Religious Studies **36**, 221–225 Printed in the United Kingdom © 2000 Cambridge University Press

Reply to Richard Gale

RICHARD SWINBURNE

Oriel College, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 4EW

I am most grateful to Richard Gale for the detailed attention which he has paid to my detailed arguments, and for the kind remarks between which he sandwiches his hard-hitting criticisms. The first of the latter is that I 'slosh back and forth' (211) between different theses, S_s, S_w, and W. I hope not, but I agree that I may not have made the relation between these sufficiently clear. I am certainly committed to, and sought to argue for, the strong version of the strong thesis:

S_s For every instance of evil, God is justified in allowing it.

But I cannot examine every instance of evil in order to show that – I do not know of all the evils, let alone have time or space to discuss each of them. So I need to produce an inductive argument for S_s, and I seek to do so by considering the various kinds of evil, and trying to show that God is justified in allowing any evil of that kind. Hence I consider the evils of having bad desires, making wrong choices which cause suffering to oneself, making wrong choices which cause suffering to others, suffering occurring through natural processes, ignorance of God etc. I divide evils into kinds, in such a way that the morally significant differences between evils of a given kind is simply one of degree – different instances of suffering occurring through natural processes differ in respect of their intensity and the period of time they last.

In the course of chapters 3 to 12, I purport to show that God is justified in allowing evils of each kind as such, to occur. Hence I argue there for what Gale calls the weak version of the strong thesis:

S_w For every kind of evil, God is justified in allowing some instances of it.

Whether there are some evils of some kinds which are too awful for a good God to allow them to occur is, I have always believed, the crux of the problem of evil. I therefore save discussion of it until the last chapter. I argue there that reflection on various thought experiments, on the great good of being-of-use and on the fact

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500005217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that no human suffers for more than the short finite period of a human life, leads to the conclusion that there are no known actual evils of any kind too awful for God to allow them to occur. Hence I argue inductively from S_w, via the considerations just mentioned, to S_s. If my strategy is not sufficiently clear in the book, I apologize. What Gale calls the weak thesis, *W*, occurs only in my introduction.

> *W* Long reflection on this [evil] will make it less and less obvious that some significant suffering for the very short period of an earthly life is ruled out [by the existence of an all-powerful, loving God].

This is simply my prediction that some very good and rational people will come to think that there is something in the argument of my book, even if they do not agree with it fully. This concerns quite a different issue from whether my argument is correct, but Gale's review is a small confirmation of that prediction.

A theodicy is always an attempt to rebut an objection to the existence of God, either one actually made by an atheist or one lurking within the heart of a believer. It tries to show that there is no incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil. It therefore assumes the existence of God as well as of evil, and tries to show that no incompatibility results. The theodicy of this book assumes not merely the existence of God but various particular Christian doctrines, such as life after death, in which there are not the kind of moral difficulties which are raised by the problem of evil; and tries to show that the existence of God, together with these doctrines, in not inconsistent with, nor rendered improbable by, the occurrence of evil. Gale objects to the fact that I do not prove these doctrines in the present book – 'readers will be upset by this lack of self-containment', he writes (218). But it is really not a good objection to a book designed to show the compatibility of *p* and *q*, that it does not prove *p*.

As Gale notes, I do refer the reader interested in my views on how these Christian doctrines may be established, to my 1992 book *Revelation*.[1] In response, Gale refers the reader to 'powerful objections' to it in ten pages of Alvin Plantinga's forthcoming book.[2] The reader who is 'upset by this lack of self-containment' in Gale's review, will not have long to wait, either for Plantinga's book nor for an initial brief response to it by me. 'Lack of self-containment' is inevitable in any work of philosophy of reasonable length – for philosophy is such an integrated subject; a book on epistemology makes assumptions about metaphysics, a book on ethics makes assumptions about epistemology etc. But what matters is that the author should make clear what he is assuming and what he is arguing for on the basis of the former. That I have sought to do.

One further assumption which I make in order to have a manageable discussion of the central issue, is that humans have free will in the sense that they have the power to choose 'whether or not to bring about effects without being subject to causes which determine how [they] will exercise that power'. Since I do not seek

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500005217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to establish this, it is again unreasonable of Gale to accuse me of an 'omission' in not discussing an objection to it. But this assumption, like all assumptions, can be defended in another place; and I refer the interested reader to the place where I have discussed human free will at some length – my *The Evolution of the Soul*.[3]

