Chapter 5
Facing evil

Evil is the most critical problem for the God who has been the focus of the two previous chapters. For innumerable people over the centuries evil has been the greatest practical and intellectual obstacle to believing and trusting in God. In the face of so much misery, pollution, and wickedness, a loving God who creates and sustains this world and continues to be active in its history for the good of all creation can seem not only morally unbelievable but even ridiculous.

It is not only believers in God who have a problem with evil: it is a basic issue for any philosophy or worldview. A 'solution' to evil which does away with a good God will face other problems. If, for example, the solution is to see evil as simply one natural outcome of a messy, chance-driven evolution in a universe without God, then there will still be questions about how one can or should respond to it, and problems about the meaninglessness of the whole process. There are no unproblematic solutions to evil—it is even questionable whether it is right to see it in terms of a problem with some conceivable intellectual solution. Is an attempt to solve it not to trivialize it? Surely it is above all a practical problem which calls for practical responses? Yet most practical responses require thought and intelligence, and stopping thinking about evil is no solution either. This chapter will explore ways of

thinking about evil, while recognizing the terrible dangers of thinking inappropriately about this most practically urgent matter.

Personal, structural, and natural evil

Most areas of life unavoidably pose the problem of evil. What has been labelled 'moral evil' or 'human evil' or 'sin' touches every sphere of human activity. People are unjust, malicious, and cruel, they lie, cheat, murder, betray, and so on. Every relationship and activity can be distorted or corrupted. The natural world can be polluted, spoiled, or destroyed. Evil can be part of our deepest friendships, our marriages, and our family life, and its effects can accumulate year after year. It need by no means be obvious: it can be insidious and subtle.

Some of the most persistent dilemmas posed by human evil are regularly demonstrated in law courts. Of course, not all things a society considers morally wrong are illegal (many forms of lying, malice, cruelty, and betrayal are not against the law), and not all laws are about what is morally right and wrong (much traffic or commercial legislation), but day after day we hear of legal cases in which classic issues are raised about how evil is to be understood. Above all, there is the matter of freedom and responsibility. Was the accused really responsible for his or her actions? Were there factors such as state of mental health or intimidation or a history of bad parenting and abuse which would support a plea of diminished responsibility? Or should there be a verdict of 'guilty but insane'?

Questions like that are a battleground for some of the most powerful forces in our civilization. The modern West has been deeply split about freedom and responsibility. On the one hand, it has championed human freedom in many forms—human rights, sexual freedom, political liberty, freedom to choose in many spheres. On the other hand, many of its most intelligent members have not believed people are free at all, and have devoted great

efforts to show that really we are the product of our genes, our unconscious drives, our education, economic pressures, or other forms of conditioning. In other words, there have been tension and conflict between those who affirm human freedom, dignity, rights, rationality, and responsibility, and those who offer various 'reductionist' accounts of humanity, often drawing on the natural or human sciences.

These differences have deep roots in theology. The very idea of the responsible individual who is legally accountable has in the West been shaped by a merging of Christianity with the law of the Roman Empire. Augustine in particular had great influence, and the tensions can be seen in his thought about freedom. On the one hand, he did not want to make God responsible for evil, so human sin (and other forms of evil which he saw flowing from it) was, he said, due to human freedom going wrong in Adam, according to his reading of the biblical story of the Fall in Genesis Chapter 3. On the other hand, he recognized the pervasive influence of being part of a human race whose dynamics have gone terribly wrong, so that we cannot escape being caught up in sin and evil. Through all this he wanted to do justice to God being in control of everything and people being only able to be good thanks to the grace of God. This sets up a huge problem about how human beings are free and how their freedom relates to God's freedom. It is clear that the way such problems are answered has a great effect on how sin is understood, and on how legal systems and other institutions handle questions of responsibility and accountability.

But what if the very legal system is corrupt? What if laws are made which dehumanize large numbers of people, as the Nazi laws against the Jews and others did? What if women or black people or husbands are discriminated against in law and in the way a whole system works? What sort of evil is that? It is a feature of social scientific description of societies and institutions to show how each has its 'culture', embodying certain perceptions, values,

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norms, and judgements on the nature of reality. These are often not made explicit—in fact, it is usual for the most fundamental of them to be taken for granted as simply the way things are. Natural scientists do not usually articulate the very strong ethical norms of their worldwide network—in fact, they often do not reflect on themselves as part of a moral community. Political parties do not usually debate why human lives should be valued at all, nor do lawyers ask whether referring to laws is an appropriate way of settling disputes. Yet fundamental questions can be asked about such matters which are to do with the way whole societies and institutions are structured. Moreover, evils can be identified in the way such structures work. Might the dynamics of capitalism so distort and damage human well-being that the whole economic system should be radically changed? Might defective ethical and political responsibility be embodied in the normal ways of working in the scientific community, so that it is at least partly to blame for a great deal of ecological damage, and for the death and suffering caused by modern warfare? Might religious communities above all be corrupters of human life, indoctrinating people into passions and hostilities which threaten to destroy the world?

