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## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE PROBLEM OF INJUSTICE

### I

In general\* when philosophers talk about the problem of evil — they analyze why there is any suffering in the world at all. Our Sages, however, seem to take a different attitude and concentrate on the somewhat different problem of *tzaddik ve'ra lo* — why the righteous suffer. There have been few exceptions to this attitude. One was Saadia Gaon, who indeed raised the problem of why anybody suffered: if the wicked suffered for their sins surely the Almighty in His goodness could have placed all souls in Paradise without them having first go through this vale of tears with its opportunities for sinning and its inevitable consequence of punishment. In other words, given that all suffering was punishment for sin committed, the Almighty could have eliminated all suffering from the world by not allowing there to be any opportunity for sinning.

Saddia Gaon's reply is a strange one and many have found it hard to accept. He says that it is human nature not to enjoy something given for nothing to the same extent that one enjoys something one had to earn through hard work. Had people entered Paradise automatically, they would not have enjoyed it

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\* In 1964 I published an essay in the *American Philosophical Quarterly* on the problem of evil. Subsequently it has become the subject of discussion and criticism in a number of articles written by other philosophers. The Editor suggested it might be useful to summarize the significant points which have emerged from these discussions and attempt to describe clearly the conclusion to which they tend to lead.

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as much as do those who enter it now after withstanding temptation and avoiding the pitfalls of transgression. Therefore, to enhance the reward of the righteous in the Hereafter, opportunities for sinning and hence for suffering have been provided.

Several objections have been raised. Firstly, seeing the amount of suffering there is in the world, one tends to suspect that the cost involved in enjoying the Hereafter by the righteous is too exorbitant. Secondly, it may be asked, let there be no possibility for sinning, and let reward in the Hereafter be increased by an appropriate amount sufficient to make up for the loss incurred by the lack of risk and hard work involved in obtaining it. Finally, the fact that people do not enjoy as much something they get for nothing happens merely to be a fact contingent upon the laws of psychology. The Almighty in His omnipotence could have changed the laws of human nature and made enjoyment solely the function of the magnitude of the reward and independent of the means by which obtained, and hence avoid the need for the possibility of sinning and punishment.

Another answer to Saadia Gaon's question is that free will is precious and that the Almighty wanted the world to possess this valuable quality. Significant freedom, however, is moral freedom which allows man freedom to choose any position between sainthood and complete wickedness. Suffering, then, is an inevitable consequence of sinning; but the possibility for sinning must exist for the preservation of human free will.

This answer also raises the worthwhileness of the cost involved in having complete moral freedom. But a more profound question may also be posed: It is admitted that saintly people have free will and that they are subject to every kind of temptation others are subject to, and it is only by exercising utmost restraint that they succeed in achieving saintlihood. This is, after all, why they deserve to be admired. But then the Almighty in His omniscience knows before anybody's birth whether he will grow up to choose freely to be a saint. He should have allowed to be born no one but those who are going to turn out completely righteous. In this way he would have allowed the world to contain the quality of free will as well as the absence

of sin and suffering.\*

## II

The foregoing considerations would tend to show that *prima facie* there is a problem of evil which is the problem of how an Omnipotent and Omnibenevolent Being should permit the existence of any suffering and indeed should permit that the world should be in a state which renders it less than the best of all possible worlds. In this section I shall try to demonstrate that upon a more thoroughgoing analysis the problem of evil vanishes.

First we have to ask: is there indeed evil in the world? Suffering unquestionably exists, but can this be construed as the existence of evil? Before one can answer this question one must assess the moral status of Divine acts. It is generally agreed that Divine acts are assessed by the same criterion as human acts, otherwise the notions of "good" and "bad" would not retain their normal meaning. What then are evil human acts? As a rule they are acts which contravene moral obligations. This brings us to the question which must be answered first: what are my obligations towards my fellow man? On the surface, it may seem that my obligation towards another is to make him — provided this does not interfere with the welfare of others — as happy as I can. Upon reflection, however, this appears inadequate.

