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EDITOR

Philosophers without Gods

Meditations

on Atheism

and the

Secular Life

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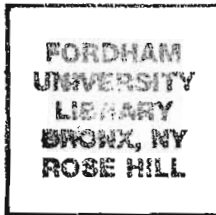
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either). The moralistic argument, far from threatening atheism, is a critical wedge that should open morally sensitive theists to the evidence *against* the existence of God.

I thank Ed Curley, Chris Dodsworth, David Jacobi, and Jamie Tappenden for helpful advice concerning this paper.

EIGHTEEN

Divine Evil

David Lewis

A Neglected Argument

Standard versions of the argument from evil concern the evils God fails to prevent: the pain and suffering of human beings and non-human animals, and the sins people commit. The most ambitious versions of the argument claim that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely benevolent deity. More-cautious approaches maintain that the existence of pain and sin ought to make us skeptical about any such deity. Or that the extent of the suffering in the millions of years of sentient life on Earth gives us strong reason to think no such deity exists. Or that particular cases of extreme anguish and human cruelty make belief in this sort of deity irrational. And so on.

In my view, even the most ambitious version succeeds conclusively. There is no evasion, unless the standards of success are set unreasonably high. Those who try to escape the conclusion have to insist that no use can be made of disputable premises, however antecedently credible those premises may be.¹ But philosophers can and do dispute anything. Some, for example, are prepared to argue about the law of non-contradiction. The faithful who claim that the strong argument from evil leaves open a bare possibility—the sort of possibility only a philosopher could cherish—gain a victory in name only.

What interests me here, however, is a simpler argument, one that has been strangely neglected. The standard versions, I said, focus on evil that God fails to prevent. But we might start instead from the evils God himself perpetrates. There are plenty of these, and, in duration and intensity, they dwarf the kinds of suffering and sin to which the standard versions allude.

For God, if we are to believe an orthodox story, has prescribed eternal torment as a punishment for insubordination. There are, of course, disagreements about what it takes to be insubordinate. Some say that the mere fact of not believing in him is enough to mark you out. Others think that you must violate one of the divine commandments. However the test is set up, it is clear that there is some complex of psychological attitudes and actions that suffices for damnation.

The orthodox story is explicit about the temporal scale of the punishment: it is to go on forever. Many of those who tell the orthodox story are also concerned to emphasize the quality of the punishment. The agonies to be endured by the damned intensify, in unimaginable ways, the sufferings we undergo in our earthly lives. So, along both dimensions, time and intensity, the torment is infinitely worse than all the suffering and sin that will have occurred during the history of life in the universe. What God does is thus infinitely worse than what the worst of tyrants did. However clever they were at prolonging the agonies of their victims, their tortures killed fairly quickly. God is supposed to torture the damned forever, and to do so by vastly surpassing all the modes of torment about which we know.

Although those who elaborate the orthodox account are sometimes concerned with the fit between crime and punishment, there is no possibility of a genuine balance.² For the punishment of the damned is infinitely disproportionate to their crimes. Even the worst of this-worldly offenders is only capable of inflicting a finite amount of suffering. However many times that offender endures the exact agony he caused, there will still be an infinite number of repetitions to come. Moreover, in each of these repetitions, the torment will be intensified and extended across all possible modes.

This is to assume, of course, that the damned have committed some crime. If the orthodox story supposes only that they fail to believe in God, then the injustice is even more palpable. Alice the agnostic may live a life full of charity and good works, notable for its honesty, fairness, and loving care of those around her. If lack of faith suffices for damnation, then the divine reward will be an eternity of the most exquisite agony.

Varieties of Theism

So I think the usual philosophical discussions of the problem of evil are a sideshow. We seem to strain at the gnat and swallow the camel. Why is this?

Many will say that what I have called the "orthodox story" is a cartoon theism. Real, grownup theists believe something much more sophisticated. The standard versions of the argument from evil prove attractive to philosophical unbelievers because they are taken to deploy only uncontroversial premises, the sorts of premises grownup theists can be expected to have to grant.

