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# HORRENDOUS EVILS AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Sutherland

*I—Marilyn McCord Adams*

## I

*Introduction.* Over the past thirty years, analytic philosophers of religion have defined ‘the problem of evil’ in terms of the *prima facie* difficulty in consistently maintaining

- (1) God exists, and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good

and

- (2) Evil exists.

In a crisp and classic article ‘Evil and Omnipotence’,<sup>1</sup> J. L. Mackie emphasized that the problem is not that (1) and (2) are logically inconsistent by themselves, but that they together with quasi-logical rules formulating attribute-analyses—such as

- (P1) A perfectly good being would always eliminate evil so far as it could,

and

- (P2) There are *no limits* to what an omnipotent being can do,

—constitute an inconsistent premiss-set. He added, of course, that the inconsistency might be removed by substituting alternative and perhaps more subtle analyses, but cautioned that such replacements of (P1) and (P2) would save ‘ordinary theism’ from his charge of positive irrationality, only if true to its ‘essential requirements’.<sup>2</sup>

In an earlier paper ‘Problems of Evil: More Advice to

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Mackie, ‘Evil and Omnipotence’, *Mind*, 1955; reprinted in Nelson Pike, *God and Evil*, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964, pp. 46–60.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Christian Philosophers',<sup>3</sup> I underscored Mackie's point and took it a step further. In debates about whether the argument from evil can establish the irrationality of religious belief, care must be taken, both by the atheologians who deploy it and the believers who defend against it, to insure that the operative attribute-analyses accurately reflect that religion's understanding of Divine power and goodness. It does the atheologist no good to argue for the falsity of Christianity on the ground that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, pleasure-maximizer is incompossible with a world such as ours, because Christians never believed God was a pleasure-maximizer anyway. But equally, the truth of Christianity would be inadequately defended by the observation that an omnipotent, omniscient egoist could have created a world with suffering creatures, because Christians insist that God loves other (created) persons than Himself. The extension of 'evil' in (2) is likewise important. Since Mackie and his successors are out to show that 'the several parts of the *essential* theological doctrine are inconsistent with *each other*',<sup>4</sup> they can accomplish their aim only if they circumscribe the extension of 'evil' as their religious opponents do. By the same token, it is not enough for Christian philosophers to explain how the power, knowledge, and goodness of God could coexist with some evils or other; a full account must exhibit the compossibility of Divine perfection with evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in the actual world (and evaluated as such by Christian standards).

The moral of my earlier story might be summarized thus: where the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is at stake, successful arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premisses (explicitly or implicitly) internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents; likewise for successful rebuttals or explanations of consistency. The thrust of my argument is to push both sides of the debate towards more detailed attention to and subtle understanding of the religious system in question.

As a Christian philosopher, I want to focus in this paper on the

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers', *Faith and Philosophy*, April 1988, pp. 121–43.

<sup>4</sup> Mackie, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–47.

problem for the truth of Christianity raised by what I shall call ‘horrendous’ evils. Although our world is riddled with them, the Biblical record punctuated by them, and one of them—viz., the passion of Christ, according to Christian belief, the judicial murder of God by the people of God—is memorialized by the Church on its most solemn holiday (Good Friday) and in its central sacrament (the Eucharist), the problem of horrendous evils is largely skirted by standard treatments for the good reason that they are intractable by them. After showing why, I will draw on other Christian materials to sketch ways of meeting this, the deepest of religious problems.

## II

*Defining the Category.* For present purposes, I define ‘horrendous evils’ as ‘evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole’. Such reasonable doubt arises because it is so difficult humanly to conceive how such evils could be overcome. Borrowing Chisholm’s contrast between *balancing off* (which occurs when the opposing values of *mutually exclusive* parts of a whole partially or totally cancel each other out) and *defeat* (which cannot occur by the mere addition to the whole of a new part of opposing value, but involves some ‘organic unity’ among the values of parts and wholes, as when the positive aesthetic value of a whole painting defeats the ugliness of a small colour patch)<sup>5</sup>, horrendous evils seem *prima facie*, not only to balance off but to engulf the positive value of a participant’s life. Nevertheless, that very horrendous proportion, by which they threaten to rob a person’s life of positive meaning, cries out not only to be engulfed, but to be made meaningful through positive and decisive defeat.

I understand this criterion to be objective, but relative to individuals. The example of habitual complainers, who know how to make the worst of a good situation, shows individuals not to be incorrigible experts on what ills would defeat the positive value of their lives. Nevertheless, nature and experience endow people with different strengths; one bears easily what crushes

<sup>5</sup> Roderick Chisholm, ‘The Defeat of Good and Evil’ (unpublished version).

another. And a major consideration in determining whether an individual's life is/has been a great good to him/her on the whole, is invariably and appropriately how it has seemed to him/her.<sup>6</sup>

I offer the following list of paradigmatic horrors: the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one's own off-spring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, having to choose which of one's children shall live and which be executed by terrorists, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent of the disfigurement or death of those one loves best. I regard these as *paradigmatic* because I believe most people would find in the doing or suffering of them *prima facie* reason to doubt the positive meaning of their lives. Christian belief counts the crucifixion of Christ another. On the one hand, death by crucifixion seemed to defeat Jesus' Messianic vocation; for according to Jewish law, death by hanging from a tree made its victim ritually accursed, definitively excluded from the compass of God's people, *a fortiori* disqualified from being the Messiah. On the other hand, it represented the defeat of its perpetrators' leadership vocations, as those who were to prepare the people of God for the Messiah's coming, kill and ritually accuse the true Messiah, according to later theological understanding, God Himself.

### III

*The Impotence of Standard Solutions.* For better or worse, the by-now-standard strategies for 'solving' the problem of evil are powerless in the face of horrendous evils.

