nothing that I choose to do. I want to distinguish between what happens to us and what we choose to do in the light of reasons that we have. And I want to say that we do not act freely unless we do so with reasons of our own.

John: That's a fair distinction to make. But you have still not answered my question.

Ron: Haven't I? Perhaps it's you who are getting tired. For I have just told you that free actions are what people undertake with reasons of their own. When I act freely, whether for good or ill, I am aiming at what I want. Contrast this with my falling down stairs because I am pushed. My aiming does not enter into this scenario. My movements are explicable in terms of other things in the world (the action of the one who pushed me, the force of gravity, and so on).

John: So you are saying that the difference between a free human action and that which is determined is this: a free human action expresses or embodies the intentions of the agent and is not the result of what other things in the world are doing to it. Is that your position?

Ron: Yes it is. I think that I am free insofar as I am not at the mercy of anything in the universe. I am free insofar as I do my own thing and am not the tool of something doing its own thing while acting on me.

John: Tired though you are, I think that you have indeed hit the nail on the head when it comes to the question of freedom and determinism. Your account squares with much that has been said

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on the topic we are now discussing. People who have written about it have often concluded that determinism is true because all that goes on with me is the inevitable account of the pressures on me of things in the world over which I have no control.

Ron: But I am not a determinist. As I've told you, I believe that there is such a thing as human action. And I do not see how this can be so unless people have reasons of their own for acting and are not just compelled when it comes to what happens to them by things in the world outside them. And that is why I say that it is you who are the determinist. For you speak of God as the cause of all my actions. And I do not see how God can be this if I am not determined in all that I do. If what you say of God is true, then everything is determined. It is determined in advance by the will of God. And I do not like that idea.

John: Nor do I. But should we think of God's will as something which renders our actions determined rather than free? You yourself just said that we are free if nothing in the world has its way with us so as to make us do what we do. But God is not something in the world. He is the reason why there is any world at all. It is, of course, easy to think of God as something forcing or determining us to do what we do. But to think in this way is surely to fail to allow for the difference between God and creatures. I can force or determine you to do something. But I can only do so as an agent external to you acting on you so as to interfere with you somehow. Yet God cannot stand to us as an agent of this kind. If God is our Creator, he makes us to be, as opposed to there being nothing. And he is doing so for as long as we exist. To call God the Creator of the world is not just to note that he got the world started. It is also to note that he sustains it in being. If that is so, however, God can hardly be an agent acting on us so as to interfere with us. And if that, in turn, is so, God is no threat to our freedom. On the contrary, we are free not in spite of God but because of him.

Ron: If I were being perverse, I'd paraphrase what you just said as 'God, though the cause of my actions, does not prevent us from being free since God makes no difference to anything'. But that can't be what you think, can it?

John: On the contrary. That way captures my thinking very well. For consider what is normally involved in making a difference to something. Doesn't it involve tinkering with something somehow? Don't I, for example, make a difference to you by changing or modifying you? Yet how can God be thought of as making a difference to things in this way?

Ron: I'd have thought that the answer was obvious. God can make a difference to something by bringing it about that the thing changes in some way.

John: Well, that is obviously true. But I am not now concerned with God as accounting for change. Rather, I am thinking about

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God as the reason why there is anything there to undergo change. And, so I'm suggesting, God, considered as such, makes no difference to anything just because he accounts for things being there with all the differences between them and all the changes that they undergo. If we really believe in God as Creator, then we believe that everything, in all its various forms, depends for its existence on God. And, so I think, one way of being for creatures is a way of being in which they are not at the mercy of other creatures but are able to make decisions of their own. To pick up on what you said above, my view is that I am free because I am not interfered with by a creature, not because I am created by God as a freely acting person. Or as I observed above, I am free, not in spite of God, but because of him. In my view, God is not part of the world. He makes the world to be. Some things (like stones) are always at the mercy of other created things, and such things lack freedom. But other things made by God are individuals who can, at least sometimes, act without being constrained by other worldly things. Such things have the power of acting freely.

VII

Ron: I think that I recognize that line of argument. Isn't it basically what we find in the writings of your friend Aquinas?

John: Full marks to you for identifying my mentor. You are better read than I thought you were. But am I to take your question as implying a criticism?

Ron: No. But your position seems to me to raise a problem when it comes to God and evil. Suppose that I agree that evil done is always a case of God willing good. And suppose that I concede that evil done is a failure of some kind and, hence, a lack of goodness which cannot be thought of as something created by God. It still remains that there are things which are not as good as they could be. Maybe it's true that if God is to make a world of lions, he is committed to producing a world in which some things can be expected to suffer at the expense of others (lambs, or bacteria, or whatever). But why can't God preserve the being of all lambs, and of all other things, by virtue of a miracle? And why can't he see to it that my free choices never lack a truly good intent?