I reply that this overlooks two important points. First, the neglected argument does apply against mainstream versions of theism preached all around us. There is

a strong case for claiming that the overwhelming majority of Christians and Muslims, both in North America and the rest of the world, are committed to the "orthodox story." There are many passages in the New Testament (and in the Koran) that tell, or presuppose, that story, if they are read at face value.³

Second, the reply fails to appreciate how difficult it is to avoid the "orthodox story" while simultaneously retaining the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. To evade the neglected argument, you must contend that prominent passages of scripture should not be read literally. Perhaps there are alternative ways of reading the idea of God's punishment or understanding torment. But we need to hear not just that there *are* such ways but *what* they are.

I concede that the neglected argument doesn't apply against deism. If you simply hold that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, completely benevolent deity but have no views about his plans for rewarding and punishing people in any hereafter, then you can save your energies to defend against the more familiar problems of evil. But, I shall suggest, you will have to acknowledge that your doctrine isn't Christianity.

There are several ways in which you might try to elaborate a more substantial theism. Perhaps you think that talk of *judgment* and of *punishment* isn't to be taken literally. Maybe what happens in this life is that people make choices. Some choose salvation, and others damnation. Those who are damned receive what they have chosen. But if damnation is torment, or if it is a state for which eternal torment is an apt metaphor, then trouble recurs. For if we suppose that the alleged choice is ill informed and irrevocable, then God does evil. He places people in a situation in which they must make a judgment that binds them for eternity, and he knows that some will be so inadequately informed that they will opt for an eternity of torment (or for a state for which torment is an apt metaphor). It is hard to distinguish between God and the parent who equips the nursery with sharp objects galore and plenty of matches, fuses, and dynamite. Moreover, it is very difficult to see how our actual choices could be anything except ill informed. For the world in which we live is one in which we have scanty evidence about any hereafter of potential torment, and one in which those who tell tales about God's judgments and punishments offer incompatible suggestions about what should be done to avoid torment. On many versions of Christianity, of course, our lack of evidence is an integral part of the divine plan, for it is supposed that the greatness of faith consists in the ability to trust in the absence of—or even in the teeth of—the evidence.⁴

Things would be different if those who are damned are stubborn, persisting in their choice even when fully informed. What would these people be like? They must prefer a state of torment (literal or metaphorical) to the alternative of salvation. Why do they see subordinating themselves to God as worse? Perhaps because they set supreme value on their own independence. But, if God is genuinely worthy of our worship, then to be fully informed is to recognize all the attributes that make this so. It is hard to recognize how resistance could survive an eternity of demonstrations of the divine magnificence.

Even if we suspend doubts about the possibility of stubbornness in the face of full information, we can still ask why God fails to prevent damnation. This returns us to the familiar versions of the argument from evil. A standard explanation is on offer: incompatibilist freedom is of supreme value. It is alleged that even an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely benevolent deity who wished to create a world in which incompatibilist freedom was found might have to allow for the existence of stubborn beings who chose eternally to remain in torment.

I reply in two parts. First, I question the supreme value of incompatibilist freedom. Imagine two worlds. In one of these, actions are produced by psychological states, themselves caused by prior psychological conditions and by the pressures of the environment, those conditions and environments in turn being caused by earlier circumstances, all in accordance with the conditions philosophers introduce to allow for compatibilist freedom. In the second world, just the same actions are performed, but in accordance with your favorite incompatibilist account. Why should we think of the second world as a great advance on the first? In what, precisely, does its superiority reside?

If you are inclined to think, as I do, that there is no superiority to be found, you will not be satisfied with the thought that God may have to allow some people who eternally choose damnation. You will think that God could have settled for a world with compatibilist freedom and that he could have set things up so as to keep his creatures out of trouble. So, to escape the problem, theists will have to explain why the value of incompatibilist freedom is so great that it outweighs the extraordinary torment endured by those who continue forever to resist.

Yet even if we allow that incompatibilist freedom is a great value, it's still worth asking why God has arranged things in the way we find them. He could leave incompatibilist freedom intact while doing far more luring and urging than he does. Assuming we have to make a choice, why must it be made through a glass darkly? Once again, God seems negligent, at best.