**3.1 Seeking the Reason Why** In his model article 'Hume on Evil',<sup>7</sup> Pike takes up Mackie's challenge, arguing that (P1) fails

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Malcolm's astonishment at Wittgenstein's dying exclamation that he had had a wonderful life, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> 'Hume on Evil', *Philosophical Review* LXXII (1963), pp. 180–97; reprinted in *God and Evil*, p. 88.

to reflect ordinary moral intuitions (more to the point, I would add, Christian beliefs), and traces the abiding sense of trouble to the hunch that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have no reason compatible with perfect goodness for permitting (bringing about) evils, because all legitimate excuses arise from ignorance or weakness. Solutions to the problem of evil have thus been sought in the form of counter-examples to this latter claim, i.e., logically possible reasons why that would excuse even an omnipotent, omniscient God! The putative logically possible reasons offered have tended to be *generic* and *global*: generic insofar as some *general* reason is sought to cover all sorts of evils; global insofar as they seize upon some feature of the world as a whole. For example, philosophers have alleged that the desire to make a world with one of the following properties—‘the best of all possible worlds’,<sup>8</sup> ‘a world a more perfect than which is impossible’, ‘a world exhibiting a perfect balance of retributive justice’,<sup>9</sup> ‘a world with as favourable a balance of (created) moral good over moral evil as God can weakly actualize’<sup>10</sup>—would constitute a reason compatible with perfect goodness for God’s creating a world with evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in the actual world. Moreover, such general reasons are presented as so powerful as to do away with any need to catalogue types of evils one by one, and examine God’s reason for permitting each in particular. Plantinga explicitly hopes that the problem of horrendous evils can thus be solved without being squarely confronted.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Following Leibniz, Pike draws on this feature as part of what I have called his ‘Epistemic Defense’ (‘Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers’, pp. 124–25).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *On Free Choice of Will* III. 93–102, implies that there is a maximum value for created worlds, and a plurality of worlds that meets it. All of these contain rational free creatures; evils are foreseen but unintended side-effects of their creation. No matter what they choose, however, God can order their choices into a maximally perfect universe by establishing an order of retributive justice.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga takes this line in numerous discussions, in the course of answering Mackie’s objection to the Free Will Defence, that God should have made sinless free creatures. Plantinga insists that, given incompatibilist freedom in creatures, God cannot strongly actualize any world He wants. It is logically possible that a world with evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in this world is the best that He could do, Plantinga argues, given His aim of getting some moral goodness in the world.

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga, ‘Self-Profile’, in *Alvin Plantinga*, edited by James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, D. Reidel Publishing Company (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster, 1985), p. 38.

3.2 *The Insufficiency of Global Defeat.* A pair of distinctions is in order here: (i) between two dimensions of Divine goodness in relation to creation—viz., ‘producer of global goods’ and ‘goodness to’ or ‘love of individual created persons’; and (ii) between the overbalance/defeat of evil by good on the global scale, and the overbalance/defeat of evil by good within the context of an individual person’s life.<sup>12</sup> Correspondingly, we may separate two problems of evil parallel to the two sorts of goodness mentioned in (i).

In effect, generic and global approaches are directed to the first problem: they defend Divine goodness along the first (global) dimension by suggesting logically possible strategies for the global defeat of evils. But establishing God’s excellence as a producer of global goods does not automatically solve the second problem, especially in a world containing horrendous evils. For God cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives He allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils—that is, individuals within whose lives horrendous evils remain undefeated. Yet, the only way unsupplemented global and generic approaches could have to explain the latter, would be by applying their general reasons-why to particular cases of horrendous suffering.

Unfortunately, such an exercise fails to give satisfaction. Suppose for the sake of argument that horrendous evil could be included in maximally perfect world orders; its being partially constitutive of such an order would assign it that generic and global positive meaning. But would knowledge of such a fact, defeat for a mother the *prima facie* reason provided by her cannibalism of her own infant, to wish that she had never been born? Again, the aim of perfect retributive balance confers meaning on evils imposed. But would knowledge that the torturer was being tortured give the victim who broke down and turned traitor under pressure, any more reason to think his/her life worthwhile? Would it not merely multiply reasons for the torturer to doubt that his/her life could turn out to be a good to him/her on the whole? Could the truck-driver who accidentally runs over his beloved child find consolation in the idea that

<sup>12</sup> I owe the second of these distinctions to a remark by Keith DeRose in our Fall 1987 seminar on the problem of evil at UCLA.

this middle-known<sup>13</sup> but unintended side-effect was part of the price God accepted for a world with the best balance of moral good over moral evil He could get?

Not only does the application to horrors of such generic and global reasons for Divine permission of evils fail to solve the second problem of evil; it makes it worse by adding *generic prima facie* reasons to doubt whether human life would be a great good to individual human beings in possible worlds where such Divine motives were operative. For, taken in isolation and made to bear the weight of the whole explanation, such reasons-why draw a picture of Divine indifference or even hostility to the human plight. Would the fact that God permitted horrors because they were constitutive means to His end of global perfection, or that He tolerated them because He could obtain that global end anyway, make the participant's life more tolerable, more worth living for him/her? Given radical human vulnerability to horrendous evils, the ease with which humans participate in them, whether as victim or perpetrator, would not the thought that God visits horrors on anyone who caused them, simply because s/he deserves it, provide one more reason to expect human life to be a nightmare?

Those willing to split the two problems of evil apart might adopt a divide-and-conquer strategy, by simply denying Divine goodness along the second dimension. For example, many Christians do not believe that God will insure an overwhelmingly good life to each and every person He creates. Some say the decisive defeat of evil with good is promised only within the lives of the obedient, who enter by the narrow gate. Some speculate that the elect may be few. Many recognize that the sufferings of this present life are as nothing compared to the hell of eternal torment, designed to defeat goodness with horrors within the lives of the damned.

