

## THE GOD OF ETH

Stephen Law

*A dialogue investigating whether the usual religious defences of belief in God are really up to the job.*

Most people who believe in God take their belief to be pretty reasonable. 'Perhaps God's existence can't be conclusively proved,' they'll say, 'but it's a fairly sensible thing to believe — far more sensible than, say, belief in fairies or Santa Claus.' But are they right?

Christians, Muslims and Jews all believe that God is both all-powerful and all-good. Indeed, God is often characterized as an infinitely loving father. Yet most of the popular arguments for the existence of God allow us to deduce little if anything about his moral character. Take the argument from design, for example. Even if we can show that the universe does show signs of design, what's the evidence that this creator is all-good?

There is also a well-known argument that, even if the universe was created by an all-powerful being, that being is not all-good. The argument is called the problem of evil, and runs roughly as follows: if God is both all-powerful and all-good, why is there so much suffering in the world? Why does God inflict earthquakes, floods, famines and the Black Death upon us? Why does he give small children cancer? Why does he make life so grindingly miserable for so many? Why does he arrange for millions of us to end our lives horrendously scarred — in many cases both physically and psychologically crippled — by the world he created for us? This hardly sounds like the behaviour of a supremely compassionate and loving father-figure, does it? Surely there's overwhelming evidence that the universe is not under the control of a limitlessly powerful and benevolent character?

Many find this argument compelling. But of course there are plenty who believe the problem of evil can be dealt with.

How? Religious thinkers have, over the centuries, developed a number of ingenious solutions. Here are some popular examples.

### **The free will solution**

God gave us free will. We are not blind automatons, but free agents capable of make our own choices and acting on them. As a result of God having given us free will, we sometimes choose to do wrong. We start wars, steal, and so on. So some suffering results from our possessing free will. However, it is still better that we have free will. Free will is a very great good that more than compensates for the suffering it can bring.

### **The 'character-building' solution**

We know that a bad experience can sometimes make us stronger. We can learn, be enriched, through suffering. For example, people who have suffered a terrible disease sometimes say they gained greatly from it. Similarly, by causing us pain and suffering, God allows us to grow and develop both morally and spiritually. It is only through our experiencing this suffering that we can ultimately become the noble souls God wants us to be.

### **Some goods require evils**

Theists often point out that God inevitably had to include quite a bit of suffering in his creation in order that certain important goods could exist. Take, for example, charity and sympathy. Charity is a great virtue. Yet you can only be charitable if there exist others who are needy. Similarly, you can only sympathize with someone whom you perceive to be suffering. Charity and sympathy are so-called 'second order' goods that require 'first order' evils like neediness and suffering (or at least the appearance of such evils) to exist. It's argued that these second order goods outweigh the first order evils, which is why God allows the evils to occur.

### **Play the mystery card**

Some theists point out that God works in mysterious ways. It's arrogant of us to suppose that we can understand the mind of an infinitely powerful and wise being. The evil God inflicts upon us is, actually, all for the best. It's just that we, being mere humans, can't see how.

Many believe these and other similar moves largely take the sting out of the problem of evil. Some think they deal with the problem altogether. I find them deeply inadequate. The following dialogue is my attempt to convey why.

\* \* \* \*

*Welcome to Eth, a modestly-proportioned planet on the far side of our Galaxy. Here, beneath the great marble spires of Eth's finest university, the debate of the age is taking place. Arrayed on either side of the University's Great Chamber are Eth's finest scholars and thinkers. They are here to decide the most controversial and emotive issue dividing the inhabitants of Eth — does God exist?*

*To the right of the Great Chamber are arrayed the believers. To the left sit the skeptics. The public galleries are near to bursting with those waiting to hear the proceedings. At the end of the debate, the audience will vote.*

*Booblefrip — the bird-like Professor of Origin — and Gizimoth — the portly Arch-logos-inquisitor — lead the debate.*

GIZIMOTH: Here, on Eth, many of us believe in God, do we not?