Instead of substituting our free choice for God's judgment and punishment, theists may contend that we should reinterpret the notion of torment. Lurid anecdotes about unquenchable fire, sulfur, and brimstone are not to be taken literally. Damnation simply consists in the state of being insubordinate to God.⁵ This proposal depends on supposing that torment is an apt metaphor for insubordination.

I deny that it is. Contented atheist that I am, my state of alienation from the deity is *not* one for which torment is an apt metaphor. Christians may respond that this judgment is shallow: From my mundane perspective, I may judge myself happy enough in my denial of God. Once I am fully informed, however, I will appreciate the grossness of my swinish satisfaction, and torment will be an apt description of my insubordinate condition.

Now familiar troubles arise. Suppose, first, that my state of insubordination is unmodifiable: insubordinate on Earth, insubordinate eternally. Then indeed, I can envisage my eternal separation from God as being one of great anguish, as I come to appreciate the glorious bliss that is forever beyond my reach. But, as before,

I have been placed in a dangerous situation, one in which my eternal prospects were determined by a choice I was forced to make in ignorance. Once again, I have been treated unjustly.

A second possibility is that I can make amends in the hereafter. When acquainted with the divine greatness and the divine plan, I accede and subordinate myself to God. Now, it seems, the metaphor dissolves. My state of insubordination is remedied, and I am no longer in torment. Perhaps the response will be that my torment endures because of the memory of my past insubordination. But why should the memory cause me more than a pang, if I rightly see myself as insubordinate because of ignorance and as remedying my insubordination in light of the facts? I might come to applaud those who made the correct choice from the earthly perspective, but it would be hard to justify chiding myself so severely that it would amount to anything like torment. Furthermore, if the memory *does* serve as a source of torment, then, once again, God has failed to prevent evil by permitting me to hazard my eternal felicity in a state of radically incomplete knowledge.

The charge was that the neglected argument depended on a cartoon version of the hereafter. I reply that the strategy of reading the scriptures non-literally either fails to take torment as an apt metaphor for the state of damnation or else reinstates the problem. If the texts (and the doctrines drawn from them) are not radically misleading, then God remains as a source of divine evil.

But the strategy has exposed another possibility: what if everyone repents and is saved?

Universal Salvation

It is plainly possible for God to avoid perpetrating evil. He might not punish anyone. Or, perhaps, he might just administer ordinary finite punishments, designed, in some way, to change the psychological condition of those who had resisted him.

I find the option of limited punishment mysterious. Presumably there is some great end that God has designed his creation to achieve, an end that is furthered by the repentance of those who had failed the earthly test. An obvious rejoinder, from those of us who find no great value in incompatibilist freedom, is that God could have saved himself the trouble of limited punishment by setting up the causal conditions so that the resisters didn't go astray to begin with. Even if we acquiesce in the supreme value of incompatibilist freedom, however, inflicting torment seems quite unnecessary. An omnipotent God could be expected to convert resisters by other means—displays of magnificence, for example. If it is suggested that these are not guaranteed to do the trick, that the resistance may persist, then it should also be noted that, under the conditions of incompatibilist freedom, punishment also comes without any guarantee of repentance. Why should sticks work better than carrots?

The idea of limited punishment supposes that God is disposed to punish his creatures so long as they remain insubordinate. If one of us resists eternally, then that person will suffer eternal torment. But perhaps this never happens. All of us may eventually knuckle under. We come to love Big Brother. We find the ministry of love irresistible. Yet this only diminishes the force of the neglected argument. God retains the disposition to punish those who resist, and to punish them eternally if they resist forever. In other words, even if he never inflicts the infinite torment, he is prepared to do so. He is ready to perpetrate evil far in excess of the sum total of pain, suffering, and cruelty manifested in the created universe. Divine evil continues to exist in the cast of the divine will.

Some Christians are universalists. They maintain that God saves all of us. This happens not because everyone eventually falls into line, but because God isn't disposed to punish any of his creatures. Now God is genuinely exempt from divine evil. He neither causes the infinite torment nor has any disposition to do so.

Is universalism really a *Christian* option? Can Christians afford to deny divine evil? Christianity, properly so-called, requires a redemption. At its heart is the claim that Jesus was born to save us from something. The condition from which we have been redeemed must be truly horrible. What can be horrible enough except for eternal torment?