John: If you are asking me 'Can God arrange for nothing to suffer and for everyone to act well?', then I think that my answer is 'Yes'. If, logically speaking, something could be the case, then God, I think, could creatively make it to be the case. I suspect that there is no logical absurdity involved in the notion of a world in which nothing suffers. And I see no logical absurdity in the notion of a world in which freely acting agents always behave themselves. That is because I believe that God is omnipotent. And, before you ask me what I

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mean by the statement 'God is omnipotent', let me say that I take it to mean 'If something can, without logical contradiction, be thought of as being, then God can make it to be'. But why does all this pose a problem for you?

Ron: Because I think that God must therefore be guilty by neglect. There are lots of conceivable goods that God, on your account, could have brought about. He could have made a world in which nothing in nature suffered. He could have made me to be a saint. But he has obviously not done so. So I deem him blameable and I therefore deny that he is good.

John: But blameable in what way? Are you thinking of some standard to which God ought to conform? Are you suggesting that, in not creating more goodness than he has, God is somehow behaving badly? If so, then I do not follow you. I can make no sense of God being subject to requirements which would render what he does, or does not do, something for which guilt could be imputed to him.

Ron: But you say that God is good. So why can't he be thought of as guilty, albeit by neglect (since we seem to have agreed that God does not will evil directly and as an end in itself)?

John: You raise a difficult question here. But my basic answer is that God has no obligations or duties to which he should conform. I presume that you are using the word 'guilty' in a moral sense. You are, I take it, saying that God is morally culpable for not producing as much goodness as he could and ought. You are suggesting that God is badly behaved. But I do not believe that God is morally good (well behaved). I do not, of course, think that God is sub-moral (like a tree) or immoral (like me). I think that God is the source of a world in which we can discriminate between that which is morally good and that which is not.

Ron: But doesn't 'good' mean 'morally good'? And shouldn't we say that God is good because he does what he ought, morally speaking, to do?

John: 'Good' does not always mean 'morally good'. There are good people, and to call people good is usually to adjudicate on them from a moral viewpoint. But there are good surgeons, good meals, good holidays, good computers, good all sorts of things other than people who are morally good. Goodness is not exclusively moral.

Ron: But are we not taught to think of God as morally good? Are we not supposed to believe that God always does what he ought to do morally speaking?

John: Are we? Who do you take to be your teachers in this matter? There are certainly people who conceive of God as a magnified and enlarged human being with all the duties and obligations had by us. But God is not a human being. He is not even a god. He is the source of the existence of everything other than himself. And, in himself, and

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considered as that from which the created order proceeds, he has no context in the light of which he can be thought of as having duties or obligations. God makes contexts. He does not belong to one. And this, of course, is how the Bible depicts him.

Ron: Would you care to elaborate on that last point.

John: Certainly. For biblical authors, God generates obligations by commanding people to act (or not to act) in certain ways. For them, God is bound by no law. Nor do they think of God as exhibiting human virtues. Aristotle taught that key human virtues include temperance, courage, and prudence. But biblical authors speak of God in a way which implies that he has none of these virtues. Temperance has to do with moderation when it comes to sources of physical pleasure. But the biblical God has no body. Courage is a matter of being able to deal with adversity. But the biblical God cannot be vanquished by anything. Prudence is a matter of recognizing what it is best to do in the circumstances in which one finds oneself. But the biblical God does not find himself to be in any circumstances. He is not part of the universe. Aristotle teaches that justice is a virtue. And God is certainly said to be just in the Bible. But by 'justice' Aristotle meant 'giving what one owes'. For Biblical authors, however, God owes nothing to anyone. His justice, far from conforming to a standard binding on him, sets standards for what is binding on people. When biblical writers tell us that God is just, they are simply noting that he acts in accordance with his decrees. And, in general, the biblical God is not depicted as being what we would think of as a morally good human being. He favours certain people. But not because they have done anything special to deserve it. He smites certain people. But not because they are (by the canons of most moral philosophers) morally reprobate. God forms light and creates darkness. He makes weal and creates woe. He is consistently portrayed as being above reproach, though not because he does his duty or is virtuous by human standards. Biblical authors sometimes complain about him. But they typically end up taking the view that God is not subject to appraisal as people are. They conclude that God is in a class of his own and is not, like people, to be judged by standards to which he is bound. In short, they presume that God is neither well behaved nor badly behaved.

Ron: But doesn't your friend Aquinas say that God owes debts to creatures and that his justice (at least partly) consists in him giving what is due to them? And, if Aquinas is right, does not God possess the moral virtue of justice? And can he not therefore be judged to be good or bad from a moral point of view?