In theological terms, we have opened up the area of 'structural sin'. People find themselves part of structures whose dynamics militate against human flourishing: Individuals cannot be held directly responsible for the resultant evils, yet they are implicated in complex ways. In modern times especially, human beings have collectively been responsible for unleashing forces which nobody can control: political systems and revolutions, military establishments and wars, stock markets and crashes, technologies which seem to have their own momentum beyond anyone's ability to stop them, information systems and media which shape cultures in ways no one can predict or prevent. These factors, and many others, combine to form dynamics which have immense power to damage individuals and whole communities in multiple ways. But can anyone be held responsible? What does it mean to blame 'the system'? The very language of blame seems inappropriate, yet we

[Handwritten marginalia:]
If there is never evil, there cannot be a turning away or of egs.
Problem in Theology
Freedom
Evil produced by society – structural evil.
Who're responsible?

are reluctant to give up using moral language about things that can produce such good and evil and which have been devised by human beings. One form of theological language that is sometimes used is that of the demonic or 'principalities and powers'. That draws on terms in the Christian and other traditions which have been used to refer to evil which is beyond individual human beings, which can take hold of individuals and whole communities or nations, and which seems to have a momentum and will of its own that is unresponsive to human control or even rationality. But should not God be seen as responsible for all such evil, given that God is responsible for the world in which these terrible dynamics multiply?

Besides evil that comes from human intentions and from humanly designed systems and structures, there is also what is sometimes called 'natural evil', meaning the pain, suffering, and death which come through diseases, natural disasters, and other harmful forces. Did God create the world intending such things to happen? In the face of them, can any form of interaction of God with the world be imagined in which a creating and sustaining God is both good and powerful?

The accusations against God could be multiplied, but they all amount to one great cry of protest, leading onto God ultimate responsibility for a world in which there is horrendous evil.
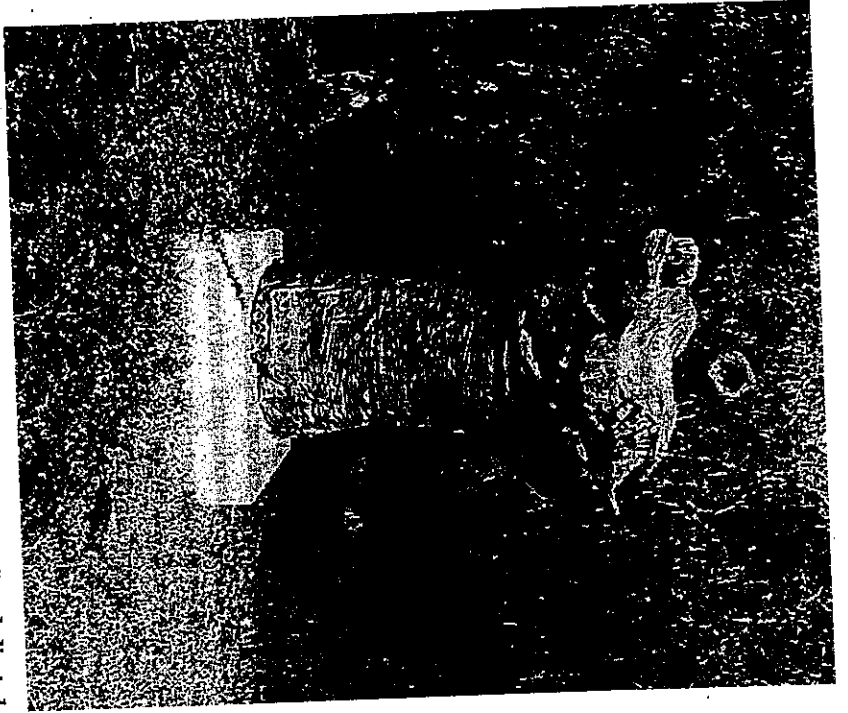
The best possible theodicy?

Theodicy (from the Greek words for God and justice) is the name for the sort of theology and philosophy which tries to justify God in response to such accusations. Some theologians refuse to enter into the discussion because they see it as inappropriate for human beings to judge God. But that is not necessarily what is going on. It can just as well be an attempt to question God arising out of anguish and apparent contradictions which it would be irresponsible to ignore.

Yet if it is legitimate, and even unavoidable, that does not make theodicy achievable in any satisfactory way. I will try to offer the best theodicy I can, and then will probe it with questions which it cannot adequately answer.