Finite torment, perhaps. But for the sacrifice of Christ, God would have had to purify each of us individually, and that would have involved significant torment in the hereafter. God envisaged two possible scenarios. In the first, sinful humanity is unredeemed and all of us must be punished before achieving union with the deity. In the second, the crucifixion serves to cleanse us from our state of sin, and no punishment after death is needed. Because God has no wish to punish any of us, he chose the second.

But this apology fails. If each of us can be saved without punishment under the second scenario, then there is no differentiation between those who acknowledge the sacrifice of Christ and those who scoff, between the most devout saints and the greatest sinners. All of us can instantly be forgiven and brought into the bliss of salvation. If that were so, then there would be no need for punishment in the first scenario. The choice is between universal acceptance without the sacrifice of Christ and universal acceptance with that sacrifice. There is no redemption, no distinguishing the faithful from the insubordinate. Alternatively, if salvation is made possible for all by the death of Christ, but some who fail to appreciate this act of redemption need further cleansing in order to be saved, then we return to the idea of limited punishment. Universalism cannot be sustained.

Orthodox Christians think that the sufferings of Jesus give all of us a second chance but that some of us don't avail ourselves of the opportunity. The redemption works for all of us by freeing us from the stain of sin (part of our human condition), but it doesn't provide instant salvation for all. That's why Christian theologians, and Christian preachers everywhere, emphasize the importance of faith, of following the precepts of Christ, and so on.⁶ If everyone wins without

regard to performance, not only do all these doctrines drop away, but so too does the rationale of the earthly life. If even the most-wicked of people can be immediately forgiven without punishment, then there is no point to our life of trial in the vale of tears.

So if there's a redemption, there'll have to be a distinction between those who take advantage of it and those who don't. What happens to those who don't? According to universalism, they are not to be punished. God will place them in some condition without perpetrating divine evil.

One possible condition would be nonexistence. Those who take advantage of the sacrifice of Christ, the faithful, are called to salvation. The rest of us simply die.⁷ You might worry, perhaps, that this is something of a waste. Couldn't God have done better by increasing the fraction of those who would rise to the opportunity? Once again, the theist is likely to sing the praises of incompatibilist freedom. A world with fewer who are saved and more who depart into eternal sleep is better than one in which the ratio of sleepers to saved is decreased (even to zero), if the decrease is purchased by exchanging incompatibilist freedom for its compatibilist counterpart. Even granting that, it seems appropriate to worry about the justice for individuals. Imagine a happy atheist, one for whom the earthly life goes well. From the standpoint of eternity, we might (and God presumably does) observe a life truncated. Our atheist didn't turn to Christ, and so bodily death came as the end. Overall, however, we can see the life in positive terms because of the success of its mundane phase (its only phase as it turns out). The trouble is that other atheists (as well as agnostics and heathen worshippers) have earthly lives that are not so wonderful; some of them indeed endure sufferings that are, by our mundane standards, excruciating (although, of course, their pains are nothing in comparison with those inflicted in the orthodox story with which we started). From the eternal perspective, this life looks like an utter mistake, for its only phase is utterly dreadful. By bringing this person into being, God has brought about divine evil.

The universalist Christian might reply that my assessment is wrong. God creates someone who turns out to suffer horribly. Bodily death comes as the end because, despite having the opportunity for faith, the atheist failed to turn to Christ; the resistance was free (in the incompatibilist sense). Arguments we have met before apply here too. Why is this type of freedom of such great value? Why does that freedom compensate *this individual* for the horrible suffering? Why not make the inducements to faith a bit stronger?

I think universalists have a better reply. The afterlife is a more heterogeneous affair than people have thought. The point of our earthly lives isn't to divide us into two groups, one to live forever in unimaginable bliss, the other to suffer unimaginable torment. Instead of being tried, we simply discover who we are. Some, perhaps the most fortunate, find out that they are people for whom the adoration of the deity is the highest form of rapture; they appreciate Christ's sacrifice and are summoned to the presence of God. Others resist the Christian message and develop different ideals for their lives. They are assigned to places in the afterlife that

realize those ideals for them. Atheist philosophers, perhaps, discover themselves in an eternal seminar of astonishing brilliance. Each of us finds an appropriate niche.⁸

This fantasy allows the sufferings of our mundane lives to be redeemed. Not all of us are destined for Christian salvation, for God's eternal Sabbath, but everyone will receive a well-adapted reward.⁹ God does not treat all of us alike. But there is no divine evil.