Suppose I had a child of very low intelligence but of very happy disposition under my care. Provided his basic bodily needs are minimally taken care of, he enjoys lying on his back all day long and staring into the air. A minor operation, I am assured by the best medical authorities, would spectacularly raise his intelligence and render him capable of creative achievements, as well as appreciating music, art, literature and science. Naturally if his intelligence were raised he would be vulnerable to the frustrations, disappointments and anxieties most of us are subject to from time to time. Nevertheless I believe it will be agreed that I should be reprehensible if I refrained from letting

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\* This last point does not hold according to philosophers who like Gersonides deny that God knows beforehand what a man will choose freely to do.

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the child have the operation even if I insured to the best of my ability that his physical needs would always be taken care of.

But why is it not good enough that I am keeping him in a state of maximum happiness? Apparently the degree of desirability of a state is not a simple function of a single factor — namely the degree to which one's wants are satisfied — but is also dependent on the kind of being one is. The somewhat less happy intelligent child is ultimately better off than the happy idiot because, although the factor of happiness is present in his case less than in full amount, he is more than compensated for this by having become a more preferable kind of person.

This idea, that my moral obligations consist not simply in my having to endeavor to raise the amount of happiness a certain being is granted to enjoy but that these obligations are somewhat more complex and consist in my having to raise the degree of desirability of his state which is a two-valued function, depending both on the potentials of the individual and the amount to which his needs are being taken care of, is illustrated as follows: In recent years much has been heard about machines one may get hooked up to and have the pleasure centers of one's brains electrically stimulated. Once a person's brain is connected to the machine, he becomes completely captivated by the experience it provides and desires absolutely nothing but the passive enjoyment of the sublime pleasures induced by it. It goes without saying, according to the Jewish point of view, that it is most deplorable that a man should become a slave to the pleasures offered by such a machine. But I believe also that from an entirely secular point of view I should be condemned by most, if without prior consultation, I hooked up A — a normal person — to this machine and thus caused him to become addicted to it for the rest of his life. This would be so even if I provided an attendant to look after A's vital physical needs. I should, I believe, be severely condemned although A's addiction has no ill after-effects. But A, previously a normal person, has had his usual ups and downs, while now he is in a continual state of "bliss." Shouldn't I be praised for having eliminated the large gap between his potential and actual amount of happiness by having satiated him with pleasure?

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

The answer, I believe, is not merely because I have rendered A a less useful member of society. Even if the needs of others are not taken into account it will be agreed by most that by inducing in A a permanent state of euphoria I have not done a good thing to him. This is so because I have reduced A's state of desirability. The latter is not solely a function of how satiated A is with pleasure but also of the kind of being he is. A was, prior to my interference, capable of great variety of response, of interaction with others, of creativity and self-improvement, while now he is reduced to a completely inactive, vegetable-like existence. The great increase in the factor of happiness is insufficient to make up for the great loss in the second factor — A being lowered from the state of a normal human being to the state of an inferior quasi-hibernating inert existence.

The general ethical view I am trying to explain, and which is quite widely accepted, is well reflected in the famous dictum, "Better Socrates dissatisfied than the fool satisfied; better the fool dissatisfied than the pig satisfied." It suggests that given two different creatures A and B, with different capacities and appetites and with different potentials for suffering and happiness, their states of desirability are comparable on an absolute external criterion. It may turn out that A is satisfied with his lot while B is complaining, yet, by this higher criterion, B is in a more desirable state than A. Accordingly, one of the universal rules of ethics is not, if everything else is equal increase the state of happiness of A, but rather, if everything is equal increase the degree of desirability of the state of A by as much as possible. It may be pointed out that generally I have far more opportunities to affect A's happiness than to affect the other factor which determines the degree of desirability of his state. It should also be noted that it is by no means always clear how much increase in one factor makes up for a given decrease in the other factor.

