INTRODUCTION

Providence as ascribed traditionally to God includes both almighty power over the world and complete knowledge of all that is in the world and all possible future developments. These attributes are clearly ascribed to God in the Scriptures and in Jewish and Christian tradition; and not there alone, for Anaxagoras for example said of his Nous, the Mind which made the cosmos, that it has power over all other things, but is not mixed up with them so that they can react upon it, and that it has complete knowledge of past, present, and future. It is the assertion that the world is ruled by Divine Providence that gives rise to the problem of evil; if the world is planned in all its detail by a mind, can that mind be called good, given the world's actual nature?

I shall begin by examining some problems about the attributes of almighty power and omniscience. I then turn to various forms of evil in the world. I begin with the problem of animal pain; for many modern people, inflicting unnecessary suffering is the very type of iniquity, and what suffering could it ever be necessary for an almighty and omniscient being to inflict on beings incapable of sin? Next, I consider the doctrine of Original Sin: I argue that this doctrine cannot be abandoned without the total destruction of Christian belief, and that its negative side, the radical corruption of the human will,
is something that we are pretty well compelled to accept even apart from revelation; what revelation offers is some hope of relief from this desperate situation. Then I consider the evidence that in this life good and evil fortune are distributed by the laws of chance, not by desert, and the consequences for our view of Divine Justice. Finally, I consider whether we ought to reject the *prima facie* evidence that men can irretrievably ruin themselves by folly and vice; and I argue that such final ruin is not excluded by the goodness of God; not even if this means that many men turn God’s gift of immortality into an endless misery for themselves.
Unfriendly critics of Christian belief have sometimes argued at once that the doctrine of omnipotence is incoherent, and that Christians must face the challenge how to reconcile God’s omnipotence with his goodness, given all the evils there are in the world. Such critics are trying to have their cake and eat it: if the doctrine of omnipotence is incoherent, they are necessarily wasting their time and energy if they discuss the problem of evil in terms of God’s alleged omnipotence, and so are any Christian apologists who consent to argue on this footing. For if this incoherent doctrine is in fact an integral part of Christian belief, then that is of itself a sufficient objection to Christianity; and thus any discussion of difficulties Christians may have about evil is a waste of time. The critic in that case is not exactly contradicting himself; but if he is right in one part of his argument, then another part – the part we are likely to find developed at greater length – is on his own showing an entirely futile exercise. If on the other hand Christians are not committed to believing in God’s omnipotence, then for them there can be no problem how to reconcile God’s omnipotence with something else; and then again any discussion of the problem of evil in terms of omnipotence is a waste of time.

I said in the last chapter that so far as I can see, any
An Irrelevance of Omnipotence

thesis that gives a plausible interpretation of the sentence 'God can do everything' is a thesis involving both inherent logical difficulties and conclusions hard to reconcile with traditional Christian belief. Of course I may be mistaken: the sort of arguments I developed very often turn out to contain subtle fallacies, or again I may have ignored some quite natural way of reading 'God can do everything' that would not be open to my sort of objections. But thus far I see no positive reason to doubt what I then argued; so I feel pretty sure that the doctrine of omnipotence neither has a reasonable and coherent interpretation nor is one that Christians need regard themselves as committed to. My view is, therefore, as at present advised, that the problem of evil is wrongly located when it is put in terms of God's omnipotence, and that both sides ought to realize this.

I am not denying, however, that there is a serious problem of evil. For I agreed also that Christians are committed quite inescapably to the dogma that God is almighty — that thus he cannot be thwarted or baffled, and does whatever he will in Heaven and on Earth. Now almightiness gives rise to a problem of evil, and one which cannot be so quickly disposed of. If we are to discuss the problem of evil in a worthwhile way, we had best forget about omnipotence and concentrate on the implications of God's being almighty. I owe this insight to McTaggart (Some Dogmas of Religion, §§182–91): it seems to me one of his most important contributions to the philosophy of religion. Before I get down to this form of the problem of evil I must try to make clear certain points about God's power and will.

The terms 'potentia absoluta' and 'potentia ordinata' are used in various ways by Scholastic writers; I have alluded to one attempt to make a distinction with these terms, and have argued that the distinction is bogus. There is no sense in distinguishing what God simply could do from what he could do wisely and well, since he cannot act except wisely and well. But there is another use of the pair that does mark a genuine distinction: namely, it will be said that e.g. absolutely speaking it is within God's power not to save Israel, this is within his potentia absoluta, but given that he has promised he cannot leave Israel to perish, it is not within his potentia ordinata. The distinction, I say, is a genuine one; but I submit — though I should have Aquinas against me over this — that it has somehow got twisted the wrong way round. What we say God can do simpliciter is what God can do in the actual state of affairs: and we thus ought not to say 'God can leave Israel to perish' but only 'God could, would be able, to leave Israel to perish if he had not promised otherwise'. (I shall find it often convenient in the sequel to use the adverb 'simpliciter' in its Scholastic sense: that sense is not at all recondite — it just means that some predication is true just as it stands, without tacit 'provisos, sub-intents, or saving clauses'. 'God can do so-and-so simpliciter' means 'God can do so-and-so — period'.)

