The Problem of Evil: The Privation Defense and Meaningful Belief

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The Problem of Evil can be introduced by observing that all Judeo-Christian religions hold that God is omnipotent and good, and by making the further observation that there is evil in the world. The proponent of the Problem will hold that all three of these propositions cannot be held in conjunction, for “either God cannot abolish evil or he will not; if he cannot then he is not all powerful; if he will not then he is not all-good.”¹ If the religious believer plays along, she will deny one of the initial observations, and though this will offer a solution to the Problem of Evil, it will also open up a whole new can of worms for her theology.

There is another avenue of defense, however, on which one attempts to show that a contradiction does not fall out in accepting all three propositions, by explaining how their conjunction could turn out to be true. This is the more theologically appealing route, and the one Herbert McCabe embarks on in his paper “On Evil and Omnipotence.” I believe that his defense—the Privation defense—can be viewed as successful, but that it also comes at a cost. I will argue that McCabe’s argument relies on a construal of the concept of good as it is applied to God (as in “God is good”) that puts the essential meaning of the concept beyond our epistemic grasp. Thus, while such a move pushes God’s goodness beyond the reach of the Problem of Evil, it also seems to push it beyond beliefs that we can reasonably hold.

Before assessing McCabe’s argument, it will be useful to briefly lay out some of the intellectual foundation on which the argument stands. Given McCabe’s philosophical allegiance as a Thomist scholar, a particular notion of Aquinas’s thought is quite crucial. Aquinas observes that “we cannot name God except from creatures,” prompting us to ask how we apply “creature-names” to God.² He claims that when we talk about God, we do not use concepts univocally (e.g. “That apple is red” and “That truck is red”) or equivocally (e.g. “After I fished on the bank of the river, I went to the bank to deposit my check”). For example, to refer to God’s and man’s wisdom univocally would fail to distinguish the perfection of God’s wisdom, while to use the term equivocally would say nothing at all about God, since there would be no correspondence between our “creature-name” and the meaning of wisdom when applied to God.

To resolve this problem, Aquinas introduces the analogy as a middle ground between the univocal and the equivocal. The analogy is a proportion, where the concepts our “creature-names” reflect, such as “wise” and “good,” “preexist (in God) in a most excellent way.”³ Crucially, there is at least some

³ Ibid., 1a.q13.a5.
correspondence between the use of terms in statements like “man is good” and “God is good.” It is thus in virtue of analogy that we can say things meaningfully about God, on a Thomist view.

With this in mind, I will now proceed to lay out McCabe’s argument. It is important to understand what McCabe does not allow himself in his defense. First, because he is not “playing along” with the Problem, he must affirm that God is genuinely omnipotent—that is, he cannot massage the meaning of divine omnipotence to satisfy the Problem. Second, he cannot get around this premise through a free-will defense, because he styles himself a “divine compatibilist;” he holds that freedom and predestination are compatible. For McCabe, there are no casual chains in the world ultimately independent of God, and so no place where evil can reside in which God is not (at least) in the vicinity.

McCabe has thus effectively cut himself off from any defense along the lines of omnipotence; there is no sense open to him in which God must sit idly by because of some (questionable) restriction on omnipotence. He instead must reconcile God’s goodness directly with the existence of evil in the world. He attempts to do this in two moves: 1. Evil is a privation of the good, so God cannot do evil, and 2. We cannot say that God ought to prevent evil, because we cannot say that God has a function.

To say that evil is a privation of the good is to say that evil is a failure—an absence of something where it ought to be. McCabe asserts: “Good and evil are logically related not like north and south but like north and not-north. Evil is not a positive alternative label to Good; it just means the absence of the Good label.” It is this notion of absence that is crucial to McCabe’s argument. If evil is an absence of some good, then God cannot be associated with evil directly, because “the omnipotence of God plainly means that everything that actually happens is due to God.” Evil is not something that actually happens, but is rather an absence, and so is not “due to God.” The precise location of evil in a causal chain of events—such as in the act of a murder—is not any actual piece of the chain, but is rather a “failure” of the chain. Thus, God cannot be said to do evil, though he is everywhere.

Of course, one may respond that even if God himself cannot “do” evil, he, as an omnipotent being, ought to prevent it, and is thus being negligent in not doing so. Here is where McCabe’s second move gets on. He observes that to be negligent is indeed to fail to do something one ought to, but then points to the absurdity of saying that God ought to do anything at all. To say that something ought to do such and such, one must say that that something has a function—the ought arises in virtue of that function. And it is only of things in the world that we can assign such a function that would prompt ought-statements. That is, “we cannot say, ‘This is the sort of activity we expect of God,’” because there is simply no function associated with being a God. Thus, God cannot be guilty by neglect. And so, because God does no evil and cannot be reasonably considered negligent, there is no sense in which God can be held responsible.

4 To avoid a separate, though related, problem (the Paradox of Omnipotence) McCabe does offer a restriction on God’s omnipotence. He argues that God cannot make creatures which he subsequently cannot control—that this is a logical impossibility like the creation of a circular square (73). This restriction, however, reinforces the Problem of Evil, for to say that God cannot create beings that act, or at least choose, beyond his control is to say that there are no acts, or choices, in the world—including those which can be characterized as evil—in which God is not in the vicinity, so to speak. Thus, McCabe’s restriction does not defuse, the Problem, but rather underscores its force.


