

Good-bye to the problem of evil, hello to the problem of veracity

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Abstract: I start from Mill's words about Mansel and the problem of evil. In this dispute Mansel has generally been thought to have come off worst. However, Mansel was clearly right to this extent: that what would make a man a good man would not be the same as what made God good. This is because, quite generally, what makes something good of its kind, where we can talk about goodness at all, varies *with* the kind. With Aristotle we must say: the criteria are fixed by the thing's *ergon*, or at least by something analogous. On this account, it would seem that God must be perfect, since as an intelligent agent He does supremely well what is in the nature of an intelligent agent to do. This seems to lead to the right solution to the problem of evil. But Mill also had something useful to contribute. He saw that there would be a consequent difficulty in regard to *revelation*. This difficulty seems to be severe and insufficiently discussed.

Good-bye to the problem of evil

Mill and Mansel

In what follows it will not matter very much how the problem of evil is stated. That is to say, it will be of no importance whether the argument is intended to show that God could not exist, or merely that the evidence shows that He is most unlikely to exist. In the first part of this paper I shall endeavour to show something quite modest: that the problem of evil should no longer be thought an effective polemical instrument. I shall not suppose that complete clarity on these questions can be achieved. For initial expository purposes, I shall take 'evil' to be pain.

Let us take the problem of evil to be something of this kind. If someone, perhaps a baby, is in pain, and one knows that one can prevent the pain by costlessly pressing a button, one acts badly in not pressing it. Or so it is said. Let us assume that the pain does no-one any good, that the occurrence of this pain is not an inevitable consequence of the existence of something we value, like the possession of free will, and that no-one else is in a position to press the button (in

case any of this is relevant). The existence of this ‘inexcused’ pain raises a problem of evil. For if there is a God, it appears from what we are told that He is often in this position and does not act. Consequently He often acts badly. So God must lack an important perfection.¹

It is perhaps worth noting that God would be said to act badly, according to this argument, even if the baby were to suffer only a minor and transient pain. A small blot on the copybook is as much a blot as a big one. This shows that we need not go into horrifying details about evil – details which it would be so important to consider in relation to other topics. (Of course if the existence of evil shows that the Supreme Being is bad, we could then go on to ask *how* bad. But that is not our question.)

This has seemed to many a convincing argument. However, there is a way out. It was provided by the nineteenth-century philosopher and theologian, Henry Longueville Mansel. Mansel’s reply achieved notoriety for a while largely because it so incensed John Stuart Mill. Though their disagreement is largely forgotten nowadays, this is rather to our loss, as I hope in this paper to show.²

I shall largely rely on Mill’s account of the disagreement. Something more scholarly is hardly needed. Mansel does not seem to have been a very lucid writer, and if Mill sets up a straw Mansel, it is the straw Mansel which will concern us. For even on Mill’s unfriendly account, it is evident that his opponent had something important to say. But so too, as I shall argue in the second half of this paper, did Mill. The result, one might say, is a draw: Mill 1, Mansel 1.

Mansel had said that God’s goodness was something other than man’s goodness – the criteria being different. Mill, in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, clearly thought this a cheat, a pettifogging evasion, and it provoked him to an unusually melodramatic response. ‘I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures. And if such a being will send me to hell for saying so, to hell I will go.’³ This remark has been thought to show Mill’s character in a good light. Indeed, not much else is remembered from Mill’s fat volume.

Mill seems to rebuke Mansel. Yet Mansel was not here indulging in wilful evasion. Perhaps he spoke truer than he knew. His position in this matter, whether he was clear about this or not, is a simple consequence of an obvious but fundamental feature of the concept of goodness. In fact a study of the problem of evil is perhaps best regarded as an exercise in understanding the concepts of goodness, wisdom, and virtue quite generally, even as they appear in secular contexts. In the first half of this paper, I shall defend in this spirit the view which Mill attributes to Mansel.

It might come as a surprise that anyone would wish to defend Mansel. After all, what appears to be Mansel’s argument is liable to be dismissed in very short order – more or less as a preliminary before getting down to serious business. For an example we might turn to J. L. Mackie’s much read book *The Miracle of Theism*.

