Introduction

The Problem of Evil

The philosophical problem of evil is the challenge of reconciling belief in God with evil in the world. The theistic concept of God as supremely powerful, intelligent, and good makes the problem very difficult because such a being, it would seem, would make a much better world than this one. All three great theistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—face the challenge of addressing this issue. In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, the problem of evil has undergone much technical refinement, leading to greater clarity about different formulations of the problem as well as strategies for response. Although most discussions of the problem officially focus on basic theism, many draw implicitly from elements of Christian understanding, and some explicitly invoke Christian claims beyond those of basic theism. The aim of this anthology is to present important material related to the problem of evil in a manner that reveals the structure of
the ongoing discussion and gives organization to some of the major positions and arguments involved.

PART ONE: STATEMENTS OF THE PROBLEM

Part One contains various statements of the problem, three from great world literature and three from classical philosophy. The selections from world literature are an excerpt from the ancient book of Job, Voltaire’s poem on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and a famous passage from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* on the encounter between Ivan and Alyosha.

The Old Testament book of Job is a dramatic treatment of the issue of God and suffering. In his personal suffering and anguish, the ancient patriarch Job develops new insights into God’s ways. The prevailing view in Job’s day was that righteous people prosper by deserving divine favor and wicked people suffer as divine punishment. One insight that emerges in the book of Job is that both human life and God are too complex for such simplistic formulas and that good people can indeed suffer. This insight is linked to the higher insight that a relationship with God is to be valued above all, regardless of one’s circumstances.

The poem by François-Marie Arouet, pen name Voltaire, was inspired by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, one of the great natural disasters in human history. The quake killed sixty thousand people in Lisbon alone, triggered seismic shocks felt throughout Europe, and created a tsunami, with giant waves hitting Spain and large waves even reaching Caribbean islands. When the quake occurred on November 1, All Saints’ Day, much of the population was attending church services, and thousands were killed or injured as churches collapsed. This event was a turning point in intellectual history because rationalist religious systems supporting unqualified optimism were seen by many in a different light. Voltaire’s subtitle—“an inquiry into the maxim, whatever is, is right”—signals that the poem targets Gottfried Leibniz’s view that this is the best of all possible worlds.

In the passage from Dostoevsky, the fictional character Ivan Karamazov, a university professor, denies that there is any rationally or morally acceptable reason for God to allow the suffering of innocent children. His brother Alyosha, a novice clergy, reluctantly agrees that he would not, if he
were God, consent to the suffering of a single child, even if that one child’s suffering was necessary to the higher harmony of all things. These writings are a sample of the poignant treatments of evil outside technical philosophy, where a vivid sense of the reality and perplexity of evil can be expressed in emotionally gripping ways. Readers might also consider the writings of John Milton, Emily Dickinson, Albert Camus, and Elie Wiesel, which contain deep reflections on good and evil.

From classical philosophy, selections from Thomas Aquinas, Gottfried Leibniz, and David Hume are included for their historical and intellectual importance. The great Christian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas argues that a supremely good God created all things good and cannot create evil. Evil in the creaturely world, then, is a defect in or corruption of what is originally good. Furthermore, since a supremely good being is the cause of other beings, there cannot be a supremely evil being as the cause of evil, as pagan dualisms suppose. Leibniz maintains that an absolutely perfect being must create the best of all possible worlds. So, evil in the world must be part of its being the best possible world among alternative worlds that God could have chosen to instantiate. In his famous philosophical dialogue, David Hume speaks through Philo to catalog terrible evils in order to pose the question of what sort of being would have created this world. Hume (via Philo speaking to Cleanthes and Demea) claims that it is not possible to infer the existence of a good God from the facts of evil but that the concomitant presence of good also blocks an inference to a completely malicious being. Since the world contains a perplexing mix of good and evil, the most reasonable inference is to a creator that is completely indifferent to his sentient creatures—a point later carefully developed by Paul Draper.