6 Ibid., 85.

7 Ibid., 73.

8 Ibid., 90.
for evil. McCabe seems to have preserved God’s omnipotence and goodness, and maintained the existence of evil in the world—a solution to the Problem of Evil.

Having offered a sketch of McCabe’s solution, and before putting forth my own objection to McCabe’s final move, I will address two other important objections against which I believe McCabe can mount effective defenses. These center on the first claim that evil is a privation of the good, and so God cannot do evil. The first objection questions whether the existence of evil has in fact been maintained. One may contend that to say that evil a privation is to deny that evil exists. The intuition of this objection is that if our notion of evil prevents us from pointing to it directly in the world, we are effectively saying that it is not real.

Yet it does seem that we are latching onto something real when we talk about emptiness and expectation together, which would give us the lack essential to evil qua privation that McCabe maintains. For example, I can point to an empty grain silo in a village after the harvest seasons while expressing the expectation that it should be full. When I point to the empty silo and say “There is nothing in that silo, and there should be,” I am expressing a fact about the world. The state of the silo, which (on McCabe’s view) is evil, is “a perfectly real condition.” And clearly, the lack of the grain in the silo is quite real to the villagers looking for their next meal.

A second objection questions not whether the absence of good (evil) exists, but rather whether we can properly restrict evil to this absence. One might say that God is in all the actions of a sin; where else is the sin but in these actions? The objection becomes quite compelling when viewed in terms of an example: when a man shoots another man, God is in the action of pointing the gun, pulling the trigger, the explosion in the barrel, the penetration of the slug into the victim’s head, and the deadness of the corpse afterward. God brings all of these things about, yet commits no evil, on McCabe’s view.

While this pill may, at first, be hard to swallow, it helps us to pinpoint exactly where evil is in any event. We can say that there are two sorts of things relevant to determining if something is good or evil: the actions (or states of affairs) themselves and the functional expectations (what a sort of thing is expected to do). Examples of actions are listed above in the murder example, and one could say that a functional expectation for man is that he not kill other men. God clearly inhabits all of these things—he “brings about” every action in the world and sets the expectations for creatures. Yet, on McCabe’s picture, evil is not in the expectations or the actions, but rather in the “gap” between them: the actions fail to satisfy, to “reach,” the expectation that man not kill other men. God clearly does not inhabit this “gap,” since there is nothing there for him to bring about; it is “empty.” And it seems reasonable to talk about evil as this “gap,” as opposed to the event itself: actions in themselves are not intrinsically evil, but only qualified as such when assessed under the rubric of expectations. For example, if the set of actions described above were contextualized in the “murder” of a crazed gunman in a mall, a very different set of expectations would likely justify the actions.

It seems, then, that there are defensible positions against objections to McCabe’s first premise. Having offered a sketch of such positions, I will now mount my own attack on his final move, which protects God from accusations of neglect by claiming that we cannot assign him a functional expectation, and thus reasonably assert ought-statements about him. On my view, it may be coherent to hold that God

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Ibid., 86.
himself does not require a functional expectation, but this coherency is jeopardized once we introduce predications like “God is good,” because of the meaning of goodness as we typically use it.

It is essential to recall that in a Thomist analogy, we are seeking to apply names to God that we have acquired from our experiences with creatures. Aquinas wants this in order to assure that we can talk sensibly about God. For concepts like “good,” it seems that some sort of functional expectation is essential to our use of them in creaturely affairs. For example, it would be strange indeed to call a man good after he walks by an old lady being beaten by a mugger. In virtue of his “good” quality, we would expect the good man to intervene. Note that this does not necessarily rest on the man’s being a human: it may be the case that not all humans would be expected to intervene in that case (certainly wicked men would not be expected to), but clearly all good men would. At least in worldly affairs, some functional expectation is relevant to our predication of terms like good. Of course, one may respond that God’s goodness is not like that of worldly goodness, but this leads to a problem that will be addressed below.

If McCabe is to hold that God has no functional expectation even when we characterize him as good, this seems to call into question exactly what we mean by good. A functional expectation seems essential to the term itself; the idea that a good thing is expected to do something in a particular context seems to be inextricable from our usage of “good.” We can thus pose the challenge to McCabe: in what sense are we using the term good when we talk about God, and can this sense been seen as analogous to the term’s “creature usage?” If McCabe fails to meet this challenge it seems fair to hold that his use of God’s goodness risks mere equivocation.

Still, one may respond that what constitutes goodness for a particular type of being is its natural classification. That is to say, we call the man who saves the old lady from the mugging good because he is doing what a human ought to do; the wicked man is wicked because he does not “behave in the way that human beings ought to behave.” God is certainly not in the natural class of humans, and so cannot be held to the same sort of functional expectations. It is thus important to clarify my claim: I am not claiming God’s goodness ought to compel him to do x or y in particular, but rather there is some expectation that he ought to fulfill as a good being. Goodness, in its most abstract sense, may not require a particular to-do list, but you certainly don’t get it for free either! This assertion is also stronger than it may initially seem: though, in principle, God’s goodness may allow any sort of functional expectation in order for his goodness to resemble our understanding of the term, the functional expectation must be one that we find reasonable, given this understanding. Otherwise, the divine use of the term is merely equivocation.