The argument appears as the first item in a section headed ‘Attempts to side-step the problem’, and is firmly disposed of – as if to say *and that’s that*.

One of these approaches may be summed up in the phrase: ‘God’s goodness is not ours’. In other words, when the theist says that God is wholly good he does not mean that God has anything like the purposes and tendencies that would count as good in a human being. But then why call him good?⁴

There is here a claim, and then a question. As to the claim, no-one is saying that God’s goodness *is not anything like* human goodness. Clearly in some way there is an analogy between the goodness of one thing and the goodness of anything else: (‘Loyalty is to a friend as sharpness is to scissors’, we might say). To continue to ask, once this likeness is pointed out, whether this is a *real* likeness is idle. As to the question, ‘Then why call him good?’, it is not rhetorically to be supposed that no reasonable answer is on offer. We shall ourselves provide an answer later in this paper – in fact, two of them just to be on the safe side. (We will talk about the goodness of an intelligent agent, and the goodness that goes with being actualized.)

The concept of goodness

We shall achieve a clearer understanding of this matter if we reflect on the concept underlying the language of good, bad and indifferent. This will be our first task. As has quite frequently been pointed out, we cannot intelligibly ask the grand abstract question ‘What things are good?’. Things are not good (bad, indifferent) as such. They are good Xs or bad Ys. One and the same individual is, let us say, a good farmer and a bad flute player. This is, so to speak, a matter of syntax.⁵ There seems to be a parallel here with adjectives of number. Frege famously pointed out that we need a description (supplied or understood) here too. Things are not simply threish or fourish. We cannot, for example, point to a triangle and ask ‘how many is this?’ It is one *triangle* but three *lines*. To be sure, if someone asks an incomplete question of this kind we can sometimes guess the relevant description.⁶

What I have said here is of course expressed very baldly, and may seem therefore to neglect complexities. As I do not wish simply to *state* that the grammar of goodness works entirely in this way, it is necessary to make a short digression. Sir David Ross, to go by his historically influential account of this matter, would want to object to this account of goodness.⁷ He would say that we have considered only *one* use of the adjective ‘good’, what he called the *attributive* use: ‘as when we speak of a good runner or a good poem’. There is also, he said, a *predicative* use ‘as when we say that knowledge is good or that pleasure is good’.⁸ It is this latter use which is ‘most important for philosophy’.⁹ I shall now consider this suggestion that our account is too narrow. (The reader who is prepared to trust what we have said so far may want to skip the rest of this section.)

This whole notion of a predicative use is suspect. One is not at all surprised when Sir David Ross says that in daily life the attributive, good-of-its-kind, use ‘is much the commoner’. Since we already have an account of goodness – what we are invited to call the attributive account – the question would arise why we needed another account alongside it. Why is the concept thought to live this double life? True enough, we philosophers should be on the look out for hidden complications. But the history of the claim that there is a property, *goodness*, which is not the goodness of a thing of a kind, has not been encouraging (we think perhaps of G. E. Moore, intuition and non-naturalness). Not that this history would put us off if the concept had been clearly introduced. But has it? There are of course uses of ‘good/bad’ which are predicative by the test of superficial grammar – that is to say, where the adjective occurs alone in a predicate, ‘is good’, or ‘is bad’, and is not juxtaposed to a common noun. Thus we might say such things as ‘Jemima is good’, or ‘Excalibur is bad’. (It is significant that these propositions sound rather odd when presented as specimens in this contextless fashion.) But whether there can be a use which is predicative in some deeper sense is left untouched by these examples. ‘Jemima is good’ would be an elliptical version of ‘Jemima is a good cook/good tennis coach/good human being’, depending on context. (I am assuming that ‘Jemima’ is not a name for a cat.) ‘Excalibur is bad’ would presumably mean that Excalibur is a bad *sword* – that it is not what it has been cracked up to be. (I am assuming that ‘Excalibur’ is not a name for a business corporation.)

