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NOTES TOWARDS AN ASH‘ARITE THEODICY

Atheists have argued that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God. They claim that (1) it would be wrong for a person to allow evil which one could prevent, and (2) because God is omnipotent, He could prevent evil. So, (3) since evil does exist, a perfectly good and omnipotent God does not exist. This is the oldest and most pressing attack on theism, and theists have developed a variety of defensive responses to this argument. In this paper I propose to outline a strategy which appears to have escaped recent attention, and to compare this strategy with two more widely discussed types of theodicy.

Most of the attempts to solve the problem of evil which have been discussed in recent philosophical literature rest on the claim that the evil which exists in the world cannot be prevented, not even by an omnipotent being, except at the expense of some important good. According to the free-will solution to the problem of evil, ‘the mere existence of free will, or some of its consequences, are great goods – goods that outweigh any evils that might result from their presence’.¹ A free-will defence was propounded by Aquinas, and in recent years Alvin Plantinga has elaborated this kind of defence.² According to Plantinga, God does not commit evil acts, rather He creates free agents, humans and the devil, who perpetrate evil. Although God is responsible for the creation of free individuals, He is not responsible for the sins they commit.

In contrast to the free-will defence is the view put forth by Augustine, and more recently by Nelson Pike, that ‘whatever evils God permits (including sinful actions) make a positive contribution to the ultimate good’.³ God is to a certain extent responsible even for the free acts of His creatures. However, while the sins of men are in some sense contrary to the will of God, God transforms these apparent evils into goods. The evil that God permits is excused because it is outweighed by the good which it makes possible. On this point the free-will defence and Pike’s Augustinian defence are similar.

¹ Baruch A. Brody, *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 8.

² Alvin Plantinga, ‘The Free Will Defense’, in Brody, *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 186–200.

³ Nelson Pike, ‘Over-Power and God’s Responsibility for Sin’, in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 31.

Both excuse evil as a necessary means to a greater good. On the free-will defence, this greater good is free will and its consequences. What constitutes the greater good for the Augustinian is somewhat more mysterious, although a number of recent thinkers have argued that the greater good is 'soul-making'. They claim that the evil in the world is needed for the development of excellent character.¹ Formulated in its most extreme version, the good outweighs the evil of any act, when seen from the right perspective; and not only is this the best of all possible worlds, but all evil is only apparent.

Both the free-will defence and the Augustinian defence seem to threaten the claim that God is omnipotent. In both views, God is not capable of eliminating any of the world's evil. The free-will defender claims that God cannot prevent evil without eliminating free will, the elimination of which would constitute an even greater evil. The proponent of the 'soul-making' view denies that God has the power to eliminate evil without destroying the possibility of some degree of excellence of character; and other variations on the Augustinian theme would have it that the prevention of an apparent evil would entail that a lesser overall good would be realized than if the evil were permitted. God is incapable of creating a better world than this! The evident absurdity of such a view was the object of ridicule in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), which was directed specifically at Leibniz, and other optimists, who claimed that this is the best of all possible worlds. The most common response of the optimists to the absurdity charge is to stress human inability to judge the goodness of the world. Another response is that actuality is itself a perfection which renders this world better than its merely possible rivals.² Without discussing these or other defences of optimism, it is clear that a theology which avoided the absurdity charge would thereby overcome one of the greatest challenges to theodicy.

For both the free-will theodicy and for the optimist theodicy, all evil is unavoidable. In what follows, an evil will be called 'unavoidable' if and only if it could not be prevented except at the cost of a greater good. The claim that there are avoidable evils thus entails not only that there are evils which God could prevent, but that in preventing these evils God would not thereby sacrifice the goodness of the end which is His purpose. According to most traditional theodicies, God's omnipotence and moral perfection are not incompatible with the existence of evil, but only with the existence of avoidable evil. It is then argued that no existing evil is avoidable. Instead of arguing that the evil God permits is unavoidable, and thus excusable, one might consider God's allowance of avoidable evil to be consistent with His moral perfection. If it is not wrong for God to allow avoidable evil, then the existence of evil is not incompatible with the existence of a perfectly good

¹ Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, revised edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

² These responses and other philosophical issues involved in the defence of optimism are discussed in Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

omnipotent being. The force behind the problem of evil depends upon the assumption that it is morally wrong to permit avoidable evil. While this assumption clearly has merit when applied to the conduct of persons, it is not obvious that it applies equally to God. There are several reasons for believing that it is not morally wrong for God to allow avoidable evil. These reasons have to do with the nature of moral requirements and judgements, with the kind of permission God gives for evil to exist, and with the nature of God’s goodness.