Thus, there appear to be two lines that McCabe could take. The first he takes explicitly in his final section: “What does ‘God is good’ mean?” He states: “always to do what is good and never what is evil—is this not a sufficient reason for being called good?” Since “goodness” exists when actions (or states of affairs) satisfy functional expectations (so that there is no “gap”), and God resides in both the actions and the expectations, God is present in every good thing. Yet, it seems that we can push on the use of “do” here. Just previously, McCabe observes that “it is true that [good things] are not achievements of God, but

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10 Of course, one may object that there is in fact no functional expectation for good men to protect old ladies from being beaten by muggers. But any use of “good” in moral philosophy eventually has something to say about action. It is in virtue of this fact, and the assumption that the minimal sticking point is not completely alien to our general intuitions, that my claim stands.

11 McCabe, 87.

12 Ibid., 92–93.
the achievements of other things that he brings about.” That is, God does not in fact “do” any good act, but “brings them about” in some divine sense. While McCabe’s maxim clearly applies to creatures, it is unclear that it gets us anywhere with respect to the challenge: we can simply question whether the sense in which God “brings about” good things is genuinely analogous to the way in which creatures “do” good things.

Ultimately, I believe that McCabe must take a second line: we do not understand how “God is good” is analogous to “man is good,” but this does not rule out that an analogous relationship exists. This follows from his line: “we only begin to understand God when we realize that his goodness cannot be construed on the model of any experience of our own that we have this side of heaven.” God’s goodness is something that we can only come to understand once we come to “full super-human maturity in heaven.” There is a sense in which McCabe has adequately defeated the Problem of Evil by making this claim: because the sentence “God is good” now invokes a sense of goodness beyond our reach in this world, we cannot utilize the meaning of ‘God is good’ necessary for the Problem’s contradiction. It may turn out that God’s goodness is conceptually compatible with the existence of evil in the world, for reasons beyond our grasp, and thus beyond the reach of the Problem.

Yet, putting the concept of God’s goodness out of reach of the Problem leads us to ask what sort of grasp we can have on the analogy, and even whether we can suppose that an analogous relationship exists at all. McCabe may respond that the analogy exists, just not in a way that we can appreciate in our human state. But this brings us to the crux of the problem. For us to form statements in terms of a Thomist analogy requires that there be a sense of goodness accessible to us that can extend over both creatures and God. Otherwise, the sentence “God is good” is a mere equivocation, with empty content. And as Mercier observes: “(if) the sentence is meaningless nonsense, so too is it to purport to believe it.” If the meaning of God’s goodness is beyond our grasp, so too are any meaningful beliefs about it.

I believe that Aquinas himself offers the strongest objection to my argument here. He admits that names like good “are imposed by us in the first place on creatures, which we know first” but that “the reality that is signified” by terms like good “are said in the primary sense of God rather than of creatures.” Essentially, to even have this concern, that goodness and God can come apart (via equivocation), is nonsensical because “God is good” cannot be a contingent fact. The primary meaning of goodness is grounded in God, necessarily.

Aquinas’s objection brings us to the heart of the matter. It is unclear that the non-believer can hold that there is no possibility of an analogous sense of God’s goodness, and Aquinas presents a compelling argument on this front. However, it is equally unclear that we have access to the aspect of goodness that would realize such an analogy. Aquinas concedes that we come to know goodness first from creatures. In fact, McCabe himself states: “The meaning we give to phrases like ‘the goodness of God’… derives not from what we know of the nature of God but what we know of creatures.” It is in virtue of this fact that

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13 Ibid., 92.
14 Ibid., 79.
16 Aquinas, 1a,q.13,a.6.
17 McCabe, 92.
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the Problem of Evil gets on. While it may be the case that our creature-usage of goodness is secondary in meaning to God’s goodness, it is nevertheless this secondary sense on which our beliefs like “God is good” stand. And the Problem of Evil illustrates that there is no way to predicate the secondary sense of goodness to God without arriving at a contradiction. Metaphysical possibility does not lend epistemic legitimacy to our beliefs in this case.

It appears, then, that McCabe has taken the Problem of Evil as far as it will go, and in doing so has revealed something crucial about the nature of the Problem and of religious belief. First, it is clear that the Problem of Evil is not a pure metaphysical attack on God, or even the Judeo-Christian God. Once a move like McCabe’s is made, to put God’s goodness beyond the reach of our understanding, the Problem has nothing more to say, because it relies on a creature-usage of goodness. But as soon as the Problem loses steam, we are poised to ask if any sense can be made out of the surviving religious beliefs, or if they are mere equivocations—mere nonsense. Perhaps McCabe has won the battle and lost the war: the Problem of Evil no longer concerns his beliefs, but it is unclear that his beliefs are anything more than equivocal nonsense.18

REFERENCES


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