There are several promising lines of theodicy in response to the accusation that a good, all-powerful God would never allow personal, structural, or natural evil. One is to ask about the concept of God being assumed. Imagine a God who creates a world in which there is genuine freedom, and who refuses to manipulate that freedom into always doing good. Is it not the case that any such manipulation would mean that the world is just a machine run by God, with humans as robots? If that is granted, certain sorts of intervention are ruled out and things must be able to go wrong. When freedom is misused, God might offer ways of coping with the results, ways of patience, resistance, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. God might even in some sense suffer the consequences of evil, taking responsibility for it by identifying fully both with those who undergo it and those who do it. Others could be drawn into this responsibility and a way of life opened up that can both face the worst realistically and also share a new quality of life. That is obviously a Trinitarian theodicy, assuming a God who creates a world that is genuinely free, who takes responsibility for it to the point of being part of it in its suffering, evil, and death, and whose Spirit enables others to be immersed in it in faith, hope, and love without letting evil have the last word.

A further dimension of that approach is to try to see the various aspects of evil from the perspective of trust in God. Unimaginable though it may seem now, it is conceivable that even out of horrendous evil God may be trusted to bring good. It is also possible that viewed from the end of the story many aspects that seemed terrible or tragic might make some sort of sense. We are familiar with many other contexts in which our judgement of what is good or bad can change radically when we see a fuller picture—what appeared to be torture turns out to be medical

3. A mother holding her dead child. Sculpture by Ilana Guy, dedicated at the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, in 1974

Some aspects of natural evil can be seen as bound up with aspects of something good. Biological death can seem very different in the perspective of eternal life beyond death, and physical pain and suffering are sometimes bound up with acts of love and self-sacrifice, from childbirth to organ donation. Some theologians have taken the view that all natural evil, including natural disasters and predation (animals killing and eating one another), is necessary to a natural order which allows for the flourishing of a diverse ecosystem. Others have suggested that a contingent universe in which natural evil is possible is required for there to be human freedom.

Then there is the human standpoint from which we view evil. Strange to say, it often seems far worse in relation to God when we are the spectators rather than the sufferers. This is not, of course, always the case, but there are many examples of it—someone suffers great evil, such as torture, betrayal, painful disability, or humiliation, whose trust in God is somehow deepened through it, whereas others who see them suffering find their own faith shaken or broken. One of the reasons why it is not impossible to have faith in God even after Auschwitz is that many who suffered and died in Auschwitz maintained faith in God. There is a warning here against thinking we know what is really going on in any situation between God and its participants. Many arguments which accuse God are the arguments of spectators who assume they are able to see what is most important in situations. And even if a sufferer loses faith in God, that need by no means be the last word in that person's relationship with God.

Perhaps human confidence that we are in a good position to judge how God is really involved in situations and lives needs to be further eroded by reflecting on how vulnerable we are to shortsightedness, impatience, misjudgements, narrow-mindedness, and mistrust. Another dimension is the often-remarked problem of a quantitative argument about suffering. If we add together instances of suffering, are we doing

treatment. While it would be intolerable to see this justifying all evil, yet some evil can also be seen to open up the possibility of good (such as compassion) that is hard to imagine otherwise. Ultimately, the question of theodicy is about whether God was right to create at all, and it has been argued that that is simply unanswerable: either one trusts that God knew what was involved and made a wise judgement, or one claims, impossibly, to have a superior viewpoint on the matter.

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anything meaningful? Might it be that the maximum of suffering is the maximum that any one person can suffer? If so, there is no meaning to a 'sum of suffering'—the problem remains but it is freed from inappropriate mathematics.

On the other side, confidence in God, despite the horrors of evil in ourselves and others, might be encouraged by the large numbers of people who have wrestled with the problem honestly and continued to trust in God. We are not the first to have faced the problem, and there is a long tradition of questioning, discussing, agonizing, and yet persevering in faith. This does not absolve anyone from going through it themselves, but it does mean that they have company. In the company are not only those who give pointers to ways of thinking, but above all those who embody the possibility of coming through terrible testing, suffering, and evil with enriched, realistic faith.

This leads on to the fundamental feature of Christian theodicy. It is not at heart about winning or losing an argument. Evil in our world is not most adequately met by arguments but by persons living certain sorts of lives and dying certain sorts of deaths. There can be no overview of what happens in the depths and extremities of these lives and deaths, but there are abundant testimonies to those who have faced the worst and testified to the goodness of God from there. Their stories are at the heart of authentic theodicy.