Redemption is taken to consist in making available to some, those who freely turn to Christ, the highest form of bliss. We are freed from sin, not so that we avoid the terrors of eternal damnation but so that we have the chance of gaining the most wonderful reward. We are as much freed *for* as freed *from*. But as I read the scriptures, the fantasy involves ignoring (or denying) crucial texts. It underplays the importance of sin.¹⁰ And, of course, it passes very lightly over the references to the torments of the damned.

Most Christians follow a version of the religion that is committed to divine evil, evil perpetrated by God. Most, therefore, fall afoul of the neglected argument. Perhaps some do not. Perhaps some are inclined to accept the universalist fantasy I have just outlined. Can that count as a genuine style of Christianity? I shall leave that for the theologians to decide.

Can We Admire the Believers?

Many Christians appear to be good people, people worthy of the admiration of those of us who are non-Christians. From now on let us suppose, for simplicity's sake, that these Christians accept a God who perpetrates divine evil, one who inflicts infinite torment on those who do not accept him. Appearances notwithstanding, are those who worship the perpetrator of divine evil themselves evil?

Consider Fritz. Fritz is a neo-Nazi. He admires Hitler. Fritz's admiration of an evil man suffices, we might think, to make Fritz evil.

But perhaps this is too quick. Fritz's evil character, we might say, arises not from his admiration for Hitler but from his willingness to behave in the same way. Simply admiring Hitler isn't enough. One must also be disposed to emulate Hitler's deeds; and if this disposition is present, one is evil, whether or not the admiration remains.

Modest Fritz is not so disposed. He thinks himself unworthy. "Great deeds are reserved for great men," he says. (Compare: "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.¹¹) Fritz wouldn't even beat up a defenseless weakling—not even with a dozen of his mates at his side. He might even go so far as to restrain them. "This is the Führer's work, not ours," he argues. Fritz knows very clearly what Hitler would want done. Even though he admires Hitler, he does not do it.

Fritz is evil, it seems, simply because it is evil to admire someone who is evil. Or more exactly, it is evil to admire someone evil in full recognition of the characteristics and actions that express their evil. Evil is contagious, transmitted by clear-eyed admiration.

Some worshippers of the perpetrator are obviously evil. They relish contemplating the torment of the damned. Some of them even think that delight in the eternal sufferings of worldly sinners will be a component of the bliss of the saved.¹² Like Fritz, they may think that inflicting such suffering, or even any suffering at all, is beyond their humble station. They are glad that the perpetrator has instituted a division of labor. Their part is to forgive those who insult them, to turn the other cheek. They are happy in the thought that, by doing so, they will heap coals of fire on the heads of their enemies.¹³

Many other Christians are not like this at all. They are sincerely compassionate; they genuinely forgive their enemies. Yet they knowingly worship the perpetrator. Perhaps they do not like to think about it, but they firmly believe that, in the hereafter, their God will consign people they know, some of whom they love, to an eternity of unimaginable agony. Moved by this thought, they do whatever they can to urge others to join them in faith. Their deep sympathy with the unbelievers is expressed in efforts to persuade others to play by the rules the perpetrator has set. In worshipping the perpetrator, however, they acquiesce in those rules. They are well aware that many will not fall in line with the rules. They think that, if that happens, the perpetrator will be right to start the eternal torture. They endorse the divine evil. And that's bad enough.

Among those of us who do not worship the perpetrator, there are many who admire worshippers of the perpetrator. We admire some of our neighbors, recognizing their honesty, fairness, kindness, courage, and so forth. We admire religious people famed for their selflessness, their courage, or their scholarship—Mother Teresa, Father Murphy, Jean Buridan.¹⁴ Yet we know that they worship the perpetrator. Moreover, since they worship the perpetrator, endorsing his judgments about the propriety of eternal torment for some (including us), the perpetrator's evil extends to them. They admire evil and are tainted by it. In admiring them, we too admire evil. Does the evil spread by contagion to us?