BOOBLEFRIP: Certainly.

GIZIMOTH: So what is God like?

BOOBLEFRIP: Well, God is all-powerful, of course. God can do anything. He created the entire universe, including every last one of us. God's awesome power knows no bounds!

*A whisper of approval ripples across the believers on the right side of the Great Chamber.*

GIZIMOTH: Let's agree about that, then. God, if he exists, is omnipotent. But here on Eth, those who believe in God also attribute another property to him, don't they?

BOOBLEFRIP: Yes. As you know, we also believe that God is all-evil.

GIZIMOTH: Can you explain what you mean by that?

BOOBLEFRIP: Not only does God's power know no bounds, neither does he depravity. His cruelty is infinite. His malice without end.

*Booblefrip casts a cool look across the right side of the chamber.*

GIZIMOTH: I see. All powerful. And all-evil. Now Professor Booblefrip, do you think that could briefly explain why you think it's *reasonable* to believe in such a being? What grounds can you provide to justify belief in this evil God?

### **The universe must have come from somewhere**

BOOBLEFRIP: Well, I don't say I can conclusively *prove* beyond doubt that God exists. But it seems to me that there are at least two rather good reasons for believing in God. First, it seems obvious to me, as it does to many, that the universe must have come from *somewhere*. Don't you agree?

GIZIMOTH: Of course. The scientists assembled here will tell you that there is a perfectly good scientific explanation for the existence of the universe — the Big Bang. About 14 billion years ago an unimaginably violent explosion occurred in which all matter and energy came into existence, and in which space and even time itself began.

BOOBLEFRIP: We're all familiar with the Big Bang theory, Professor Gizimoth. But of course, the Big Bang really only *postpones* the mystery of why there is anything at all, doesn't it? For now we need to explain *why there was a Big Bang*. *Why* did the Big bang happen? Science can't explain *that*, can it? There's a real *mystery* here, isn't there?

GIZIMOTH: Hmm. Perhaps

BOOBLEFRIP: The only satisfactory explanation we have for why the universe came into existence in the first place is that God created. So there's my *first* reason to believe in God.

*Gizimoth frowns: he's clearly not buying Booblefrip's argument. But he encourages Booblefrip to continue.*

## Evidence of design

GIZIMOTH: And your second reason?

Booblemat: Take a look around you, at the wonders of universe. Life. Conscious beings like ourselves. Do you suppose that all this appeared just be *chance*? Surely not. The universe shows clear signs of design. And where there's design, there's a designer!

GIZIMOTH: But science *can* explain life. What about the theory of natural selection? That explains how over millions of years, life forms evolved and developed. It explains how complex life-forms can gradually evolve from even the simplest of bacteria. Science can perfectly well explain life without introducing your supernatural designer.

BOOBLEFRIP: Natural selection can't explain everything. For example, it can't explain why the universe was set up to allow natural selection to take place in the first place, can it?

GIZIMOTH: Hmm. Well no, it can't explain that.

BOOBLEFRIP: Did you know that, if the laws governing the universe had been only *very slightly* different, the universe would not have survived more than a second or two? Either that or it would have quickly dissipated into a thin sterile soup incapable of producing life. For life to emerge and evolve, you need *very specific* conditions. The universe must be set up in an extremely precise fashion. And of course we know that it was set up in just this way, don't we!

GIZIMOTH: I guess so.

BOOBLEFRIP: Now that it should *just happen* to be set up in just this way by chance is too much to swallow. That would be a fluke of cosmic proportions. It's much more sensible, surely, to suppose that someone deliberately designed the universe this way, so as to produce life, and ultimately ourselves. That someone is God!

*Another warm ripple of approval arose from the right side of the Great Chamber. The assembled academics felt that, so far at least, Booblefrip was getting the better of the argument. But Gizimoth was perplexed.*

GIZIMOTH: Very well, let's suppose the universe *does* show clear signs of having been designed by an intelligent being.