Some theologians and philosophers hold what is called a ‘divine command theory’ of morality.¹ According to this theory, what makes an act good or evil is whether or not it conforms to the will of God. Now anything that God does must be in conformity with His will, so He can do no wrong. If God permits famine and war, then to grant this permission is what He wills, and so it cannot be wrong. A divine command theologian may consistently argue that although God issues decrees through revelation which constitute the moral law for man, God’s own activity does not fall within the scope of all such decrees. So, for example, God might decree that people should prevent famine, where they have the power to do so, without bringing Himself under the scope of His own decree. In this way it would not be inconsistent with God’s perfect goodness that He permitted avoidable evil.

One of the earliest developments of a divine command theory of morality, which included a recognition of the implications of such a theory for the problem of evil, was that of the tenth-century Muslim theologian, al-Ash‘ari. Al-Ash‘ari contended that God is the author of the moral law and as such is not subject to it. God can create evil without thereby being evil, just as He can create motion without thereby moving.² In more recent times, such Christian theologians as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner have also endorsed theodicies based on a divine command theory.³

Although the divine command theory of morality entails that whatever God permits, God does not do wrong in granting this permission, the converse does not hold. We need not adhere to a divine command theory of morality in order to accept the view that God does not do wrong in allowing avoidable evil. Meta-ethical positions other than the divine command theory are consistent with the view that God does not do wrong in permitting avoidable evil. For example, one might hold a naturalist view that the purpose of morality is human happiness, or the view that moral rules are

¹ E.g. Baruch Brody, ‘Morality and Religion Reconsidered’, in Brody, *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 592–603. Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

² Cf. W. M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962), pp. 82–90; also Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 204–5.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969). Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952). Cited in G. Stanley Kane, ‘The Concept of Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil’, *Religious Studies*, xi (1975), 49–71.

social conventions. It is as consistent with these moral theories as it is with the divine command theory that the moral obligations which apply to people do not apply to God. One might hold that since God has no need for human happiness, and is not subject to social constraints, He stands outside the moral sphere. God may judge human beings as damned or saved by their adherence to the moral law, but this does not mean that the law applies to Him. The error of those who use the argument from evil to support a denial of the existence of God is that they presume that the existence of evil is a reflection on the moral nature of God. To believe that God is beyond the sphere of human morality is to hold that God is not to be judged on the basis of human moral law. While any human who permitted the occurrence of avoidable evil might be accused of wrongdoing, the same may not be said of God. This immediately raises the question of whether God can be judged to be moral at all. Before addressing this question, we have to look more closely at certain fundamental issues in moral theory.

Although the divine command theory of morality was a prominent part of al-Ash'ari's theodicy, we need not agree with the divine command theory in order to endorse al-Ash'ari's contention that it is not wrong for God to permit avoidable evil. All that is required is the acceptance of an especially limited kind of moral relativism, according to which the moral quality of at least some acts is relative to whether they are performed by creatures, or by the Creator. In what follows, any theodicy which is based on this sort of moral relativism will be called an Ash'arite theodicy, whether or not it incorporates a divine command theory of morality or other elements of the historical position of the Ash'arite theologians.

One might argue that if God permits an evil, is responsible for the occurrence of that evil, and does not permit that evil only to achieve a greater good, then such a God would be inconsistent in His decrees that evil should not be done. This point is raised by John of Damascus against a Saracen foil:

If you say that both good and evil are from God, you would make him unjust, which He is not. And if you were to say that God had ordained the adulterer to commit adultery, the thief to steal, and the murderer to kill, they would in that case be worthy of respect for doing God's will. You would thus belie your lawgivers and pervert your Books, since they command that the adulterer and the thief be flogged, and the murderer killed, who should rather be honoured for having done God's will.¹

The commandments state that it is the will of God that evil not be done, while the existence of avoidable evil testifies to the fact that evil is in accord with the will of God. This apparent inconsistency can be resolved if one distinguishes God's permission that evil be done, in the sense of not pre-

¹ 'John of Damascus: A Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian' in M. S. Seale, *Qur'an and Bible* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 65.

venting human evil and bringing into existence natural evils, from the permission which God does not grant to humans to perform evil. The latter, withheld permission is *moral*, while the failure to prevent the occurrence of an event might be called the *existential* permission for that event. That there is no inconsistency between God's existential permission of evil and His moral forbidding of evil is central to the Ashʿarite theodicy, and is explicitly recognized by al-Ashʿari himself.