Now I take it that conceptually there is no limit to the degree which the desirability of state may reach. One can easily conceive a super-Socrates who has a much higher intelligence and many more than five senses through which to enjoy the world and who stands to Socrates like the latter stands to the pig. And

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there is the possibility of super-super-Socrates and so on *ad infinitum*. Given this last supposition about an infinite hierarchy of possible beings and hence the limitless of the possible increase in the degree of desirability of state, how does the aforementioned universal ethical rule apply to the Almighty: “. . . increase the degree of desirability of state as much as possible?” But no matter to what degree it is increased it is always logically possible to increase it further. A mortal’s possibilities are physically limited, hence there is in his case a natural limit which applies to the principle but there is no limit to what God can do. It is therefore logically impossible for Him to fulfill the ethical principle, i.e., to do enough to discharge His obligation to do more and further increase the degree of desirability of state. But what is logically impossible to do cannot be done by an Omnipotent being either and it is agreed by practically all philosophers that God’s inability to do what is logically impossible does not diminish His omnipotence. Just as it is logically impossible to name the highest integer, it is impossible to grant a creature a degree of desirability of state higher than which is inconceivable; thus it is logically impossible for God to fulfill what is required by the universal ethical principle and therefore He cannot fulfill it and is therefore not obliged to fulfill it. There is no room for complaint, seeing that the Almighty has not fulfilled the ethical principle which mortals are bound by and has left His creature in various low state of desirability. Thus the problem of evil vanishes.

### III

It will be illuminating if we consider some of the questions that have been raised:

A. Admittedly it is impossible that the Almighty should place everybody, or for that matter anybody, in a state better than which is inconceivable. Yet He could improve the state of everybody and make it better than it is now. The problem of evil may thus be stated not as the problem of why things are not so good that they could not be better, but why things are not better than they actually are.

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

The answer is that one is justified in complaining about an existing state of affairs only if what one is complaining about is not logically inherent in every state of affairs, that is, if the situation could be changed into another in which the reason for complaint would be removed. If, however, it is clear now that no matter what changes are introduced, in any new situation there is exactly as much reason to complain as before, there is no right to demand that the old situation be replaced by another. In our case it is clear that no matter by how much the degree of desirability of the state of an individual be increased it would still be just as short of being so large that larger it could not be, as it is now. Therefore in any improved situation, objectively speaking, there is as much reason for complaint as there is in the present situation. So while creatures' situations could so be changed as to make them cease to complain, nothing could be done to mitigate the objective situation and remove the objective grounds on which to complain — namely that things are less good than they could be. The reason for this complaint remains constant through all changes, there is therefore no objective justification for demanding any changes.

B. It would be possible, it is argued, to create a state of affairs in which all creatures whatever their needs were completely satisfied and ceased to complain. Why has the Almighty not created such a state of affairs?

Because, as it has already been explained, when A and B are in different states and A is complaining while B is entirely satisfied with his lot, it is not necessarily the case that B is better off than A. "Better a fool dissatisfied than a pig satisfied," etc. It would therefore be absurd to say that if a being were left to exist as a low order creature but satisfied and uncomplaining, then his case would represent no evil while if he were placed in what is objectively a more preferable state, namely were made into a much higher order creature, though not entirely satisfied, then one can justifiably complain about the evil in the world.

C. It is a fact that when we witness Socrates positively distressed or even just deprived from the happiness he could partake in, our compassion is aroused. On the other hand, we are not in the least upset when we see a satisfied pig. Does this not

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show that we tend not to subscribe to the view expounded here concerning the degree of desirability of state being a two-valued function? Does this not show that what really seems to matter to us is whether a creature's actual needs, whatever they may be, are satisfied, but not what kind of a creature a given individual is?