BOOBLEFRIP: Ah. A convert!

GIZIMOTH: Not at all. I'm supposing this only *for the sake of argument*. You still haven't given me much reason to suppose that this designer is all-evil, have you?

BOOBLEFRIP: But God is, *by definition*, all-evil.

GIZIMOTH: But why define God that way? Why not suppose, instead, that God is *neither good nor evil*? Or why not suppose he is *all-good*?

*Booblefrip thinks Gizimoth has gone too far.*

BOOBLEFRIP: What a bizarre suggestion. It's obvious our creator is *very clearly* evil! Take a look around you! Witness the horrendous suffering he inflicts upon us. The floods. The earthquakes. Cancer. The vile, rotting stench of God's creation is overwhelming!

### **The problem of good**

GIZIMOTH: Yes, our creator may do *some* evil. But it's not clear he's *all-evil*, is it? It's certainly not obvious that his wickedness is infinite, that his malice and cruelty know no bounds. You're deliberately ignoring a famous argument against the existence of God — the *problem of good*.

BOOBLEFRIP: I'm familiar with the problem of good — we theologians of Eth have debating it for centuries. But it's not fatal to belief in God.

GIZIMOTH: Really? Let's see. The problem of good, as you know, is essentially very simple. If the universe was designed by an all-powerful, all-evil God, then *why is there so much good in the world*?

BOOBLEFRIP: That's the supposed problem, yes.

GIZIMOTH: Why, for example, does God allow at least some people to live out happy, contented and fulfilled lives? Why doesn't he torture them instead? If God is all-powerful, he certainly *could* torture them, couldn't he?

BOOBLEFRIP: Well, yes, he could.

GIZIMOTH: In fact he *could* make their lives utterly miserable. And we know that, as he is also supremely evil, he must want them suffer. Yet he gives some people every care and attention. Why? It makes no sense, does it?

BOOBLEFRIP: Perhaps not at *first* sight, no.

GIZIMOTH: Here's another example. Why does God allow us to do good deeds, to help our fellow Ethians? He even allows us to lay down our lives for each other. These selfless actions improve the quality of our lives no end. So why does God allow them. Why doesn't he *force* us to be nasty and do evil, just like him?

BOOBLEFRIP: I grant you that God's allowing so much noble and selfless behaviour might *seem* like very good evidence that he is not all-evil. But appearances are deceptive.

GIZIMOTH: Also, if God's is absolutely evil, why did he put so much beauty in the world for us to enjoy? Why did he create such sublime sunsets?

BOOBLEFRIP: Good question.

GIZIMOTH: And why does God give us children, which bring us immeasurable happiness? You see? There are countless ways in which our lives are enriched by God's creation.

BOOBLEFRIP: But there's also evil!

GIZIMOTH: True, there's evil in the world. But there's an awful lot of good. Far too much good, in fact, for anyone reasonably to conclude that the universe was created by an all-evil God. Belief in a supremely wicked creator is palpably absurd.

*There is much quiet nodding to the left of the Great Chamber. Gizimoth's argument has struck a chord with the unbelievers. But Booblefrip thinks Gizimoth's argument is far from conclusive.*

BOOBLEFRIP: Look, I admit that the amount of good in the world might *seem* to undermine belief in an all-powerful, all-evil God. But actually, we believers *can* explain why a supremely evil God would allow all these good things to happen.

GIZIMOTH: By all means try.

### The free-will solution

BOOBLEFRIP: Surely you are familiar with the free-will defence?

GIZIMOTH: Perhaps you would care to explain it.

BOOBLEFRIP: Very well. God's malevolence *is* without end. True, he let's us do good. He allows us to act selflessly for the betterment of others, for example. But there's a reason for that.

GIZIMOTH: What reason?

BOOBLEFRIP: God gave us free will.

GIZIMOTH: Free will?