<sup>13</sup> Middle knowledge, or knowledge of what is 'in between' the actual and the possible, is the sort of knowledge of what a free creature *would do* in every situation in which that creature could possibly find himself. Following Luis de Molina and Francisco Suarez, Alvin Plantinga ascribes such knowledge to God, prior in the order of explanation to God's decision about which free creatures to actualize (in *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press, 1974, chapter IX, pp. 164-93). Robert Merrihew Adams challenges this idea in his article 'Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977); reprinted in *The Virtue of Faith*, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 77-93.

Such a road can be consistently travelled only at the heavy toll of admitting that human life in worlds such as ours is a bad bet. Imagine (adapting Rawls' device) persons in a pre-original position, considering possible worlds containing managers of differing power, wisdom, and character, and subjects of varying fates. The question they are to answer about each world is whether they would willingly enter it as a human being, from behind a veil of ignorance as to which position they would occupy. Reason would, I submit, dictate a negative verdict for worlds whose omniscient and omnipotent manager permits pre-mortem horrors that remain undefeated within the context of the human participant's life; *a fortiori*, for worlds in which some or most humans suffer eternal torment.

*3.3 Inaccessible Reasons.* So far, I have argued that generic and global solutions are at best incomplete: however well their account of Divine motivating reasons deals with the first problem of evil, the attempt to extend it to the second fails by making it worse. This verdict might seem *prima facie* tolerable to standard generic and global approaches and indicative of only a minor modification in their strategy: let the above-mentioned generic and global reasons cover Divine permission of non-horrendous evils, and find other *reasons* compatible with perfect goodness *why* even an omnipotent, omniscient God would permit horrors.

In my judgment, such an approach is hopeless. As Plantinga<sup>14</sup> points out, where horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God's *actual* reason for permitting them; we cannot even *conceive* of any plausible candidate sort of reason consistent with worthwhile lives for human participants in them.

#### IV

*The How of God's Victory.* Up to now, my discussion has given the reader cause to wonder whose side I am on anyway? For I have insisted, with rebels like Ivan Karamazov and John Stuart Mill, on spot-lighting the problem horrendous evils pose. Yet, I have signalled my preference for a vision of Christianity that insists on both dimensions of Divine goodness, and maintains not only (a)

<sup>14</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'Self -Profile', *Alvin Plantinga*, pp. 34-35.

that God will be good enough to created persons to make human life a good bet, but also (b) that each created person will have a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole. My critique of standard approaches to the problem of evil thus seems to reinforce atheologian Mackie's verdict of 'positive irrationality' for such a religious position.

*4.1 Whys versus Hows.* The inaccessibility of reasons-why seems especially decisive. For surely an all-wise and all-powerful God, who loved each created person enough (a) to defeat any experienced horrors within the context of the participant's life, and (b) to give each created person a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole, would not permit such persons to suffer horrors for no reason.<sup>15</sup> Does not our inability even to conceive of plausible candidate reasons suffice to make belief in such a God positively irrational in a world containing horrors? In my judgment, it does not.

To be sure, motivating reasons come in several varieties relative to our conceptual grasp: There are (i) reasons of the sort we can readily understand when we are informed of them (e.g., the mother who permits her child to undergo painful heart surgery because it is the only humanly possible way to save its life). Moreover, there are (ii) reasons we would be cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually equipped to grasp if only we had a larger memory or wider attention span (analogy: I may be able to memorize small town street plans; memorizing the road networks of the entire country is a task requiring more of the same, in the way that proving Gödel's theorem is not). Some generic and global approaches insinuate that Divine permission of evils has motivating reasons of this sort. Finally, (iii) there are reasons that we are cognitively, emotionally, and/or spiritually too immature to fathom (the way a two-year old child is incapable of understanding its mother's reasons for permitting the surgery). I agree with Plantinga that our ignorance of Divine reasons for permitting horrendous evils is not of types (i) or (ii), but of type (iii).

Nevertheless, if there are varieties of ignorance, there are also varieties of reassurance. The two-year old heart patient is

<sup>15</sup>This point was made by William Fitzpatrick in our Fall 1987 seminar on the problem of evil at UCLA.

convinced of its mother's love, not by her cognitively inaccessible reasons, but by her intimate care and presence through its painful experience. The story of Job suggests something similar is true with human participation in horrendous suffering: God does not give Job His reasons-why, and implies that Job isn't smart enough to grasp them; rather Job is lectured on the extent of Divine power, and sees God's goodness face to face! Likewise, I suggest, to exhibit the logical compossibility of both dimensions of Divine goodness with horrendous suffering, it is not necessary to find logically possible reasons *why* God might permit them. It is enough to show *how* God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors—by defeating them within the context of the individual's life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.

**4.2 What sort of Valuables?** In my opinion, the reasonableness of Christianity can be maintained in the face of horrendous evils only by drawing on resources of religious value theory. For one way for God to be *good to* created persons is by relating them appropriately to relevant and great goods. But philosophical and religious theories differ importantly on what valuables they admit into their ontology. Some maintain that 'what you see is what you get', but nevertheless admit a wide range of valuables, from sensory pleasures, the beauty of nature and cultural artifacts, the joys of creativity, to loving personal intimacy. Others posit a transcendent good (e.g. the Form of the Good in Platonism, or God, the Supremely Valuable Object, in Christianity). In the spirit of Ivan Karamazov, I am convinced that the depth of horrific evil cannot be accurately estimated without recognizing it to be incommensurate with any package of merely non-transcendent goods and so unable to be balanced off, much less defeated thereby.

Where the *internal* coherence of Christianity is the issue, however, it is fair to appeal to its own store of valuables. From a Christian point of view, God is a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, a good incommensurate with both created goods and temporal evils. Likewise, the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely non-transcendent goods or ills a person might experience.