What of those who admire those who admire those who worship the perpetrator? Are they too infected? If admiration transmits evil, then so do chains of admirers of arbitrary length. Eventually, almost every living person will be infected. It is almost impossible to avoid being hooked up to a chain that will terminate, possibly at a very long distance, in admiration of the perpetrator. Ecumenicism only makes matters worse. The more we are prepared to be tolerant in religious matters, the more we'll be prepared to overlook the details of others' theological views; the more we'll focus on their exemplary behavior toward those around them; as more admire the perpetrator's admirers, there will be more people for others to admire, and the contagion will spread.

This will occur even if, someday, there are no more worshippers of the perpetrator, even if nobody remembers the perpetrator, even if nobody remembers anyone who worshipped the perpetrator, even if nobody remembers anyone who remembered worshippers of the perpetrator. The only ones to escape will be the committed misanthropes. Leaving aside those who find nothing admirable in humanity, everyone will be tainted with divine evil.

The conclusion is absurd. It is also depressing. How can it be morally permissible to be tolerant of others and to appreciate their worth? What saves us from chains of contagion?

Perhaps what saves us is that sometimes those who admire are not well enough informed. If Fritz did not know about Hitler's evil deeds, thinking of the Führer only as a strong and patriotic leader who was restoring morale, then the misguided admiration would not mark Fritz as evil. Similarly, if I admire a worshipper of the perpetrator, recognizing that the worshipper appreciates the divine commitment to eternal torment, and if you admire me, not knowing of my admiration of the worshipper but recognizing my (occasional) good deeds, then the taint of divine evil does not spread from me to you. You are in the dark about the source of the evil in me. Like Fritz, you are an innocent. And, perhaps, your ignorance is far less culpable than his.

Admiration, we might suppose, is a bit more selective than the examples suggest. We don't just give it or withhold it. We admire people for particular qualities; sometimes we admire them despite perceived defects. I may admire the worshipper because he does so much for the poor and the sick. If I admire the worshipper despite his endorsement of the perpetrator, I place great weight on qualities that are genuinely good. You may admire me because you take me to be responding to that good. You do not know of my knowledge of the worshipper's acquiescence in the perpetrator's rules, and my decision to give that relatively little weight in my overall assessment. If you did know that, you might have second thoughts about me; you might not admire me after all. So the chain of contagion would be broken.

It is possible, then, to limit the spread of divine evil. Chains of contagion can be broken because admirers are often not fully informed about the attitudes of those they admire, because admiration can be a selective matter, a response to particular qualities. This is probably how things work in actuality. We are not all tainted with evil.

A residual difficulty remains. What of the worshippers themselves? And what attitude should we non-believers have toward our Christian friends? Can they avoid contagion? Can we admire them and not be infected?

If our friends believe the universalist fantasy, there's no problem. They don't worship a perpetrator, and we can freely admire them. But I suspect that the vast majority are more orthodox. They genuinely think that their God will commit those who do not accept him to eternal torment. They may prefer not to dwell on the point, but when they consider it, they accept his judgment. Of course, they do

not see this as divine evil. Instead they talk of divine justice and the fitting damnation of sinners. If Fritz is clear about Hitler's actual deeds, he will tend to use similar locutions. He won't talk about evil and genocide but will praise the proper purification of the highest form of culture and the justified wiping out of a disease.

Modest Fritz isn't disposed to persecute the Jews in his neighborhood. Nor are our Christian friends inclined to rain suffering and humiliation upon us. Yet if Hitler, or one of his appropriate representatives were there, beside Fritz and his mates and the potential Jewish victim, Fritz would approve of the persecution's being carried out by the proper authorities. So, too, with the worshippers. If the day of judgment were to arrive now, and they were to stand by and observe God's decision to punish us—their unbelieving friends—they would endorse it. Perhaps they would grieve for the fact that the punishment was prescribed for *us*; they would be full of regrets that we had not listened to their warnings and urgings; perhaps they would blame themselves for not having done more. But, in the end, they would worship the perpetrator; they would label divine evil as divine justice.