The line I am taking here is parallel to the line taken by Aquinas, and by Hobbes too, about the voluntariness of acts done out of fear. A man without a pistol at his head would will that the bank which employs him should keep its money in the till, but with the pistol at
his head what he does will is that the robber should have the money and not blow out the bank clerk's brains. The object of actual willing is what actually is chosen in the concrete present circumstances, not what would be chosen in hypothetically supposed circumstances. This distinction is sometimes called the distinction of antecedent and consequent will. It is important on several counts to get the distinction the right way round, and not say that the surrender of the money is involuntary simpliciter and voluntary only hypothetically, namely if you have a pistol to your head. For one thing, getting this distinction the right way round serves to quash a tedious sophistry in discussions of free will. People who say, as I should, that a man is not free to act in the present if the way he acts is determined by a set of factors outside his own control are always told that this is a confusion between being determined and being compelled. But the objector is on the contrary himself likely to be confused; coercion by fear, unless a man is in such a crazy panic, brevis furor, that he cannot even think, leaves a man able to choose what he shall do, but merely gives him a strong reason to choose one way; whereas coercion by force means that the man's choice does not enter into the story. If a man's choice lies not between surrendering his employer's money and instant death, but between betraying his country and having some peccadillo exposed, we may be less inclined to excuse him for yielding to the threat; that we consider the value of the alternatives involved shows that we do regard yielding as a morally appraisable choice and not as simply involuntary.

For our present purpose, this notion of what is willed 

An Irrelevance of Omnipotence

simpliciter, actually chosen in the concrete situation, is important because this is the sense of will in which God's will is never thwarted. Men can and do act against God's will in the sense of despising his counsel and breaking his commandments; God's declared counsels and commands are called his will in one sense, distinguished in Scholastic jargon by the label voluntas signi. And it is in this sense of will too that we pray that God's will may be done on Earth as it is in Heaven; that is, that men may be obedient to God's command and heedful of his counsels. But whatever happens is something God freely brings about or freely allows some created agent to bring about; the way in which, as I have argued, God must needs fulfil his promises is no exception to this freedom, for God was free to promise or not and had perfect foresight of all possible consequences — he cannot be entrapped by his own promises. Whatever God would choose to bring about or to allow in other circumstances, what he does bring about or allow is just what he chooses.

If I may now revert to what I said about the power of God, we may observe as I said a parallelism between what God wills simpliciter and what God can do simpliciter. There is no case in which 'God wills so-and-so', simpliciter, is true and 'God can bring about so-and-so', simpliciter, is false. God of course can do whatever he does; and he does whatever he will. Even if what happens is due to some finite agent other than God who acts voluntarily, God cannot, so to say, be denied responsibility; for as I said before, the power of the finite agent derives from God originally, and its continuing exercise again depends on God's will.
An Irrelevance of Omnipotence

But now we come to the crux of the matter. McTaggart has questioned whether for an almighty God the distinction between antecedent and consequent will is maintainable, and has argued that a being to whose antecedent will much in this universe were not repugnant would not be perfectly good. This is a serious challenge to traditional theodicies.

McTaggart in fact speaks not of an almighty, but of a creative, God; but it seems clear that he conceived his creative God as being, in my sense, almighty—what God cannot be said to do, he likewise cannot be said to will to do (Some Dogmas of Religion, §188). And it seems clear that being almighty and being creative do in fact go together. A God who was not a Creator would be acting within a universe containing other agents whose power did not depend on him, and so would not be almighty. Christians are of course anyhow committed to God's being both.

The distinction between antecedent and consequent will is certainly going to be difficult of application to God. It is customarily illustrated by examples to which there can be nothing parallel in God's case—like the merchantman's captain who throws his wares overboard in a storm: antecedently he wills to bring them into port, consequently upon the storm he wills to throw them overboard. But the captain only does not will rather to allay the storm because this is not open to him; he is not one whom wind and sea obey.

Moreover, the very notion of means and ends is difficult to apply to God. The ordinary notion of means and ends involves that the agent chose the means because he wills the end. But God cannot be said to will or choose anything on account of some cause; as regards what happens in the created world, God's will is the first cause and itself has no cause—otherwise we should get a regress about the causation of God's willing. It is thus that Aquinas (Ia q.19 a.5) says of God ‘Non propter hoc vult hoc’—he does not will one thing on account of another.

Denying that God adopts means in order to secure ends after the fashion of finite agents does not, I think, mean that we need reject the apparent teleology in the world, particularly in the world of living things, as a delusion; I think it is extreme folly to do that, and only fashion can make people account for the ostensible teleology by the idea that of many kinds of things just those survived which chanced to be viable.