Thus, the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would *engulf* (in a sense analogous to Chisholmian balancing off) even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life here below, and overcome any *prima facie* reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living.

*4.3 Personal Meaning, Horrors Defeated.* *Engulfing* personal horrors within the context of the participant's life would vouchsafe to that individual a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole. I am still inclined to think it would guarantee that immeasurable Divine goodness to any person thus benefited. But there is good theological reason for Christians to believe that God would go further, beyond engulfment to defeat. For it is the nature of persons to look for meaning, both in their lives and in the world. Divine respect for and commitment to created personhood would drive God to make all those sufferings which threaten to destroy the positive meaning of a person's life meaningful through positive defeat.

How could God do it? So far as I can see, only by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person's relationship with God. Possible dimensions of integration are charted by Christian soteriology. I pause here to sketch three<sup>16</sup>. (i) First, because God in Christ participated in horrendous evil through His passion and death, human experience of horrors can be a means of *identifying* with Christ, either through *sympathetic* identification (in which each person suffers his/her own pains, but their similarity enables each to know what it is like for the other) or through *mystical* identification (in which the created person is supposed literally to experience a share of Christ's

<sup>16</sup> In my paper 'Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil', *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 248–67, I sketch how horrendous suffering can be meaningful by being made a vehicle of divine redemption for victim, perpetrator, and onlooker, and thus an occasion of the victim's collaboration with God. In 'Separation and Reversal in Luke-Acts', forthcoming in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. by Thomas Morris, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1988, I attempt to chart the redemptive plot-line there, whereby horrendous sufferings are made meaningful by being woven into the redemptive plot. My considered opinion is that such collaboration would be too strenuous for the human condition were it not to be supplemented by a more explicit and beatific divine intimacy.

pain<sup>17</sup>). (ii) Julian of Norwich's description of heavenly welcome suggests the possible defeat of horrendous evil through Divine gratitude. According to Julian, before the elect have a chance to thank God for all He has done for them, God will say, 'Thank you for all your suffering, the suffering of your youth'. She says that the creature's experience of Divine gratitude will bring such full and unending joy as could not be merited by the whole sea of human pain and suffering throughout the ages.<sup>18</sup> (iii) A third idea identifies temporal suffering itself with a vision into the inner life of God, and can be developed several ways. Perhaps, contrary to medieval theology, God is not impassible, but rather has matched capacities for joy and for suffering. Perhaps, as the Heidelberg catechism suggests, God responds to human sin and the sufferings of Christ with an agony beyond human conception.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, the inner life of God may be, strictly speaking and in and of itself, beyond both joy and sorrow. But, just as (according to Rudolf Otto) humans experience Divine presence now as *tremendum* (with deep dread and anxiety), now as *fascinans* (with ineffable attraction), so perhaps our deepest suffering as much as our highest joys may themselves be direct visions into the inner life of God, imperfect but somehow less obscure in proportion to their intensity. And if a face-to-face vision of God is a good for humans incommensurate with any non-transcendent goods or ills, so any vision of God (including horrendous suffering) would have a good aspect insofar as it is a vision of God (even if it has an evil aspect insofar as it is horrendous suffering). For the most part, horrors are not recognized as experiences of God (any more than the city slicker recognizes his visual image of a brown patch as a vision of Beulah the cow in the distance). But, Christian mysticism might claim, at least from the post-mortem perspective of the beatific vision, such sufferings will be seen for what they were, and retrospectively no one will wish away any intimate encounters

<sup>17</sup> For example, Julian of Norwich tells us that she prayed for and received the latter (*Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 17). Mother Theresa of Calcutta seems to construe Matthew 25:31–46 to mean that the poorest and the least *are* Christ, and that their sufferings *are* Christ's (Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York 1960, pp. 72–75).

<sup>18</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 14. I am grateful to Houston Smit for recognizing this scenario of Julian's as a case of Chisholmian defeat.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Plantinga, 'Self-Profile', *Alvin Plantinga*, p. 36.

with God from his/her life-history of this world. The created person's experience of the beatific vision together with his/her knowledge that intimate Divine presence stretched back over his/her pre-mortem life and reached down into the depths of his/her worst suffering, would provide retrospective comfort independent of comprehension of the reasons-why akin to the two-year-old's assurance of its mother's love. Taking this third approach, Christians would not need to commit themselves about what in any event we do not know: viz., whether we will (like the two-year-old) ever grow up enough to understand the reasons why God permits our participation in horrendous evils. For by contrast with the best of earthly mothers, such Divine intimacy is an incommensurate good and would cancel out for the creature any need to know why.

## V

*Conclusion.* The worst evils demand to be defeated by the best goods. Horrendous evils can be overcome only by the goodness of God. Relative to human nature, participation in horrendous evils and loving intimacy with God are alike disproportionate: for the former threatens to engulf the good in an individual human life with evil, while the latter guarantees the reverse engulfment of evil by good. Relative to one another, there is also disproportion, because the good that God is, and intimate relationship with Him, is incommensurate with created goods and evils alike. Because intimacy with God so outscals relations (good or bad) with any creatures, integration into the human person's relationship with God confers significant meaning and positive value even on horrendous suffering. This result coheres with basic Christian intuition: that the powers of darkness are stronger than humans, but they are no match for God!

Standard generic and global solutions have for the most part tried to operate within the territory common to believer and unbeliever, within the confines of religion-neutral value theory. Many discussions reflect the hope that substitute attribute-analyses, candidate reasons-why and/or defeaters could issue out of values shared by believers and unbelievers alike. And some virtually make this a requirement on an adequate solution. Mackie knew better how to distinguish the many charges that may be levelled against religion. Just as philosophers may or may not find the existence

of God plausible, so they may be variously attracted or repelled by Christian values of grace and redemptive sacrifice. But agreement on truth-value is not necessary to consensus on internal consistency. My contention has been that it is not only legitimate, but, given horrendous evils, necessary for Christians to dip into their richer store of valuables to exhibit the consistency of (1) and (2).<sup>20</sup> I would go one step further: assuming the pragmatic and/or moral (I would prefer to say, broadly speaking, religious) importance of believing that (one's own) human life is worth living, the ability of Christianity to exhibit how this could be so despite human vulnerability to horrendous evil, constitutes a pragmatic/moral/religious consideration in its favour, relative to value schemes that do not.