Question: Has God decreed and determined acts of disobedience?

Answer: Yes, in the sense that He has created them, and has written them down, and has announced that they will be. But we do not say that God has decreed and determined acts of disobedience in the sense that He has commanded them.¹

Regardless of whether a divine command theory of morality is accepted, one may hold that God's decrees to humans are never in conflict with the moral law.² Then if an action is morally wrong, it is not morally permitted by God. The actuality of avoidable evil implies that such evil is existentially permitted by God. This does not mean that such evil is morally permitted by God. God's moral forbiddance of an act is directed toward humans, not toward God Himself.

In order to uphold an Ashʿarite theodicy, it is not necessary that we subscribe to the Ashʿarite divine command theory of morality, but we do need to offer some explanation of why God does not do wrong when He permits avoidable evil. John Rawls makes a distinction which will be useful for framing such an explanation. Rawls distinguishes two kinds of moral requirements, which he terms 'obligations' and 'moral laws'.³ According to Rawls, obligations arise when one voluntarily agrees to abide by the rules stipulated by some fair arrangement or institution. Natural laws, on the other hand, apply to us without regard to our voluntary acts and have no necessary connection with institutions or social practices. If the Ashʿarite theodicy is correct, then God is not subject to at least some natural laws (i.e. the law to prevent avoidable evil), although He does fulfil all His obligations.

There are several ways to defend the view that God's moral perfection is such that it entails that He meet His obligations, but is not subject to natural laws, or that He is at least not subject to all the same natural laws to which humans are subject. The differences between such strategies depend upon one's account of natural law. Let us consider two views: first, a limited divine

¹ Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari, in John Alden Williams (ed.), *Themes of Islamic Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 169.

² This claim is controversial. Some hold that God commanded Abraham to perform an immoral action. Cf. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*, pp. 12–16. Kant held that Abraham had reason to judge that he was mistaken in his belief that God had ordered him to kill his son. Although nearly all exegetes of the Qurʾan claim that God did command the sacrifice of Ishmael, in the Qurʾan itself it is stated only that Abraham dreamt that God ordered him to kill his son, not that God did order the sacrifice.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 114–117.

command theory, and second, a theory according to which natural law follows from the social nature of the human condition.

Consider first a limited divine command theory. There are two kinds of moral requirements: obligations and natural duties. The basis of obligation is to be found in institutional arrangements. When God enters into a covenant with man, the institution of the covenant places moral requirements on God as well as on man. If institutional rules can be used to explain the morality of obligations, what will explain the morality of natural laws? One answer is that natural laws are commanded by God to be fulfilled by humans.

A second explanation of natural laws may be taken directly from Rawls. Rawls claims that natural duties 'obtain between all as equal moral persons',¹ and that they are 'principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association'.¹ Clearly, duties which have this sort of foundation do not necessarily apply to God. The notion of natural law which is developed in the context of the kind of contractarian theory advocated by Rawls is one which is based on a theory of human nature, human interests, and human rationality. Making use of certain assumptions about human nature, Rawls offers us a way of understanding why the prevention of avoidable evil is a law of human morality. This theory of natural law provides no justification for the application of such moral laws to God. Given that God is necessarily not an equal moral person among men, it is reasonable to expect that the natural law for God and for men would be different.

The divine command theory and the contractarian theory are not the only ethical positions from which it could be argued that natural law does not necessarily apply to God. Any ethical theory which bases the moral law on human nature, human flourishing, or human intuitions will be compatible with the view that moral laws which have this kind of human basis may not apply to the deity.

In a thorough attack on the positions of Barth and Brunner, G. Stanley Kane has pointed out several weaknesses in theodicies which are similar in important respects to the general Ash'arite view. First, Kane raises arguments against the divine command theory of morality. It has been shown here that the Ash'arite theodicy does not require a divine command theory. Secondly, Kane attacks the view that God's goodness is unintelligible to men. If God falls outside the sphere of morality, and if His acts would be morally reprehensible were they performed by one who was subject to the moral law, then in what sense can it be claimed that God is good?³ There

¹ *Ibid.* p. 115.

² *Ibid.* p. 11.