BOOBLEFRIP: Yes. God *could* have made us mere automata that always did the wrong thing. But he didn't do that. He gave us the freedom to choose how we act.

GIZIMOTH: Why?

BOOBLEFRIP: By giving us free will God actually increased the amount of suffering there is in the world. He made the world far more terrible than it would otherwise have been!

GIZIMOTH: How?

BOOBLEFRIP: Think about it. By giving us free-will, God can be sure we will *agonize endlessly* about what we should do. For free will brings with it the exquisite torture of *temptation*. And then, when we succumb to temptation, we feel guilty. Knowing that, being free, we could have done otherwise, we feel awful about what we have done. We end up torturing *ourselves*. The exquisitely evil irony of it all!

GIZIMOTH: Hmm.

BOOBLEFRIP: By giving us free-will God allowed for far more intense and subtle forms of suffering than would otherwise be possible.

GIZIMOTH: But what about the good people sometimes do?

BOOBLEFRIP: It's true that people do sometimes choose to act selflessly and nobly, and that this can produce good. But this good is far outweighed by the additional suffering free-will brings. Just take a look at the world, for goodness sake! It's a world full of people who not only behave despicably, but also agonize endlessly about what they have done!

### The problem of natural goods

GIZIMOTH: But this is ridiculous!

BOOBLEFRIP: Why?

GIZIMOTH: Well, for a start, this only explains the good that we bring about by acting freely. It doesn't explain the existence of *naturally occurring* goods.

BOOBLEFRIP: Such as?

GIZIMOTH: Well, what about the glories of nature: sublime sunsets, stunning landscapes, the splendor of the heavens? We're not responsible for these things, are we?

BOOBLEFRIP: No. God is.

GIZIMOTH: But why would an all-evil God create something that gives us pleasure? Also, why does he give us beautiful children to love? And why does he choose to give some people extraordinary good fortune — health, wealth and happiness in abundance? Surely the existence of these things provides us with overwhelming evidence that, even if the universe has a creator, he's not *all* bad?

### The 'character-destroying' solution

BOOBLEFRIP: You're mistaken, Gizimoth. Such things are *exactly* what we should expect if God is supremely evil.

GIZIMOTH: But why?

BOOBLEFRIP: *Some* natural beauty is certainly to be expected. If everything was uniformly ugly, we wouldn't be tormented by the ugliness half as much as if it were laced

with *some* beauty. To *truly* appreciate the ghastliness of the environment most of us inhabit — a urine stained, concrete and asphalt wasteland peppered with advertising hoardings, drug addicts and dog dirt — we need to be reminded every now and then that things *could* have been different. God put some natural beauty into the world to make our appreciation of the ugliness and dreariness of day-to-day life all the more acute.

GIZIMOTH: Hmm. But why would a supremely wicked God give us beautiful children to love?

BOOBLEFRIP: Because he knows we'll spend our entire lives worrying about them. Only a parent can know the depth of torture a child brings.

GIZIMOTH: Why does he give us healthy young bodies?

BOOBLEFRIP: He makes sure our beauty, vitality and health are short-lived. You see, by giving us something, and then snatching it away, our evil creator can make us suffer even more than if we had never had it. Our relentless slide into decay, ugliness and disease is so much more agonizing than if God had just made us repulsive and decrepit to begin with.

GIZIMOTH: But then why does God allow *some* people live out such contented lives?

BOOBLEFRIP: *Of course* an evil God is going to bestow upon a *few* people lavish lifestyles, good health and immense success. Their happiness is designed to make the suffering of the rest of us even more acute! We'll be wracked by feelings of envy, jealousy and failure! Who can be content while *they* have so much more!

GIZIMOTH: Oh honestly.

BOOBLEFRIP: Don't you see? The world clearly was designed to produce life, to produce conscious beings like ourselves. Why? So that it's designer can torture us. The world is designed to physically and psychologically *crush* us, so that we are ultimately overwhelmed by life's futility and bow out in despair.