To me, the most troublesome weakness in what I have said, lies in the area of conceptual under-development. The contention that God suffered in Christ or that one person can experience another's pain require detailed analysis and articulation in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. I have shouldered some of this burden elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> but its full discharge is well beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> I develop this point at some length in 'Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers', pp. 127–35.

<sup>21</sup> For example in 'The Metaphysics of the Incarnation in Some Fourteenth Century Franciscans', *Essays Honoring Allan B. Wolter*, edited by William A. Frank and Girard J. Etzkorn, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 1985, pp. 21–57.

<sup>22</sup> In the development of these ideas, I am indebted to the members of our Fall 1987 seminar on the problem of evil at UCLA—especially to Robert Merrihew Adams (its co-leader) and to Keith De Rose, William Fitzpatrick, and Houston Smit. I am also grateful to the Very Reverend Jon Hart Olson for many conversations in mystical theology.

# HORRENDOUS EVILS AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Sutherland

## *II—Stewart Sutherland*

### I

I was stupid and callous enough to go and see an execution this morning . . . the spectacle made such an impression on me that I shan't get over it for a long time. I've seen many horrible things in war and in the Caucasus but if a man had been torn to pieces before my eyes it wouldn't have been so revolting as this ingenious and elegant machine by means of which a strong, hale and hearty man was killed in an instant. In war it's not a question of the rational will, but of human feelings of passion; but in this case it's cold, refined calculation and a convenient way of murder, and there's nothing grand about it. It's the insolent arrogant desire to carry out justice and the law of God—justice, which is determined by lawyers taking their stand on honour, religion and truth, and all contradicting each other . . . Then the repulsive crowd, the father explaining to his daughter, the convenient and ingenious mechanism that does it . . . The law of man—what nonsense! The truth is that the state is a conspiracy designed not only to exploit but above all to corrupt its citizens . . . I will certainly never go and see such a thing again, and I will never serve *any* government anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

So Tolstoy on the guillotine in a letter from Paris in April 1857. The horror of what he saw remained with him throughout his life and he described it starkly twenty years later:

When I saw the head part from the body and how it thumped separately into the box, I understood, not with my mind, but with my whole being that no theory of the

<sup>1</sup>L. Tolstoy, Letter to V. P. Botkin in *Tolstoy's Letters* Vol 1, selected, edited and translated by B. F. Christian, Athlone Press, 1978. See pp. 95–6.

reasonableness of our present progress could justify this deed, and that though everyone from the creation of the world, on whatever theory, had held it to be necessary, I knew it would be unnecessary and bad. . .<sup>2</sup>

Tolstoy's most recent biographer, whose translation of this paragraph of Tolstoy's *Confession* is used here, tells us that Tolstoy was unable to sleep for days after witnessing the execution. By secular analogy with Marilyn Adams' examples, this is undoubtedly a case of horrendous evil, as perceived by Tolstoy. His sensibilities were outraged and he refused to countenance any way in which that practice could be reconciled with a theory of human law based upon the idea of human progress. Equally, he finally lost any belief in the benevolent powers of the state. Interestingly, however, others witnessed the event without similar alienating consequences. Doubtless in some cases the differences are to be explained in terms of a hardening of the arteries of sensibility or of sheer indifference, and in others in terms of the elaborate rationale of the good of society at large.

Nonetheless there are several points of difference between this horrendous evil and Tolstoy's response to it, and the reactions of Professor Adams to the horrendous evils which she enumerates and defines. Most significantly Professor Adams argues that within Christian theism there are resources available adequate to 'engulf' and even 'defeat' the worst of horrendous evils. I propose to use the contrast with the Tolstoy example to attempt to clarify the basis upon which she makes this important claim. Initially it should be noted that there are three particular significant differences.

In the first place, in tones which would have been congenial to Ivan Karamazov, Tolstoy writes,

. . . though everyone from the creation of the world, on whatever theory had held it to be necessary, I knew it would be unnecessary and bad . . .

His moral vision is trusted on this point beyond anything else. This primacy of the moral is not explicitly rejected by Professor

<sup>2</sup> From Tolstoy's *Confession*. This paragraph is translated and quoted by A. N. Wilson in *Tolstoy*, Hamish Hamilton, 1988. See pp. 146–7.

Adams, but, as I hope to show, it is implicitly set aside. In the second place, in a way that is quite critical for Adams' case there are fundamentally immanent parameters to Tolstoy's example of horrendous evil and his reaction to it. The essence of the Christian case as outlined by Adams is that the only solution lies in extending these parameters to include the possibility of 'transcendent' good which can be set against immanent horrendous evil. The two points are related to one another in ways which will bear further exploration.

There is a third general point highlighted by the Tolstoy example which may or may not be of real significance. It is this. I am using the expression 'horrendous evil' *via* Tolstoy in a way which may call in question the definition offered by Professor Adams (Section III—Defining the Category). She seems there to limit 'horrendous evils' to evils in which we, who use the term, participate either by 'doing or suffering' them. In fact my use of the term is wider than that qualification strictly allows. Tolstoy, like Ivan, views as horrendous the evils suffered by others to which they have only a secondary relation involving neither the doing nor the primary suffering. The importance of this extension will become apparent in due course.