Suppose, however, we turn to an example of the supposed predicative use given by Ross: ‘Knowledge is good’. What is this supposed to mean? I suspect that ‘knowledge is good’ only appears to be intelligible because, in charitably searching for a sense, we abandon the *adjective* ‘good’ and take the sentence to be saying that knowledge is *a* good, that is to say a benefit, something worth having for this individual or that group. (We could then of course ask whether it was worth having for its own sake, i.e. for no further reason, or whether it was a blessing just as a stepping stone to other goods.) If this is what is meant by talking of a predicative use we need have no quarrel. But if we block this answer, what do we have left?

People who believe in God will no doubt want to say that the existence of God is a benefit to men, or that the vision of God in heaven is the supreme benefit for which men are made. But we may assume that this is not what they have in mind by the goodness of God, or at any rate not all of it. We need not, however, insist on this. For if this *is* what is meant by the goodness of God, the problem of evil would not arise, and the thesis of the first half of this paper would be settled.

In order to give the predicative use every chance to establish itself, let us try to *make* something of the proposition ‘God is good’ – where this is to mean not that God is *a good X* or *a good Y*, or is *a* good (a benefit to men, say), but that he is ‘just’ good *sans phrase*. Could we perhaps take this to mean that God is *the source and measure of all value*?¹⁰ Would this suffice? Let us take *source* and *measure* separ-

ately. First the claim that God is the source of all value. God cannot, of course, make sharpness to be a good quality of scissors because, so to speak, that is so already; but let us say that, if any scissors are good and sharp, He will directly or indirectly have made them so. Thus understood, to be the source of value suggests the exercise of a skill or ability. However, as the supreme possessor of this skill, God would not be good *simpliciter* but would be something like a good craftsman. We are back with an attributive use. If, on the other hand, God is said to be the *measure* of all value (not a clear remark, of course) then there is one thing which God neither is nor isn't, namely good – just as the metre bar in Paris (under standard conditions etc.) is the one thing which is neither a metre long nor not a metre long.¹¹ If God cannot be said to be good (or not good), there is no problem of evil for *this* reason.

In trying to make sense of a predicative use of good, we need to take account of the suggestion, in Sir David Ross, that this goodness is possessed by knowledge and by pleasure. He offers us these examples in order to make the notion clear to us. We are now invited to consider, let us say, that God too is predicatively good. Now what interest could this last possibility have for us? It is clear that a predicate which is true of such diverse items would have to indicate some pretty abstract property. Of one thing we could be sure: the information that an entity was predicatively good would not enable us to infer that it was, for example, kind to animals; for it does not even make sense to say this of knowledge. Who then could say what restrictions the possession of this abstract characteristic would logically place upon what God might do or permit? Would there be any such restrictions at all? In the light of this, it is hard to see how the possibility of a predicative sense could be of concern to anyone discussing the problem of evil.

How the criteria of goodness are determined

Let us return to the idea, which we should by now adopt, at least tentatively, that the adjective 'good' is always attributive. We need now to consider the way the criteria of being a good X are determined. Naturally the criteria of being a good X will vary depending upon the description we put for the letter 'X'. In general, we could say that the criteria are fixed by what Aristotle called the thing's *ergon* (what an X does, its activity or function, what it is for). This may turn out to be a bit too narrow. Sometimes we will want to talk in some way about the standard interest we take in a thing. This is obviously a related notion. We need this extension because we use a phrase like 'a good position on the chess board' and it would be rather forced to talk of a position on the chess board as having an *ergon*. The standard interest which fixes the criteria in this case is that of the player whose position it is, rather than that of his opponent, there being no such thing as the standard interest common to both players. Sometimes our standard interest in a thing does not come in at all. As Philippa Foot likes to point out, this interest does not provide the criteria for good roots, nettle roots perhaps. We standardly need

nettle roots to be underdeveloped, inefficient, susceptible to disease, easily damaged, etc. The account of goodness given by John Rawls: 'A is a good X if and only if A has the properties ... which it is rational to want in an X',¹² is particularly unconvincing here.