PART TWO: VERSIONS OF THE PROBLEM

In Part Two, key readings are featured on three different versions of the problem of evil: the logical, evidential, and existential versions. Beginning with this part, readings are paired so that the positions they take and the implications they generate may be seen more clearly in a dialectical context. In the first half of the twentieth century, there was not a lot of philosophical material on the problem of evil. Most philosophers simply assumed that
logical positivism had shown religion to be intellectually substandard: that
the concept of God was meaningless, that arguments for the existence of
God were ineffective, and that the problem of evil had dealt a definitive
blow to belief in God. In that climate of opinion, in 1955, J. L. Mackie pub-
lished his argument that was designed to expose a logical contradiction be-
tween the existence of God and the existence of evil—an argument which,
if valid, is a direct disproof of theism. As an essential part of his argument,
Mackie relies on specific definitions of attributes of God, such as omnipo-
tence, which are themselves not uncontroversial. In the period of renewal in
philosophy of religion that began in the late 1970s, theistic responses to the
problem of evil proliferated. Alvin Plantinga’s response, known as the free
will defense, became classic. Plantinga points out that Mackie’s definitions—
particularly of omnipotence—need not be accepted by theists. If God
grants a kind of free will to creatures that is incompatible with any form of
determinism, Plantinga argues, then it is not within God’s power to control
the outcome of their choices, thus allowing the possibility for evil. Note
that the point of this defense or any defense against the problem of evil is
not to argue for the truth or plausibility of God or free will or any other as-
pect of theism but to show that the attack on theism fails.

Given that many theists and nontheists came to agree that the free will
defense shows that the logical argument against theism, as exemplified in
Mackie, fails, many nontheistic professional philosophers developed a dif-
fierent type of argument to show why evil is still a problem for theism. What
became known as the evidential argument claims that some fact or facts
about evil count against the credibility or probability of theistic belief. Wil-
liam Rowe articulated his own rendition of the evidential argument in 1979
and in subsequent decades revised it several times in response to criticisms.
Rowe claims that it is reasonable to think that at least some of the intense
suffering in our world could have been prevented without losing a greater
good or without allowing an equally bad or worse evil. Since Rowe assumes
that theism entails that God is justified in permitting evils only if they are
necessary to a greater good, he believes he has good grounds for atheism.
The lead selection provided here is a dialogue of Rowe with Daniel Howard-
Snyder and Michael Bergmann, who are prominent representatives of the
response known as the skeptical theist defense. Howard-Snyder and Berg-
mann’s basic point is that the human inability to discern God’s reasons for
some evils does not constitute evidence that there are no such reasons. Their argument for this point is that we have no reason to think that our finite minds are able to grasp either all of the connections between goods and evils or all of the goods that there are to which evils may be connected. Yet such matters may well be known by infinite divine wisdom.

My own essay that follows is a critical discussion of the general types of standard responses that are offered against the evidential argument. Whether a theodicy is Augustinian or Irenaean or Plantingian in approach, it assumes both that God would prevent or eliminate any evil that does not lead to a greater good (what I call “gratuitous evil”) and also, therefore, that a greater good for every evil or type of evil must be specified in order for the theodicy to be adequate. On the other hand, the skeptical theist defense tries to block the evidential argument from going through by discounting our rational and moral evaluations regarding whether a given evil or some category of evils is gratuitous. By contrast, I argue that traditional greater good theodicies have a view of meticulous providence that is not essential to theism and that the skeptical theist defense relies on a view of our ability to make reasonable judgments about gratuity that is also not essential to theism. I argue for a view of divine providence that is general and not meticulous such that the world contains genuine contingencies, including contingencies of evil free choice and contingencies in the way natural order intersects human interests.