## II

The strength of Professor Adams' case can be measured by our success in finding relevant differences between the Christian's response to the horrendous evils which she defines and enumerates and Tolstoy's response to the efficient horrors of the guillotine which he witnessed. She offers two main but inter-related suggestions which can help us plot what these differences are. The first is to draw a distinction between 'Why?' answers to the problems which these evils pose, and 'How?' answers. The second is to stress that:

God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived, a good incommensurate with both created goods and temporal evils.

In this section of the paper I wish to examine the first of these points and its implications for religious belief, all the time bearing in mind Professor Adams' insistence that her paper is primarily concerned with the internal consistency of Christian

belief rather than with the broader question of the truth or acceptability of Christian beliefs.

Adams concedes that in ruling out ‘Why?’ answers to the problems of horrendous evils she might seem to be giving away too much. Nonetheless she is crystal clear on this point:

. . . where horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God’s actual reason for permitting them; we cannot even *conceive* of any plausible candidate sort of reason consistent with worthwhile lives for human participants in them.

She does however, also insist that the limitations here are human limitations and that

there are reasons which we are cognitively, emotionally and/or spiritually too immature to fathom.

The negative side of that (our inability to fathom) has been well explored by writers as diverse as Hume and Dostoevsky, as Kant and Camus. Adams’ substitution of ‘How?’ for ‘Why?’ proposes that since we cannot in this area at least find reasons for rejecting sceptical conclusions by defeating those conclusions in terms recognisable to the sceptic, we should look rather for the ways in which (how) God might reassure the believer by trumping (‘defeating’) the evil Ace of Clubs with the great and good Ace of Hearts. Before we turn to the question of what content to give to the ‘Ace of Hearts’, we must first consider the implications of the replacement of the language of persuasion by the language of reassurance.

The first question which must arise is whether this tactic is designed to deny altogether that there is an intellectual question at stake here at all. The spirit as well as the letter of Professor Adams’ paper makes it clear that she is not advocating such a radical proposal. Christian belief is still concerned with reasons and reasonableness. The role of reason in this particular topic is to deny the adequacy of candidates for answer to the question of why God permits horrendous evils. I am unclear whether, according to Adams, *reason* tells us that we are ‘cognitively, emotionally, and/or spiritually too immature to fathom’. I suspect, to be more precise, that Adams would claim that within the system of Christian beliefs which she inhabits it is plausible,

and therefore up to a point reasonable, to assume such a degree of immaturity.

If that is the case then the question becomes one of what happens to the intellectual Why-question within this substitution of the language of reassurance for the language of persuasion. Clearly Adams does not discount the importance of these questions. Why else should she wrestle with them in such persistent fashion? Even less does she follow those who would discount them as foolish or even in some unspecified sense 'unreal' questions. Her paper suggests that our immaturity shows itself not in the *questions*, as some would allege, but in the inability to perceive *answers*. Thus we must assume that the Why-questions are somehow displaced from the centre of our preoccupations, and properly so in the light of reassurances given.

Let us consider such a proposal first by reference to Tolstoy's horror at the execution. Interestingly, as we noticed, he was surrounded by people who felt no such horror. For Tolstoy the question 'Why?' had no acceptable answer. Thus there was no context within which his sense of horror might be dispelled. The possible explanations for the absence of this sense of horror in those around could imply that some adequate explanation of why this should happen in this manner could be given. Tolstoy unequivocally rejects this possibility as, *mutatis mutandis*, does Professor Adams, so we need pursue it no further in this paper.

Two other possibilities occur, the first of which Adams would certainly reject, although as a matter of fact there are those, including Tolstoy in other contexts, who would level this as a serious charge against some forms of religious belief. This is the possibility that those who see no horror in the execution, or, in the religious context, see no *horrendous* evils, are simply cold or indifferent. Again we can leave this explanation aside since although as a matter of fact it may be the correct one in individual cases, there is no necessary connection between this attitude and religious belief. (Tolstoy's reasonably consistent anarchism however, did see a causal connection between the state and such moral corruption.)

The second possibility is a more serious though less clear matter. In the context of the guillotine it amounts to the proposal that the Why-question is deflected or displaced by

engaging the intellect and associated emotions elsewhere perhaps by bread and circuses or some twentieth-century equivalences such as the cry of 'law and order' or 'a chicken in every pot'. For Tolstoy such subjugation of intellect and primary moral emotion would be anathema and could only be achieved by change in moral belief and moral perception. He is refusing to accept that any end could morally justify adopting this means. His case then depends upon the affirmation that there is no rational or moral argument which can persuade him of the error of his moral perception that execution by guillotine is horrendously evil.

What could such an argument, rational and moral, look like? It would have to have as its end product either a specific change in Tolstoy's moral perception, or alternatively it would have to upset the whole applecart of Tolstoy's moral beliefs and sensibilities. In the former case it could in principle be achieved by the sort of elaborate and persuasive argument found in, say the *Socratic Dialogues*, where Socrates' unsuspecting conversational companions were led to re-evaluate specific moral beliefs such as in *Republic I* that justice is the interest of the strongest. In the latter case what would be required would be perhaps persuasion to accept a radical form of moral scepticism such that the force of particular moral feelings, however great, would be, to use Professor Adams' expression, 'engulfed' or 'defeated'.

Implicit in the passages quoted from Tolstoy, and explicit elsewhere in Tolstoy's writings is the proposal of an alternative, and he claims, more plausible hypothesis compatible with and therefore supporting the primacy of his moral sensibilities: it is in the interests of the state not only to offer rationalisation of the practice of execution by guillotine, but to distract ('corrupt' is his term) the attention which otherwise the citizen might give to this event.