The story concerning the retarded child and the story about the pleasure machine clearly point in the other direction. The apparent counter-examples arise only because in practice there is very little mobility across the boundaries between the various kinds of creatures. An inferior creature is taken for granted to be what it is and not someone who could be and therefore perhaps ought to be a higher kind of creature. Let us imagine, however, that we have witnessed Socrates deprived of all his belongings, prohibited from studying or engaging in discussion and thrown out of his house. Subsequently there comes along a magician who turns Socrates into a pig, thus rendering him satisfied to do nothing but roll in the mud. It seems to me that we would not regard his problems as having been solved but on the contrary feel intense pity that an accomplished being like Socrates has been so reduced that he does not at all feel the great deprivations he has been subjected to as deprivations.

D. According to the suggested solution to the problem of evil it makes absolutely no difference in which state the inhabitants of this world are; the problem of evil just does not exist, for no matter what, nothing can be done which would bring anybody's state nearer to the state which could not be improved any further. But being good essentially implies that one does certain things and refrains from others; yet the Almighty's goodness turns out not to impose upon Him any restraints at all. He is completely free to do anything to anyone, for no matter what he does we cannot attribute lack of goodness or evil to Him. The question then naturally arises: is it meaningful to assign goodness to Him at all? Is the predicate "good" not empty of all meaning, when our knowledge that the Almighty is good renders us incapable to foretell at all what He will do and what He will refrain from doing?

Or to put it differently, if the world was governed by an

absolute monster whose aim was to do as much evil as possible, it does not seem that the world would have to be different from what it is now. An omnimalevolent being might leave the world in the state it is without turning anyone into a lower kind of creature or increase the amount of his suffering, by the same kind of argument we have used before: no matter how bad things are they can always be worse; it is logically impossible to be in a state worse than which is inconceivable. But if the same state of affairs is compatible with the world being governed by an omnibenevolent being and an omnimalevolent being then what feature of the world permits us to assert meaningfully that it was created by the former rather than by the latter? Do we not have to conclude that the notions of omnibenevolence and omnimalevolence are interchangeable as well as devoid of all meaning?

This last objection, if valid, implies that my attempted defense of Divine goodness made things worse than they were before: the atheist only claimed that the Almighty is not perfectly good since it is an observed fact that evil exists, but on my analysis one has to conclude that He cannot be good at all since the notion of goodness can logically not apply to an omnipotent being.

The objection would have been valid only if it were a fact that the sole rule goodness imposes upon its practitioners is to increase the degree of the desirability of the state of everyone by as much as possible. There are, however, many other rules, and omnipotence is compatible with these. A good being, for example, may be expected to be truthful most of the time, and a perfectly good being, no matter how powerful, can be relied upon to be truthful every time.

Nor seems there to be any excuse why, if the world is governed by an Almighty God, there should be even a single case of injustice in it. Omnipotence certainly does not interfere with the ability to be perfectly just; on the contrary it guarantees it. One who believes in God is committed to the belief that perfect justice reigns in the world, which implies that given any two people A and B, if A is more righteous than B, then the degree of desirability of A's state is higher than that of B's.

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Now it is because the principle of increasing everybody's degree of desirability of state does not apply to an omnipotent being while the principle of maintaining complete justice does, that the position of our Sages turns out to have been so right. Their attitude to neglect the problem of evil as such while being very much concerned with the problem of injustice is now seen completely vindicated. On the surface it looks as if the principle of justice which an omnipotent being can and should observe is often violated. Quite often, of two individuals A and B, where A seems much more righteous than B, it is B who appears to be in a higher state of desirability. But as the Talmud points out, observations confined solely to what is happening in this world can never serve as conclusive evidence as to whose total sum of degree of desirability of states add ultimately up to more. Given that there is life in the Hereafter it is possible that the balance be redressed there. Thus while the general problem of evil vanishes for logical reasons, the problem of injustice disappears for the practical reason that we do not have access to all parts of an individual's life and thus cannot make the observations necessary to determining whether there is such a problem.