In addition to philosophical work on the logical and evidential versions of the problem of evil, some work has also been done on what we might call the existential version. This label calls attention to the “real-life” dimension of the problem in addition to the more abstract and general lines of reasoning that are typically pursued. William Hasker, in the selection here, argues that happy people who do not regret their own individual existence cannot meaningfully raise a problem of evil, since their existence and unique identity are causally dependent upon a great many past events, some of which are evil events. Marilyn Adams explores the redemptive or salvific nature of human suffering, providing what we might consider to be a forthrightly spiritual solution to the existential problem of evil. Although not speaking of all suffering categorically, Adams argues that suffering may, in the right context, provide a special personal sense of intimacy with God—who identifies powerfully with those who suffer—and also a glimpse into the inner
life of God, whose nature is essentially self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The explorations by Hasker and Adams are fascinating forays into the human existential response to evil, but the admirable analytical rigor displayed in both treatments obviates any attempt to write off the existential dimension of the problem as merely subjective, somehow nonrational, or not worthy of philosophical investigation.

PART THREE: PERSPECTIVES IN THEODICY

Part Three highlights theodicy as the traditional way of responding to the problem of evil. Deriving from two classical Greek words, Theós (meaning God) and dikē (meaning justice), theodicy is the attempt to square God’s justice with the existence of evil. Although theodicy has been used to address both the logical and evidential versions of the problem, it is now standard to consider a defense per se—and particularly the free will defense—as the appropriate kind of answer to the logical version and theodicy as the conventional type of answer to the evidential version. However, deploying a skeptical theist defense against the evidential argument is a notable exception to developing a theodicy. A defense simply aims to block the claim that it is likely that there are no morally sufficient reasons for certain evils, whereas a theodicy seeks to offer a plausible account of God’s possible or actual reasons. Some theodicies revolve around a particular theme, such as free will or natural law or character development. However, the theodicies featured here are more global, systematically weaving together various themes into a comprehensive narrative about God’s nature and his purposes in the world.

St. Augustine’s complex theodicy focuses on the causal genesis of evil in the world in order to accomplish two objectives: to exonerate God and to maintain the guilt of creatures. Augustine treats topics such as the origin of sin in the free choices of originally good creatures, God’s intent to bring good out of evil, God’s timeless perception of the goodness of the whole creation in spite of its negative aspects, and the creature’s inability to perceive all aspects of the divine plan. Clearly, some Augustinian ideas recur in the works of later Christian thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, subsequent Thomistic philosophers, John Calvin, Leibniz, Alvin Plantinga, and others. David Ray Griffin, a process philosopher, critiques Augustine’s theology,
which is based on a view of God as immutable, perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent. According to Griffin, this strong view of the deity entails that there is no genuine evil in the universe—a position that is faithful neither to human experience nor to the Christian faith. Griffin observes that Augustine comes closest to acknowledging the problem of evil for theism in his discussion of sin, or evil willing, on the part of creatures, but he then contextualizes all evil by declaring that the universe is better for containing it than not containing it. The aesthetic theme in Augustine’s theodicy makes the negatives that occur in the creation—such as sin—serve the beauty of the whole, and the “fortunate fault” theme, which is common to various Christian orientations, affirms that sin is essentially linked to God’s great redemptive activity toward fallen creatures.

John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy purports to draw from St. Irenaeus of the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Instead of focusing on the causal genesis of evil, the Iranaean tradition in theodicy emphasizes the evolving resolution of evil. Instead of interpreting evil in the world as a fall from a once perfect state, it treats evil as a necessary stage in the development of a spiritually mature creature from a relatively immature state. According to Hick, God’s process of soul-making is not completed in temporal existence but continues into the afterlife. He theorizes that the conditions required for soul-making include both “epistemic distance” (which means that the world appears to finite minds as if there is no God) and the presence of genuine challenges, risks, and temptations (which provide opportunities for free creatures to grow in virtue). In his critique of Hick’s argument, William Rowe points out that epistemic distance from God is not necessary for moral and spiritual freedom, since it is possible for creatures to fully know that God exists and yet make their own choices to move toward or away from God. As for Hick’s claim that evil which seems far in excess of what is needed for soul-making is actually necessary for soul-making, Rowe maintains that this is paradoxical, bordering on incoherent. Pursuing further the difficult problem of excess evil, Rowe argues that Hick fails to explain either particular instances of horrendous evil or the great amount and severity of evil generally.