Now the point of all this is not here to defend Tolstoy's views but to use this case of secular horror to highlight quite precisely what it is that Professor Adams must achieve if she is to displace in the religious case the Why-question with the How-question, and do this by identifying forms of reassurance available within the religious tradition which are not paralleled elsewhere. She indicates in principle agreement with this diagnosis in writing:

In my opinion, the reasonableness of Christianity can be maintained in the face of horrendous evils only by drawing on resources of religious value theory,

and,

In the spirit of Ivan Karamazov, I am convinced that the depth of horrific evil cannot be accurately estimated without recognising it to be incommensurate with any package of merely non-transcendent goods and so unable to be balanced off, much less defeated thereby.

That is to say, *mutatis mutandis*, if the Tolstoy example is one of horrendous evil, of course there can be rationally or morally persuasive argument which engulfs or defeats the horror either by adequate explanation or by bringing a change in moral evaluation by proposing a different balance of immanent goods. To return to an earlier, and, I hope, not over-frivolous comparison, Tolstoy is in a no-Trump game. There is, at the immanent level, no trump suit, and the Ace of Hearts cannot 'defeat' the Ace of Clubs.

In the game in which Professor Adams plays, however, the Ace of Hearts will triumph, because it represents a transcendent good, and we must now consider the implications of this for our account of the nature of the religious/Christian belief. The central point which arises from the comparison with Tolstoy's example is that at its minimum the defeat of the horrendous evil requires a significant qualification of the initial moral perceptions and commitments which lead to the classification of evils as horrendous evils. That is to say, the individual must, in the end come to the view that viewed in a proper light horrendous evils are not so bad after all! Whereas in the secular case, Tolstoy cannot conceive of immanent goods which in compensation or reassurance will bring him to such a view, it is claimed that in the religious case the believer does have access to transcendent goods which can so defeat horrendous evil.

It would be as well at this stage to remind ourselves of what seemed a minor point made at the very end of the first section of this paper. For Tolstoy, in part, the horror of what he witnessed arises because it is happening to someone else and because it is being done to that person. (The *poor* victim however might well

have drawn no significant richer differences in the horror scale between death by guillotine, by firing squad, by sniper's bullet or by sudden massive coronary. It would require a pretty cool and subtle mind to draw such distinctions at that stage in one's nearly finished history.) Although she cites with approval Ivan Karamazov it is not wholly clear from her paper whether Professor Adams takes on board fully the point that what horrifies Ivan is that these awful things should happen to others—in his examples to small children. If his main preoccupation is with what this does to *his* sense of the meaning of life then he is a *voyeur* who weeps self-indulgent tears.

This point and Professor Adams' view of it is quite critical to her main thesis that Christian consistency can be maintained when we experience *how* God can reassure us. The difference can be well illustrated by appealing to one of her own examples:

The story of Job suggests something similar is true with human participation in horrendous suffering: God does not give Job His reasons-why, and implies that Job isn't smart enough to grasp them; rather Job is lectured on the extent of Divine power, and sees God's goodness face to face!

In irreverent moments one might be inclined to think, 'Bully for Job! But if he had kept his wits about him he might have asked whether all those deaths (of others) in his family were strictly necessary in order to teach him that particular lesson'. Whatever reassurance he felt, or which in another novel might have come Ivan's way, 'What about the others?' is the nub of Ivan's question.

This raises the fundamental question of what reassurance by transcendent goods does to the believer's moral sensibilities and commitments? Here there is, I believe, an ambiguity in Professor Adams' position about whether she is restricted in her discussion to the horrendous evils which we individually suffer, or whether her 'solution' applies also to our perception of what is horrendous in the suffering of others (cf. Tolstoy and Ivan).

In the former case it may well be that the transcendent goods which Adams posits (if they are real) can defeat by displacing the impact of horrendous suffering. Most of us can think of secular, immanent, analogues of this in our own experience: the

grief is finally displaced; the pain does ultimately disappear; the harm done ceases to fill the horizon because it is overtaken by a greater good. Even here, however, there is a difference between the reasons which might lead one to say, ‘Painful though it was, I’m glad that I was turned down for that job’. In one case the reason might be, ‘Because I now realise they were right in their judgement and I would not have been up to it’. There one’s beliefs about the justice of the original judgement have undergone change. In a second case, the reason might be, ‘Because since then the UGC has recommended closure of that Department. However’, one might add, ‘that does not change the fact that it was quite unjust to appoint Bloggs instead’. Here, one’s sense of justice, right or wrong, is unaltered.

On one account of Professor Adams’ position the reassurance does not alter the original moral assessment that these evils are horrendous, because it is a *How*-answer—a displacement of the question—rather than a *Why*-answer—a persuasion that our judgement was clouded at the time. My difficulty with this conclusion, if it is the one reached by Adams, is that it is not only the *question* which is displaced. The moral sensibilities and beliefs which gave form to the question are also displaced, and that is a high price (indeed, I should say, too great a price) to pay. I believe in fact that the difficulties become even more acute if we agree that horrendous evils are not restricted to those evils which we directly suffer, but include (in fact for Ivan were pre-eminently) evils which we perceive others to suffer and which because of that, horrify us.

### III

We must now consider further the second main element of Adams’ case for the consistency of the Christian’s refusal to be overwhelmed by horrendous evils: that there are transcendent goods which engulf and defeat horrendous evil: this defence both stands as a separate proposed bulwark, and (as we have seen) is also one of the ways in which the substitution of *How*-questions for *Why*-questions might be supported (see p. 305).

Professor Adams’ view is that there are goods or values not dreamt of in the view of those who believe that recognition of horrendous evils is incompatible with Christian belief:

. . . philosophical and religious theories differ importantly on what valuables they admit into their ontology.

Thus the resolution of the matter seems to be in terms of recognising different theories which differ precisely on the point of whether there are within the one transcendent goods which will defeat the horrendous evils recognised by both.

The distinction between ‘engulfing’ and ‘defeating’ horrendous evils plays an important part in this section of Professor Adams’ exposition. Thus she claims that, for example, face to face intimacy with God would engulf horrendous evils in the sense that

within the context of the participant’s life (they) would vouchsafe to that individual a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole.