But teleology may be something different from an agent's being caused to choose means by his desire of the end. I shall revert to the subject of teleological explanation. For the moment I shall just say briefly that if we are to take final causes seriously, then we must regard the form of explanation ‘Why p? p in order that q’ as an ultimate form; we must not reduce it to the form ‘p because an agent first had the desire that q’, where a desire is regarded as one kind of event. This, as has often been said in objection to Aristotle, would reduce a final cause to one particular sort of efficient cause. It seems clear, as a matter of history, that Aristotle did recognize final causes in nature without believing à la Schopenhauer in an unconscious will in things and without believing either in Paley's watchmaker God who craftly
adapted means to ends. But the exposition and defence of a teleological explanatory framework would take me far from my present subject.

For the present I return to what Aquinas says of God in the passage I cited: in terse lapidary Latin, ‘Vult ergo hoc esse propter hoc, sed non propter hoc vult hoc’. To spell this out: God wills that there should be a universe in which hoc est propter hoc – in which teleological explanations of the form ‘it comes to pass that p in order that it should come to pass that q’ will work; but God is not induced to bring it about that p in order that it may be the case that q, because he desires the latter state of affairs; non propter hoc vult hoc. ‘God has no ends’ was the way Thomas Hobbes put it; God has nothing to gain from creating things, or from our praise of him; God’s will is the reason why things other than God are, and itself has no reason. I am not denying that God’s will is for the good, or affirming that God has set up some arbitrary standard of goodness; but the Divine Nature stands in no need of any good to be got from creation,

privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indigia nostri.

And Lucretius’s reference to the absence of grief and fear from the Divine Nature as well as to its self-sufficiency points up the difficulty of distinguishing God’s antecedent and consequent will. If God’s will cannot be altered by some good it lacks, or deflected from its course by grief or fear, what room is there for a distinction between antecedent and consequent will in God; between what God would will if only… and what God does will? And if God does will, simpliciter, such a world as this, how can he be good?

Faced with this difficulty, some men have conceived of God as at least capable of making himself need creatures (C. S. Lewis in The Problem of Pain hints at this) and as liable to frustration and disappointment. But I think this is a blind alley, as I have said before. To go this way is to surrender the Christian cause at once; the other way one can go on arguing. I should perhaps here consider the frequent apologetic move of saying that we should consider the character and attributes of God not in terms of abstract theological reasoning but as manifested in the character of Jesus Christ. This may be called a neo-Monophysite heresy: that there is only one character or nature in Christ, and that this is humanly recognizable. Those who maintain this thesis cannot have realized how destructive of Christ’s claims it is. For he most certainly did not come to reveal to the Jews a God whom hitherto they had not known and whose character they were now to discover in himself; he was a Jewish Rabbi, teaching within a religion that existed among men before he was born. Whatever he claimed for himself, he certainly did not make the absurd and blasphemous claim that his observable human nature was identical with the Divine Nature; if he had, no pious Jew would have listened to him for a moment; and we must not make the claim on his behalf. Christ as man was amazed and disappointed and angered, and knew grief and pain beyond all men; but we shall get nowhere if we try to find such passions in the Divine Nature.
An Irrelevance of Omnipotence

No: McTaggart's difficulty is a real one. He is right in saying that God's nature in action expresses itself by his will; right in saying that we must not think of limitations on God's power as though they were external obstacles — which is an absurd idea as regards an almighty Creator; right in holding that nothing stops God from doing something except that he does not will it — that God is unable to do only what he is also unable to will. McTaggart does not raise the difficulty I have raised about a theodicy that uses the concept of means and ends, at least he does not do so explicitly; in fact in one place (Some Dogmas of Religion, § 181) he seems to consider that this concept could be applied to a creative God who was not omnipotent (that is, not what I have called absolutely omnipotent). But it would be difficult indeed to defend the application of this concept to a being for whom the distinction of antecedent and consequent will did not exist; perhaps the passage where McTaggart suggests the contrary is only a temporary dialectical concession. Anyhow we have seen that on Aquinas’s view the means-and-end concept cannot properly be applied to the Divine will, and his reasons for his view appear sound.

My purpose has been to bring this difficulty sharply before your eyes, not to resolve it. I think a great deal of harm has been done by people thinking the problem of evil needs to be discussed in terms of how omnipotent Omnipotence is. I argued in the last chapter that sense is not to be made of ‘God can do everything’, and I have argued this time that the real problem lies elsewhere. If I succeeded, as McTaggart unfortunately did not, in shifting the field of debate, I should count that worthwhile.

I shall end with a couple of remarks which though they do not resolve the problem of evil are I think relevant to it. It is mere impertinence for someone who holds a noncognitive view of our ascribing good and evil to persons or actions to pretend that on his footing there is any problem of evil at all. If my moral code, let us say, is a system of imperatives that I freely choose to promulgate, or if it amounts to saying ‘I approve of this and I hope you will too’ — then it is merely grotesque to imagine this sort of thing addressed to God. We have here a mirror-image of the error that God decrees good and evil arbitrarily. Only of course if it were so, we should have to respect his decrees; and he needn't respect ours.