Can we absolve them of evil for their collaboration? We might try to recall the many good things they do, the sufferings they alleviate, the comforts they bring. There is plenty to throw into the balance in their favor. We can admire their compassion, their perseverance, their selflessness. But can we admire them, despite their preparedness to worship the perpetrator?

The balance seems to tilt in the negative direction. For, as the original neglected argument makes clear, the evil that God causes is infinitely greater than the entire sum of mundane suffering and sin. It is infinitely intense, and it lasts forever. However much pain our friends forestall or relieve, it is infinitesimal in comparison with the torment inflicted on a single individual who receives God's damnation. Yet they are willing to testify to the perpetrator's rightness in passing so severe a sentence. They are prepared to go on worshipping.

Overall, it seems, our evaluation must be negative. They are like the tyrant whose many small contributions to his subjects' welfare pale in contrast to the monstrous repression he will countenance. If we think of them as clear-headed, as fully aware of the character of their commitments in worshipping the perpetrator, we cannot excuse them.

But most of us do, at least most of the time. Are we too conniving at the divine evil? Probably not, precisely because the neglected argument is neglected. The magnitude of the torment isn't taken seriously. We dodge the consequence by keeping it all in soft focus, consoling ourselves with the thought that hellfire and brimstone are mere conceits, that grownup theists have gotten beyond the cartoon scenarios. That is probably the stance most favored by those who worship the perpetrator; starting from their trust in God, they suppose that there must be some nice version of the story, one that will not literally end with billions of damned souls writhing in eternal agony. Can they articulate a nice version that retains the distinctive ideas of Christianity?

Non-believers have been able to excuse their religious friends on the grounds that they are probably not clear-headed about the commitments of their worship. We can think of them as good people who have not seen the perpetrator's dark side. In bringing the problem of divine evil to their attention, I am presenting them with a choice they have previously avoided. Ironically, I may be making it impossible for myself to admire many whom I have previously liked and respected.

Editorial Note (Philip Kitcher). In March 2001, David Lewis finished a short outline of a paper he planned on "Divine Evil." He sent me a copy of the outline, and we had two conversations about it. Around this time, he also wrote a letter to Michael Tooley about the project.

After David's untimely death, Stephanie Lewis and I discussed some of his unfinished work. Further exchanges between us, and with Louise Antony, led to a decision that I would try to turn David's outline into a full essay, drawing on the letter about it and my memory of our conversations. (In particular, I have kept a promise I made to David to supply him with some references.) I am grateful to John Collins, Patricia Kitcher, and Michael Tooley for their advice and encouragement. Comments from Louise, and, especially Steffi, have been extremely helpful in composing the final version.

David's marvelous philosophical voice is inimitable. I have tried to preserve it by using as many phrases from the outline as I could. But this is surely, neither in substance nor in style, the paper he would have written. I trust readers to attribute its insights to David, and its deficiencies to me.

NINETEEN

Meta-atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception

Georges Rey

When I was very young, I attended a Methodist church for several years, and, purchasing the little books offered for the purpose, prayed morning and night, confessing my peccadilloes and asking for happier times. I found particularly compelling the singing of the chorales by the congregation: the combination of the simple tunes with complex inner harmonies being sung by ordinary folk struck me as simultaneously sublime and democratic and aroused in me a sense of good will toward people and much of the world that still plays a significant role in my life (among other things, making me particularly vulnerable to the religious music of Bach and the moral writings of Kant).

Around the age of eight or nine, however, I recall learning some of the rudiments of science, and, after a little reflection, it seemed to me pretty obvious that most of the claims-about God, although still attractive, were wishful thinking. Ironically enough, the very humility that I had been taught to be a virtue made me think that we ought to respect the independence of the world from our wishes, and it came to seem to me that atheism was therefore the only genuinely religious attitude (I was actually barred from the Boy Scouts for describing my religion as atheism!).

One might think that with greater maturity I would have come to more moderate views. But I'm afraid the reverse has happened. What with teaching the standard theistic arguments in my introductory philosophy courses, attending and discussing religious services with various observant friends, and just reading the daily paper, I frequently find myself having to confront religious views. But the more I do so, the more I actually fasten upon and think about upon the claims being made, the more bizarre and incredible do I find them. I really mean no offense to religious people, but, increasingly, the claims seem to me not merely