The logic of this seems to be quite clear and it is a question of whether what seemed to be beyond reparation is in fact not so. (Whether the language of ‘face to face intimacy’ with an eternal God stands up to detailed scrutiny is another matter.) Transcendent goods can, it is proposed, ‘engulf’ the most intractable of immanent evils.

The ‘defeat’ of horrendous evils, however, seems to be an even more difficult conception to grasp and not surprisingly at the tail end of a paper Professor Adams is not unaware of the need for fuller development of the very complex theological notions to which she alludes.

Notwithstanding the problems in either case, there is a number of more general comments which can be made, and which can be introduced by offering specific questions for Professor Adams’ consideration.

1. What of those others who suffer? Ivan’s question will continue to force itself upon us which is why the Tolstoy example is pertinent. Either, Professor Adams accepts that ‘horrendous evils’ are not restricted to this suffering which *I* experience, in which case how does *my* face-to-face intimacy with God help? Or, she restricts ‘horrendous evils’ to this harm which *I* suffer and her thesis is much less far-reaching than had first appeared. (See earlier pp. 317–8).

2. What of those who do not experience such transcendent bliss? Is such a lack attributable to them or to God? Sometimes it would seem that the mysterious ways in which God moves have a dark selective underside, or alternatively that the believer is committed to the belief that the victim is responsible for being so immature as to see him or herself only as victim. The latter may be so in some cases, and therapy has been known to help, but as Professor Adams agrees, in this discussion we are considering horrendous evils which have no non-transcendent counter-weights.
3. Is there a common moral language between believers and non-believers? On the face of it Professor Adams' response to this question seems to be, 'Yes and No'. The affirmative element can be traced to the common moral response to 'horrendous evils', shared by believer and non-believer. The negative element is based upon Professor Adams' insistence on the distinction between 'religious value theory' (p. 306) and 'religion-neutral value theory' (p. 309). Believers recognise a range of goods (transcendent) which have no place in the moral language of non-believers. This raises a further important question about the relation of the view of the non-believer to that of the believer to which we must now turn.
4. What does such a theory as that offered by Professor Adams do to our moral sensibilities and perceptions? For the believer it allows the possibility of both engulfing and defeating horrendous evils. But does this possibility imply also the engulfing and defeat of at least some elements of our moral sensibilities and perceptions? What changes take place in the believer who is thus reassured? I have already ruled out the possibility that Adams is advocating a form of indifference comparable to those in the crowd who did not share Tolstoy's horror at execution by guillotine, and I must assume that the sort of theologically-based assurance being proposed is much more than a sophisticated warm glow within.

Is defeat then accomplished by a shift in moral perspective? It

is difficult to construe what is proposed in any other way since the essential question is whether this evil, characterised by the term 'horrendous' and which appeared to be beyond reparation, is in fact beyond reparation. Professor Adams' reply is that for the believer no evil need be so perceived. The Ace of Hearts is in that sense a trump card. However, to accept it as such is to have altered one's moral priorities and that cannot be done without a shift in moral perception. There are at least two different ways in which this might happen. The first is that one might be persuaded by moral reasoning to change one's view but on the whole Professor Adams seems not to favour this account of the change. The main alternative then is to accept that without good moral reason one permits at least a limit or qualification to be placed upon the importance which one had previously attached to regarding this evil as horrendous. To qualify one's moral perceptions, even in that way, is nonetheless to *change* them in the extreme cases which we are considering.

A final point to conclude this section of the discussion is to suggest that even if we do play by the rules of consistency suggested by Professor Adams, the questions of theodicy still arise. When, or if, we see God face to face we might still wish to ask with Ivan, 'What about the children?' If the answer to that is that it is only post-mortem that such questions will be finally stilled (or answered?) then the difference between such a believer and Ivan would seem to be over what is meant by 'horrendous'. Ivan's essentially moral question is,

If all have to suffer so as to buy eternal harmony by their suffering, what have the children to do with it—tell me please? It is entirely incomprehensible why they should have to buy harmony by their sufferings. Why should they too be used as dung for someone's future harmony?

My suspicion is that when Professor Adams refers to 'horrendous evil' she is implicitly translating that as 'immense or disproportionate harm' which befalls an individual. In that case it is a matter for the individual to be satisfied or not, in his or her *own* case, as to whether that harm is outweighed by immense or disproportionate (= transcendent) good. If however, one remains with Ivan, or for the sake of illustration, Tolstoy's reaction to the guillotine, the notion of horrendous evil is one

which focusses upon the moral notions of injustice (Ivan) or cold-bloodedness (Tolstoy). Such an evil is not so obviously susceptible of being outweighed, and that on two counts. In the first place it is not a matter on which one individual can pronounce on behalf of others. In the second place, moral judgement should only reasonably and properly be set aside on the grounds of either error or irrelevance. It is difficult to agree that Professor Adams has substantiated either of these two grounds.

#### IV

*Conclusion.* The differences between Professor Adams and myself could be simplified by focussing upon the extent to which we agree, firstly upon whether the characterisation of evils as horrendous is a moral judgement, and secondly if so, whether there are conceivable circumstances in which such an apparently absolute moral judgement can be defeated. Professor Adams makes it plain that her concern in this symposium is with the consistency rather than the truth of Christian belief. Since I am inclined to believe that truth in these matters has much to do with what is conceivable as consistent I find it difficult to argue as if the distinction between truth and consistency can be so clearly drawn here. Nonetheless even if the distinction is pressed, there is still the question of whether such a God as Professor Adams envisages would wilfully behave in such a way as to undermine the importance and correctness of the judgements (about horrendous evils) which arise from the frail and infrequently encountered flowers of refined moral sensibility.