*Gizimoth is becoming frustrated. Every time he comes up with another piece of evidence that the universe wasn't*

*designed by a supremely evil deity, Booblefrip turns out to have yet another ingenious explanation up his sleeve. And yet, thinks Gizimoth, the evidence against the existence of an utterly evil God is overwhelming.*

### Some goods require evils

GIZIMOTH: This is ridiculous. You have an answer for everything!

BOOBLEFRIP: Yes, I *do* have an answer to all your arguments. So far, you've given me not the slightest reason to suppose that the world was *not* created by a supremely evil being. But if you're unhappy with my answers, let me try a rather different approach. There are some evils that require goods in order to exist, aren't there?

GIZIMOTH: Such as?

BOOBLEFRIP: Take the evil of jealousy. Jealousy requires there be something to be being jealous of. God gave good things to *some* people so that others would feel jealous. Or take lying. Lying requires that people often tell the truth — otherwise there would be no point in lying because no one would believe you. The evil of dishonesty requires that there be a *certain amount* of honesty.

GIZIMOTH: And you think these evils outweigh the goods they depend on?

BOOBLEFRIP: Exactly. God allows *some* good things into his creation. It's the price he has to pay for these greater evils.

### Play The Mystery Card

GIZIMOTH: These tricky replies of yours are patently absurd. You can't *seriously* maintain that the world you see around you — a world full of natural beauty and laughing children — is *really* the handiwork of an infinitely evil God?

BOOBLEFRIP: I do maintain that, yes. True, I may not be able to account for every last drop of good in the world. But remember that we are dealing here with *the mind of God*. Who

are you to suppose you can understand the mind of an infinitely intelligent and knowledgeable being? Isn't it arrogant of you to suppose that you can figure out God's master plan?

GIZIMOTH: I'm *arrogant*?

*There's some subtle nodding from the believers on the right.*

BOOBLEFRIP: Yes. Arrogant. Evil God works in mysterious ways. Ultimately, everything really is all for the worst. It's just that, being mere humans, we can't always figure out how.

GIZIMOTH: Oh, really. This is...

BOOBLEFRIP: I think it's arrogant of you to suppose otherwise — to suppose that *you* must be able to figure it all out.

### The verdict

*At the end of the debate, the audience vote. After the deliberation, a spokesperson steps forward with their verdict.*

SPOKESPERSON: It seems to us that Booblefrip has made a powerful case for supposing the world was created by God. In addition, Booblefrip has provided a compelling defence of belief in this evil being. He has successfully explained why even an evil God would allow a great deal of good. And so the motion is carried — we are persuaded that Evil God exists.

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Are you persuaded by Booblefrip's defence of belief in a supremely evil God? Of course not. His explanations are clearly feeble. Surely, despite Booblefrip's convoluted maneuverings, belief in a supremely evil God remains patently absurd. That's why none of us believe in such a God, of course.

But Booblefrip's defence of belief in an evil God merely flips round the standard explanations that theists offer in defence of belief in a good God. Booblefrip's attempts to explain what

good there is in the world mirror the theist's attempts to explain the evil.

So if Booblefrip's explanations are deeply inadequate, why aren't the theist's explanations? Actually, Booblefrip's explanations strike me as at least as sensible as the theist's (though still not at all sensible, of course). Certainly, the onus is now on the theist to make clear why their explanations are any more plausible than are Booblefrip's absurd efforts.

Despite Booblefrip's best efforts, belief in an evil God clearly remains downright silly. But then why isn't belief in a good God also silly? Aren't we justified in rejecting belief in a good God for the same very good reason that we are justified in rejecting belief in an evil God? If the problem of good is fatal to belief in an evil God (which it clearly is), why isn't the problem of evil similarly fatal to belief in a good God?

That's the question the theist needs to answer.

*Stephen Law is editor of Think and lecturer in philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London.*



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