Nevertheless, I am not satisfied by such considerations. It is not that they are without substance, but rather that the terrible reality of evil constantly inspires suspicion of their adequacy. The attempts to suggest that evil is somehow a means to a good end are especially vulnerable to moral objections, but all the others are also open to a range of attacks. Above all, vivid and sickening testimonies to evil or experiences of evil—each of us can fill in our own examples—make all justifications ring hollow. Who can speak at all in the face of evil? Who can even

bear to contemplate it fully? Is it not what the Christian and other traditions have often concluded, a 'dark mystery', of which no satisfactory understanding or explanation or even description is possible?

Perhaps the least inadequate points above are the one about an incarnate God with which I began and the related one with which I concluded, which might be called the argument from saints. But they are both peculiar sorts of arguments, fundamentally dependent on trust and discernment, and it is easy, when one's imagination is filled with the reality of evil, to interpret God differently (even to the point of complete rejection) or choose different individual and group stories of apparently unredeemed and unredeemable evil and suffering.

The most basic statement of the Christian tradition is that there is a double mystery, the dark mystery of evil and the bright mystery of goodness. Acknowledgement of mystery need not deter further thinking. Some Christian theologians have added to this the idea that—without wishing to deny the powerful and devastating effects of evil—evil can be thought of as in some sense fundamentally 'insubstantial', as a kind of 'non-being'. In this understanding, rather than good and evil facing one another like the opposing armies on a chessboard, goodness is the basic, abundant, substantial reality, coming from God and making up the whole world; evil is the waste, the pointlessness, futility, nothingness, lack or absence of good which impacts on that reality. This does not mean that the mysteries of good and evil are solved. Indeed, such an understanding can lead to the conclusion that evil will always defy ultimate intelligibility, and that there is always more to be understood about the infinitely rich bright mystery of good. Christian theologians who have attempted to speak about the mystery of good and evil in this and other ways have invariably centred their reflections on the theological topics where both mysteries converge: Jesus Christ and salvation.

It might be said that for many Christians theodicy happens in this convergence. The drama of good and evil is focused through the history of one person. So it is not a new argument (though it gives rise to endless argument) or a new solution, but a new person who is to be trusted and hoped in. Jesus Christ is seen as someone who engages with evil at its worst and who can be trusted in any situation no matter how terrible. This distinctive Christian response will be explored in more detail in the next two chapters. But before that this chapter will conclude with an account of evil which sees it in the context of the God discussed in the previous two chapters.

Evil as idolatry

So far the main focus has been on the possibility of justifying God in the face of evil. What about interpreting evil in the light of God? There are many ways of attempting this, and the one followed here will begin from the notion of worship discussed in the previous chapter. There the divine was defined as whatever you worship, the key focus of desire, attention, obligation, energy, and respect. Society was described in terms of the desires, compulsions, and obligations which fundamentally order and shape it. In theological terms this led into seeing it as defined through the worship of God and idols. If evil is theologically understood as whatever contradicts the good God, then the dynamics of idolatry are a basic way of exploring what evil is and how it works.

It is quite straightforward to apply this insight in a general way to big distortions and to name the obvious candidates as idols, as the previous chapter did: money, family, race, class, gender, nation, legality, pleasure, or self-fulfilment. Clearly these and other things can be given the sort of priority which turns what is basically good into, something idolatrously ultimate and distorting. The 20th century was full of examples of human flourishing being destroyed through such false worship. Sometimes the idolatry is

'monotheistic' when there is one dominant concern; sometimes it is 'polytheistic' as several are kept in play at once.

Usually, however, particular situations are complex and their diagnosis is disputed. How does one decide, for example, when the line has been crossed from healthy concentration on economic prosperity to the 'bottom line' of profit being the only thing that really matters? There are serious issues of discernment here, with temptations to rhetorical exaggeration on both sides. Sound theological judgement requires case-by-case debate which is continually informed by worship and the understanding of traditions and contexts. I will give one sample case from my own experience.

For five years I was part of a group which included theologians, clergy, and others working 'on the ground' in deprived areas of English cities. We used many approaches to try to do justice to the complex reality of those areas, such as stories of individuals and groups, and studies of housing, children, black experience, business enterprise, crime, and fear. A key focus was on worship in poor urban areas, and its significance in illuminating the dynamics of life there. Idolatry became one key to understanding, but it was recognized that for those involved in an idolatry it tends to be encompassing and pervasive—it is their normality. Because of this, a society's idols may be more visible from the margins, where the normality is under strain or contradicted. Idols are usually supported by falsehoods and by ignoring major truths, and it is easier to discern these too from the margins.

The margins are not only a place where different perspectives can be had, they are also often where the bad consequences of idolatries are most apparent—misery, oppression, huge wealth differentials, violence, constriction of life and hope. We saw in deprived urban areas a specially intensive convergence of the negative consequences of our society's habitual idolatries such as economic success, efficiency, status, security, pleasure, and power