Some descriptions will not bring with them criteria of goodness at all. A pebble does not have an *ergon*, and is not characteristically wanted for this or that, and the same could be said of a point of the compass. So 'a good pebble' or 'a bad point of the compass' are phrases without sense. We should not of course conclude that all pebbles or points of the compass are indifferent! The language of good, bad, and indifferent has no place. If one introduces a special background, then the language once again comes into its own. We set the children to find the *roundest* pebble. Some descriptions of the form 'a good X' will be odd but perhaps construable. What would 'a good rabbit' be? Perhaps a rabbit in a good condition, able to do rabbitish things well. If a farmer plagued by rabbits were to say 'a good rabbit is a dead rabbit', that would be just a joke. Here, when we talk about 'rabbitish things', we need to know something about a rabbit's manner of life. A rabbit in good condition can move swiftly. By contrast, a tortoise which can only move much more slowly than a rabbit is not thereby defective.¹³

Sometimes when we talk of 'a good X' we, as it were, remember that every X is a Y and it is the criteria for being a good Y which are salient to our minds. Think of the phrase 'a good woman'. It might be thought contrary to human dignity to think of women as having a role, a function or 'a place'. Admittedly Kant, to whom we naturally turn on matters of dignity, would have disagreed with us. He believed that women had a special civilizing role, and were indeed fitted to govern males in this respect, leading them, if not to morality, 'at least to its garment, civilised propriety'.¹⁴ So that perhaps gives a sense to the phrase 'a good woman'. But it is not the sense we would be likely to fix upon when we look back upon the life of Aunt Agatha and think what a good woman she was. We would naturally think of a woman as a human being and work with the criteria which go with this more general description.

It might turn out to be helpful to think of goodness as having 'varieties'.¹⁵ One variety might for example be 'efficiency'. Not everything we think good of its kind will be efficient – a good dancer, for example. But we should note that 'efficient' shares the grammar of the broader concept 'good'. Something will be efficient *qua* this or *qua* that, and we won't be able to say that something is efficient without indicating or assuming what kind of thing we are talking about. Another variety might be 'real', 'genuine', '*echt*', which also has the requisite grammar.¹⁶

Let us assume that this account of the concept of goodness is more or less correct. No doubt there will be refinements to make, but we need not go into that. We turn now to consider how an appreciation of these points changes our outlook on the problem of evil.

We will certainly no longer wish to thump the table and insist that the criteria

of goodness for God and man are identical. On the contrary we will expect them to be different – though perhaps related. If Mansel thought as much, he was clearly right. And the point – an advantage surely – has nothing much to do with theology. It would blur this insight to say that the word ‘good’ has many meanings. People have been inclined to express the Mansel point in this way, but it is very misleading to do so.¹⁷ Would the word ‘good’ have the same meaning when used of man and God? Yes, of course it would. Or rather, it would on a natural interpretation of ‘same meaning’. We would not expect separate dictionary entries. (Do we even want to say that the criteria of goodness are the same for *all men*? Think of the phrase ‘my station and its duties’. Or think of Aristotle who talks of the different kinds of goodness suitable to the ruler and to the ruled, and indeed to ‘different classes of the ruled’; *Politics*, 1260a.)

‘Moral’ goodness as the same for all rational beings

‘But surely’, it will be said, ‘we are here dealing with a special sort of goodness, *moral* goodness. God is a rational being. And it would seem axiomatic that moral goodness is the same for all rational beings.’ Kant’s moral philosophy more or less takes off from this latter idea. Goodness must be the same for all rational beings, he says at the very outset of the *Groundwork*, otherwise the must of morality would not have the right sort of necessity.¹⁸ And it would appear that Mill, in his reaction to Mansel, agrees with Kant on the matter of moral uniformity (if not perhaps for Kant’s reason). In fact, the thought will be rather generally accepted.

The famous claim that moral goodness is the same for all rational beings threatens to be either false or empty. We can consider the matter in two ways: under the headings *obligations* and *virtues*.