³ A similar objection has been raised against divine command theories. It is asked, 'If goodness is due to following divine commands, but it is senseless to speak of God following his own commands, then isn't it senseless to speak of God's goodness?' Quinn's reply is that God's goodness is not due to following divine

are a number of responses which could be given to this question. It may be claimed that God is good because He fulfils His obligations, He honours His covenants, and He never judges a person unfavourably for the performance of a morally permissible action. Also, the requirements against which He judges men are not beyond the capability of human beings. He is merciful. He rewards us beyond what we deserve. God is also good because He upholds human morality among men by promising punishment for the violation of moral principles and reward for those who are morally good. He provides guidance to human beings through their rational faculties and through His revelations. God explains His own goodness to us through His revelation. His moral perfection is not the same as human moral goodness, but it is analogous to human moral goodness in important ways. It is like human goodness in that God shares with us certain obligations, like the obligation to honour contracts; it is unlike human goodness in that God is not subject to the duty to prevent avoidable evil. While we may not have a complete knowledge of what constitutes God's goodness, we are not without an inkling. God fulfils His covenants; but He is not subject to natural moral law.

A third feature of the theodicies of Barth and Brunner with which Kane finds fault is the claim that it is improper for human beings to judge the goodness of God or His works. Kane calls this the 'impropriety thesis'. Against the impropriety thesis Kane argues that 'if one is to have any way of being sure that the object of his worship is truly worthy of worship, he cannot avoid judging the credentials of any being offered for worship'.¹ The Ash'arite theodicy does not depend upon the impropriety thesis. We might hold that there are some aspects of God's morality which we understand, and in terms of which we judge God to be good. We might then go on to judge that God is so good in the terms we do understand, that it is not unreasonable to hold that He is also good in ways we do not know about. All of this is consistent with a recognition of the fact that human and divine morality differ in important respects. It would be wrong for a person to promise to torture someone for living a life of sin. But it is not only not wrong for God to make such a promise, we might even count this as evidence of the goodness of God. The appropriateness of moral judgements about God is thus consistent with the claim that God is not subject to the same moral laws to which humans are subject, and in particular, that God is not subject to the duty to prevent avoidable evil.

To summarize, theodicies like those of Augustine and Leibniz, which baldly claim that whatever evil exists in the world is really necessary for some greater good, are open to attack on two sides. First, God's omnipotence should enable him to achieve greater good without permitting as much evil

command, but that in other respects it is analogous to human goodness. Cf. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*, pp. 130–64.

¹ Kane, 'The Concept of Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil', p. 52.

as there is. Secondly, it is totally obscure as to what the greater good could be which requires the existence of the amount of evil in the world. Neither of these criticisms apply to our theodicy because it is not claimed that evil is permitted only for the sake of the achievement of some good.

'Soul-making' theodicies attempt to answer the charge of obscurity with the claim that the greater good achieved through the existence of evil is excellent character. In order for people to be truly righteous they need to live in a world full of hardship, toil and suffering. God in His infinite wisdom knows that were there any less suffering in the world, there would be an unacceptable decline in righteousness, and if there were any more suffering in the world, it would be counterproductive. This kind of theodicy is implausible to the extent to which it is unreasonable to think that every single calamity, every single bit of evil which exists in the most isolated parts of the world somehow contributes to someone's moral fibre.¹

'Soul-making' theodicies are also open to the charge that they conflict with claims of omnipotence. A truly omnipotent being would be able to achieve His ends without permitting as much evil as there is, if any.

The theodicy advocated herein may be challenged at just the point where it claims superiority over those who would in some way allow limits to God's power. If God could have achieved His ends without the occurrence of some evil, why didn't He? Even if it is granted that His failure to do so is not inconsistent with God's moral perfection, we might wonder why He did not make the world a more pleasant place. Some answers to the question of why there is evil in the world will be inconsistent with the claim that God is morally perfect. We cannot attribute the evil in the world to God's cruelty or malevolence. We need not, however, claim that the evil in the world is needed by God to fulfil some purpose. While it might be cruel for a person to allow suffering which could be easily avoided, we are not entitled to hold God to this standard. It might not be cruel for God to allow suffering which could easily be avoided. There are circumstances in which we do not judge the causing of suffering to be cruel. If a volcano erupts and causes great suffering, we do not claim that the volcano is cruel. The volcano is not cruel or benevolent because the volcano is not human. Human moral judgements cannot coherently be applied to mountains. Perhaps the situation is in some respects similar in the case of God. Moral judgements do not apply to the mountain because the mountain is less than human, and thus not subject to moral law. Some moral judgements may not apply to God because He is so superior to human beings that He transcends the moral law. Once all moral judgement is suspended with respect to God's existential permission of evil, the question of why God did not create the world with less evil loses its force.