David Ray Griffin represents the tradition of process theodicy in arguing, on metaphysical grounds, that the freedom of finite beings is not donated to them by God but is rather inherent in the nature of being actual. Therefore, the traditional understanding of omnipotence must be modified:
God has all the power it is possible for him to have but not all the power that there is. Since finite freedom is not the result of divine self-limitation but a metaphysical feature of particular existence, beings in the world have the intrinsic power to resist the divine aims. So, rather than coercion, God employs maximum persuasive power as he continually attempts to draw free finite actualities into agreement with his ideal aims for them. Against Griffin, Bruce Reichenbach defends a more nuanced theistic view of God’s power. He also points out difficulties regarding how the concept of power plays out at two distinct levels of existence as understood in process metaphysics: the level of individuals and the level of the aggregates into which individuals are conjoined. Aggregates with no central self or soul to synthesize the experiences of the whole lack the power of self-determination, whereas aggregates with a self do possess this power. Furthermore, since God is an individual and not an aggregate, he lacks coercive power with respect to aggregates. In the end, says Reichenbach, the process deity is not even a personal being and therefore does not resemble the God of the Bible as understood by the community of faith.

A position called open theism has attracted a great deal of interest since it arose in the early 1990s. Its explanation of evil draws heavily from two of its most basic themes: that God limits his own power by creating personal beings with genuine freedom and that God’s knowledge is contingent upon creaturely choices rather than timeless and fixed. In brief, the openness vision is that God and his creation are deeply relational in nature, which means that God’s overarching goal is for personal beings freely to seek relationship both with him and with their fellows. Genuine human-divine relationship, according to openness thinkers, requires both that God is open to creaturely choices that he does not meticulously control and that the human future is open as persons interact with God’s overtures toward them. So, this kind of genuinely relational universe involves the real possibility of evils that serve no greater good. Paul Helm argues, on the contrary, that God takes no risks in creating and guiding the universe. Elaborating on what he considers a biblical view, Helm takes the position that divine providence as it applies to personal evil is indeed “meticulous.” Attaching very strong views of power and knowledge to God, Helm argues that God always chooses whether to prohibit or allow evil, thus guaranteeing that his creation is free from the risk of an action being chosen or an event occurring outside of his control.
Departing from his usual defensive stance with respect to the problem of evil, Alvin Plantinga’s essay included in Part Three articulates a “felix culpa” theodicy based on an ancient theme of the Christian church: that the human fall into sin is an exceedingly fortunate event because, in addressing sin, God enacts a plan of redemption that involves the incomparable good of the Incarnation and Atonement. So, if God’s intention is to create a highly valuable world that includes not only the good of his own existence but the good of Incarnation and Atonement, then, logically, he must will that the world contain sin, suffering, and evil. Kevin Diller responds by questioning Plantinga’s strategy of interpreting evil as a means to God’s far greater ends. Diller argues that this makes evil a functional good, somehow rational and fitting in God’s economy, thus distorting its true theological significance as needless and harmful but permitted rebellion and damage. Moreover, for Diller, only on a highly contestable scale of values can a world containing sin and evil be considered better than other imaginable worlds, since there are possible worlds with no sin and evil that still contain the wonderful good of God’s self-revelation and invitation to relational intimacy.

PART FOUR: ISSUES IN THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Part Four consists of exchanges between philosophers regarding particular aspects of the ongoing discussion of God and evil. Robert Adams challenges the Leibnizian idea that God’s perfection requires that he create the best possible world because moral obligations do not apply to creatures who are merely possible beings. Adams also reasons that divine grace means that God does not choose to create finite beings because of their desirable characteristics and thus that God might select less excellent creatures than he could have selected. Philip Quinn disagrees with Adams, arguing that theism implies that God must do his best in creation. Although it is not wrong for God to actualize a less morally good world than he could have actualized, his doing so would simply show that he is not a superlatively good moral agent.

Another controversy in the overall discussion of evil regards the role of natural laws in accounting for natural evils. The familiar line of argument is that a world run by natural laws is necessary for the sake of a stable environment for the conduct of our lives, although the regular operation of