First then, with regard to obligations. To make out that rational beings are *not* all under the same obligations one does not have to think of exotic intelligences from science fiction or theology; one only has to think of how things are in regard to ourselves. I owe something to Smith and you do not, simply because he is my benefactor and not yours. Our obligations are not the same. To make out that we *are* all under the same obligations we have to go in for hypotheticals: ‘If Smith were your benefactor then you would owe ...’. If we go down this road we shall get emptiness. Let us consider this in regard to rational beings generally. Suppose I ought not to commit adultery. Then we can say of any rational being X, that *if* X were a sexual being, and was in other relevant respects similar to me, and if X lived in conditions (a), (b), (c), such as I live under, (these suppositions being perhaps quite absurd), then X ought not to commit adultery. This surely says nothing at all. Anything sufficiently like this rabbit is also a rabbit. But of course! Notice that what goes for moral obligation goes too for legal (and prudential) obligation. If God were an Australian citizen like any other, He would be under an obligation to vote.

If we are not going to render the question empty, we would naturally expect

that God's obligations, if He had any, would be different from ours. It is ironical to see that this follows clearly from Mill's own account of moral obligation. In fact it would be hard to see how God, on this account, could be under any obligations at all. This result might surprise some people, as they are used to thinking of Mill as a utilitarian. The natural utilitarian account of obligation would seem to be uniform: *all* rational beings are at all times to maximize, or (on a less stringent view) are to produce 'a positive balance of pleasure over pain'. But Mill – if a utilitarian at all¹⁹ – certainly does not talk about moral obligation in this way. Moral obligation, for Mill, is essentially determined by the somewhat minimal rules a human community needs to enforce in one way or another in order to achieve some basic good, in particular, security (see *Utilitarianism*, chapter 5). If this were correct, a rational being who did not live under these conditions (God, for example) would either have no obligations at all, or presumably very different ones. Mill seems to have forgotten this while criticizing Mansel.

We reach a similar result if we turn to the position of a modern writer like G. H. von Wright. In *The Varieties of Goodness*, he argues that the obligations of morality arise for us because we live among others of approximately equal strength and vulnerability, so that we can each say to ourselves: it is better to have the advantage of not being harmed by others than to have the advantages of being able to harm. He then imagines 'a giant among men, who could treat the rest of mankind as insignificant worms, who can do nothing to harm him'.

Is it not his moral duty, too, never to do evil to his neighbour? *Must* it not be everybody's duty? I would answer *No*. ... If a being stronger than all men together shows benevolent concern for the welfare of humans, this would be more like an act of *mercy* than an act of *justice*.²⁰

Under the heading *virtues* the issue is even more easily disposed of. (Indeed the topic partly overlaps with what we have just argued, for justice is a virtue after all.) The list of virtues will manifestly not be the same for every rational being, for what counts as a virtue can depend upon characteristics which not all rational beings share, or upon the circumstances of life which are not universal among rational beings. Courage can only be a virtue for agents who can be frightened, and we have no reason to think fear universal among rational beings. The devil may be pretty bad, but he cannot be unchaste (as Aquinas observes).²¹ Thrift cannot be a virtue among beings who live in a world without shortages. Aristotle even argues of justice that it is 'essentially something human'.²²

That the circumstances of life can alter what counts as a virtue has, of course, been often argued. Hobbes taught there was no such thing as the obligations of justice while men lived in the state of nature, and Hume said that questions of justice would not arise if the circumstances of our lives were different. (Of course, one would want to know what counted as 'justice' for these two authors.) We have here an application of a point later to be made with greater generality by Wittgenstein: that in certain conditions of nature our concepts would lose their

grip. There would be no such thing as *weight*, let us say, if there were not certain constancies in the results of the procedures we refer to as weighing – using scales and springs, etc. The upshot is that the list of what counts as virtues will not be the same for all rational beings. But once again we can no doubt make the thesis true by arguing hypothetically: ‘*if* conditions were the same’ etc.