John: Once again, I have to say that you seem to be better read in Aquinas than I thought that you were! And, indeed, you are right in some of what you now say. Hence, for example, in Article 2 of Question 21 of his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas says that God is truly (and not just metaphorically) just since he acts in accordance

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with what is owed to him and since he gives what is due to creatures. But please notice what Aquinas is saying here. When it comes to God's justice to himself, Aquinas simply means that God's will is at work in everything he makes and that all that God makes manifests the goodness that God essentially is. And, when it comes to God's justice to creatures, all Aquinas means is that God makes creatures to be what they are essentially. He means that, for example (and to cite an example which Aquinas himself gives), that God is just because he provides people (in general) with hands. And in saying all this, Aquinas is quite clearly not saying what we normally have in mind when we commend people morally for being just. In his talk about God's justice, Aquinas is clearly doing two things. He is stressing that God is the Creator and sovereign Lord of all things, none of which fall outside his providential direction. He is also claiming that creatures are what they are essentially because God makes them to be what they essentially are. And in talking like this, of course, Aquinas is very much reflecting the biblical view of God. And, his view, I think, is correct.

Ron: So you are saying that God's goodness is not ours.

John: Yes, and then no. I am saying that God is not a human being subject to moral obligations. But I do not think that I am punning or equivocating when I say that God is good. For one thing, I can make no sense of the notion of God lacking what he needs to be perfectly himself, which, in my book, implies that God is good. Then again, I take all creaturely goodness, in all its many forms, to derive from God as making the difference between there being something and nothing. And, to put things as bluntly as possible, I do not believe that one can give what one does not have. In my view, God, considered as the Creator, is good because all that we think of as good derives from what God is and must, therefore, express what he is. If I say that some creature is good, and that God is good, I am not equivocating. But neither am I saying that their goodness consists in them being exactly like each other as things belonging to the same class can be. In this sense, so I think, it is ludicrous to suppose that God is good as any creature is good.

VIII

Ron: So where does this leave us when it comes to God and evil? If I understand you correctly, your position amounts to the following theses: (1) Evil is a lack of being and is therefore not directly willed by God creatively; (2) Everything created by God, every positive reality other than God, is good and is produced by God; (3) God could have produced a lot more goodness than he has, but this does not mean that God is subject to moral censure since God's goodness is not moral goodness.

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John: That is what I want to say. Though I'd want to stress that, in taking this line, I am not claiming any great insight into God. People sometimes demand an explanation of how evil fits into God's scheme of things. I do not pretend to have any such explanation. Evil, for me, is a mystery, just like God. Why has God not produced more goodness that he has? I have no idea. That, for me, is the mystery of evil. I do, however, claim that evil does not show that God does not exist. And, if you can bear with me awhile, there are some other things that I'd say.

Ron: Maybe you've said enough already. And, anyway, I must leave you soon since, as I've said, I have an engagement. But tell me very briefly what you'd want to add to what you've already said.

John: Well, one thing I'd add is that, even if you disagree with everything I've been arguing, you should hesitate before concluding that evil shows that there is no God since it seems reasonable to suppose that our perspective is limited. People, after all, are finite things with a finite degree of knowledge. We are ignorant of so much. So, even if we can't see how, might it not be the case that evil actually coheres with the existence of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and good?

Ron: That seems a rather feeble move to make. You are now suggesting that maybe we don't see all the picture and that, if we did, then maybe we would see how evil and God connect with each other. But there seem to be too many 'maybe's' here for comfort.

John: I take your point. But it's true that we are ignorant of many things. And, for that reason, I think we might reasonably adopt a position of agnosticism when it comes to God and evil. Your position is not agnostic. You think that evil shows that there definitely is no God. Given our limited knowledge (very limited when set beside omniscience), I think that a little more caution is called for. What seems to us to be proof of or evidence for God's non-existence might appear in a different light given information we currently lack. Opponents of belief in God often insist that there are evils which could never be reconciled with belief in God's existence. But how can such people know that knowledge not presently available to us could not reasonably lead them to revise their view? 'Because', they might reply, 'there is decisive evidence to the contrary'. But such 'evidence' has to be nothing but a small part of what, if those who believe in God are right, is a very big picture indeed. It encompasses the being and workings of God, not to mention the history of the universe from its beginning to its end.

Ron: O.K. I'll think about that. But are you now finished?

John: Not entirely. But what I have to say would detain you longer than you are able to stay. Since you leave me while promising to think, however, may I put a few more questions into you head as you now race off?

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Ron: Of course. But be quick.

John: I take you to think that human suffering serves no good. But might not a lot of it be justified on the ground that it leads to some good which, given the way things are, cannot come about without it? Or cannot we at least entertain the thought that human suffering does, as a matter of fact, lead to great good? Can't suffering and adversity help to make people better human beings? Don't pleasure and happiness bring dangers of their own?

Ron: When it comes to your last question, the answer, I fear, is 'Yes', as I shall probably soon discover for myself. I am off to a party, and I expect to get very drunk there. And I am sure that I'll pay a penalty when I wake up tomorrow. But don't think I'm mocking you as I leave you on this note. I'll brood on what you say. And perhaps we can meet again to discuss the vexing topic of our current conversation. You will surely agree that we've hardly said the last word on it.

John: I would say that we have barely begun to scrape its surface.

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