Now for a few minor matters before we come to the central issue. Gale claims (213) that if Maximus is right in supposing that the Blessed are omniscient, not by nature but by grace, 'some actual non-perfect being's knowledge exceeds God's'. I do not see why. The 'omniscience' of the Blessed would be omniscience of just the same kind as God's – knowledge of all that it is logically possible to know. Neither for the Blessed nor for God would the result of future human free choices be within the range of omniscience – by Pike's argument. (Gale claims that this argument is subject to a 'glaring fallacy'; but he adds no note telling us where he explains what that is.) There is no 'paralysis of the divine will leading to a contradiction' (215) involved in God's not being able to do the best, if there is no best or equal best act; He just freely does some good act. It is no objection (218) to my claim that God has the right to allow one individual to suffer so long as he gives him overall a good package of life, that God 'could meet this obligation and still cause unjustified evils – evils which could not satisfy [my] conditions (a) to (d)'. Of course, my claim – very explicitly – is that an evil has to satisfy all four conditions in order for it to be compatible with God's goodness that He should bring it about; only condition (a) is concerned with God's 'right' to bring it about. I certainly did not 'admit' (216) in *The Existence of God* that 'the probabilities of God's existence relative to the premises of different theistic arguments are inscrutable'. What I did say is that, to use Gale's phrase, their 'precise value[s]' (216) are inscrutable. The same goes for the precise values of the probabilities of any scientific theory.

What, however, everything turns on is whether Gale is right that, 'it is intuitively obvious, based on what we actually know about this world, that the expected value of God's determining that there exist a particular free person or natural evil is on the negative side of the ledger, however inscrutable its precise value might be' (216). My book is a sustained attempt to show that what Gale claims to be 'intuitively obvious', probably is not so. I do this by trying to persuade the reader that there are great goods for which the various forms of evil are logically necessary. Some of these goods are ones ignored by most writers on theodicy, who tend to assume that the only good states are ones of pleasurable enjoyment. I seek to argue in particular, that the goods of freely choosing between good and evil, and of being of use, can be, and in the crucial cases are, so great that they outweigh the earthly suffering and other evil needed to make them possible. As I write in my introduction, 'I can easily understand many deeply sensitive people reacting with horror at the very attempt' to show this. So I fully understand Gale's indignation; there will be other reviewers even more indignant. My book is an attempt to persuade such people to begin to think again in order to get things into what I

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500005217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argue is the right perspective. But, as I acknowledge in my introduction, it may require more than reading one book, however cogent are the arguments of that book, before 'a radical change of moral stance' results.

Gale concentrates his attack on my claim that being-of-use is in itself a good for him who is of use and one which often outweighs any suffering or other bad state involved in it. Gale regards my purported illustrations of the latter as similar in structure to (216) the 'perverse foreign policy of the USA in south-east Asia' being of use in leading to 'excellent, inexpensive Oriental restaurants' in Pittsburgh today. But there are two all-important disanalogies between such examples of Gale's and the serious ones which I consider, such as the conscript dying in battle being of use in making possible victory in a just war. The first disanalogy is that the 'perverse foreign policy' was a wrong act. But, I argue explicitly, no-one is ever justified in wrongdoing in order to make possible some greater good. (I cite St. Paul, 'Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid.') And that naturally yields the view, which I endorse, that wrongdoing is never on balance a good for the agent, however much good it makes possible. And the second disanalogy is, of course, the quantitative one. My examples are ones where the good which one person is of use in providing for another, is a big one, not one as tiny as the good of Pittsburgh's Oriental restaurants. I emphasize continually throughout the book that goods and evils have to be weighed against each other, and that the goods and evils which I discuss come in varying strengths. A's being of use to B is only on balance a good for A if the benefit to B is not a small one in comparison with the suffering (or other bad state) involved in A's being of use. A human H has at most an extremely limited right to cause or allow A to suffer in order that he may be of use to B. Such a right, in so far as it exists, arises from H being responsible for A's existence and nurture. (The National Rifle Association has no responsibility at all for the existence and nurture of any other humans.) The responsibility of humans for the existence and nurture of other humans is as nothing compared with God's responsibility for our existence and nurture; and so His right to cause or allow us to suffer in order to be of use is vastly greater than our right in respect of any other humans. God wants the very best for us – not just a life of comfort, a bit of free choice facilitated by some minor temptations, a little bit of being-of-use. He wants us to become saints by making difficult choices and being of great use, even if this involves suffering for the short period of an earthly life – as well as enjoying the celestial banquet in the world to come. Hence, I stick by my view that there is good reason for God to permit (not to cause) the Holocaust, and the other vast evils of recent centuries. And in connection with the Holocaust, it is important to realize that the greatest evil was not that suffered by the Jews, but that suffered by the concentration camp guards. The Jews lost only their lives, the guards lost their souls (in the sense of any desire to pursue the good). But the latter loss was a loss resulting from a free choice and one which, Gale reminds us, I claimed that God was desperately anxious to deter. But there

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500005217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is no sense in supposing that God or anyone else could make someone freely choose the good.

It is, or ought to be, painful to analyse the morality of allowing evils to occur; for it involves holding in temporary check the compassion which it is natural (and good) to feel for those who suffer. And it did hurt me to write the previous paragraph, but I believe it to be true (even if, for some of us, this life might be more comfortable if it was false.) And I wrote *Providence and the Problem of Evil* to try to begin the process of persuading others that it is true.[4]

Notes

1. Richard Swinburne *Revelation*: *From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
2. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
3. Richard Swinburne *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986 (rev. edn 1997)).
4. Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500005217 Published online by Cambridge University Press