¹ John Hick has responded to this charge and others in the second edition of his *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978). An assessment of his responses is beyond the scope of this paper.

The question is an unanswerable as the question of why God did not create a different number of stars. It is not a question with moral implications.

The question of why God allows as much avoidable evil as there is cannot have an answer. There can be no divine purpose which makes avoidable evil worthwhile. The net amount of evil in the world would be worthwhile only if there were some purpose such that the realization of this purpose would result in a better world than would result otherwise. If the world were really better with the realization of this purpose, the net amount of evil would be reduced. But if a divine purpose which would reduce the amount of evil can only be achieved at the cost of the existence of some evil, that evil is not avoidable. If God could not have achieved a worthwhile purpose without allowing the evil in the world, this evil would not have been avoidable. If He could realize His purposes without permitting the existence of the evil there is, then these purposes fail to explain why He allows the evil. Whatever avoidable evil exists in the world bears no relation to the purposes of God. It is inexplicable.

The perpetration of avoidable evil by humans is reprehensible. Humans are blameworthy for bringing about avoidable evil. It has been argued above that God is not similarly blameworthy because He is not subject to the duties which apply to humans. Someone may object that it is inappropriate to blame a volcano for the evil it brings about because the volcano is not an agent. But since God is the ultimate creator of His actions, He is an agent, and thus is blameworthy for the evil He creates. An answer to this objection is suggested in al-Ash‘ari’s doctrine of the compatibility between moral responsibility and determinism.

According to al-Ash‘ari, all actions are created by God. Humans are not the creators of their own acts. Yet they are responsible agents. The relation between an agent and his action by virtue of which the agent is responsible for his action is called *kasb*, which is usually translated as acquisition or appropriation.¹ Exactly what this relation amounts to in Ash‘arite thought is a matter of controversy. Nevertheless, the structure of the Ash‘arite position has a bearing on our problem. The Ash‘arites were compatibilists. They believed in divine determinism and in human responsibility. The question of ultimate origination or creation of an act, according to this view, is irrelevant to the question of moral responsibility. What makes the agent responsible for his or her actions is the relation of *kasb*. According to contemporary compatibilists, an agent is responsible for his or her actions because he or she performs those actions voluntarily, deliberately. Moral responsibility springs from the deliberative choice of a course of action. The existence of avoidable evil is not the result of deliberative choice on the part of God. God does not

¹ Cf. M. Schwarz, ‘“Acquisition” (*Kasb*) in Early Kalam’, in S. M. Stern, Albert Hourani and Vivian Brown (eds.), *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 355–87.

deliberate. So he does not bear the appropriate relation to His acts which is necessary for moral responsibility.

The objector would classify God and humans together as responsible agents because both are originators of their actions. The volcano would not be a moral agent on this view because it is a mere transmitter of causes. On the Ash'arite view, origination is irrelevant to moral responsibility. Humans, like inanimate objects, do not create their actions. Deliberative choice is required for moral responsibility. This is a relation which humans have to their actions but for which God has no need.

The denial that God has the *kasb* relation to his actions goes too far. God is not morally responsible for the existence of avoidable evil, but He is responsible for some of His actions, like the keeping of covenants. God does not deliberate about keeping covenants any more than He deliberates over the existence of avoidable evil. But in place of actual deliberation there is a proxy for deliberation in scripture. The effect of God's action is as if it were the result of the careful deliberation of a wise judge. The similarity between the nature of some of God's actions and the actions which would result from perfected human deliberation gives sense to the analogical attribution of some anthropomorphic characteristics to God.¹ So there is a sense in which God does have the relation of *kasb* to some of his actions, although it is not *kasb* in the literal sense in which it is applicable to humans, and thus it is possible for God to be morally responsible for His good actions, to be good; but, of course, not in the same way in which humans are good.

In short, the Ash'arite theodicy advocated here traces the error in the problem of evil to anthropomorphism. To claim that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of a perfect and omnipotent being is to presume that prohibitions regarding bringing about evil which apply to human beings also apply to God. Traditional theodicies solve the problem of evil by compromising God's power. In these notes a way has been proposed which solves the problem of evil not by limiting God, but by exalting Him above human morality.

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¹ On analogical predication in Qur'anic exegesis see Allamah al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan*, trans. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982), Vol. 4, pp. 133-42.