Hobbes shows us that it is difficult to think of God as having the virtue of justice at all – unless indeed, as perhaps we *should* say, an intelligent agent is bound to count as just if radically incapable of injustice.

The power of God alone without other helps is sufficient justification of any action he doth When God afflicted Job, he did object no sin unto him, but justified his afflicting of him, by telling him of his power: (Job 40. 9:) *Hast thou, saith God, an arm like mine?* ... Beasts are subject to death and torments, yet they cannot sin: it was God's will they should be so. Power irresistible justifies all actions, really and properly, in whomsoever it be found; less power does not, and because such power is in God only, he must needs be just in all actions, and we, that not comprehending his counsels, call him to the bar, commit injustice in it.²³

This might seem at first to be a somewhat ostentatious display of tough-mindedness. But soberly considered it makes a plausible point. We are accustomed to think that power corrupts. But if this is true it is a truth about men. More generally, ‘power goes with goodness’ as Aristotle says (*Politics*, 1255a). Hobbes puts his point in a way which is more abrasive-sounding than necessary. The justice of an action (like its legality) is a residual matter. We have in mind an action which simply fails to be unjust (or illegal), rather than an action which is endorsed. Hobbes could have said that the description *just/unjust* had no application to the actions of a being of irresistible power (any more than the description *legal/illegal*).

The supposed necessity to eliminate evil

To all this it might be replied that although morality need not be ‘the same for all rational beings’ – indeed, need not be ‘the same for all *human* beings’ – the criteria must at least be the same *in some respects*, and that this is enough to create a problem of evil. Might there not be an analogue of the virtue of justice that would have to be common to all? In particular, it might be suggested – as something evident – that certain states of affairs are just bad: the useless pain suffered by that baby in the example with which we began. It might then be urged that any rational agent would be bound to eliminate such things if their elimination were both easy and costless. And to say that such an agent would be bound would simply mean that this conduct was a necessary condition of being just. Not to act would be to wrong the baby; or at any rate, it would be evidence of a defect.

However, there is a problem in construing ‘bad state of affairs’ when used in this way. A state of affairs does not have an *ergon* or anything like it. Philippa Foot has suggested that phrases like ‘bad state of affairs’ or ‘bad thing to happen’ do indeed lack sense when used foundationally, or from scratch, to explain our

obligations.²⁴ She admits, of course, that such phrases have a sense in colloquial use, but argues they have a rather special role. A bad state of affairs is not a state of affairs which fails to do state-of-affairsish things. A man will talk of a *bad outcome* simply to indicate an outcome he regrets, a defeat, for example, for the football team he supports. She adds, significantly for our purposes, that it is part of what it is to be a good human being that one regrets certain things, that one regards certain happenings – natural disasters let us say – as bad, that is to say, *as* disasters. That is surely correct. But it would not follow that every intelligent agent of whatever kind would have to be counted defective if he or it were indifferent to such outcomes. Our idea of the virtues is so closely tied to the human condition. Peter Geach has argued, for example, that sympathy for animal suffering is a mark of a human virtue, at least if kept within certain bounds, but has suggested that sympathy *could* not be a divine virtue. There is no virtue of this kind which God could have or lack.²⁵

But this matter will continue to nag us. Surely *a good being will eliminate evils insofar as it can*. Isn't this undeniable? To judge by the prominent place it has acquired in anthologies on the topic of God and of evil, it would seem to have acquired the status of an axiom.²⁶ True enough, an additional, weakening, qualification might by now be considered mandatory: 'at least if this can be done without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance', or 'unless the being has some suitably weighty moral excuse'. But given these cautions, it will be claimed, the axiom must surely be accepted.

However, the sceptics who like to make use of this supposed truth are perhaps insufficiently sceptical in this particular. Is the axiom to be accepted as true for absolutely every evil? Think of absences, absences of sentient beings let us say, representing a loss of the joy in living. Think of how many merely potential mammals there must be, all absent from the nature of things – potential rats for example. Let it be granted that a rat's life would be judged 'worth living' (by the average rat or ethicist). Then consider the argument: '*There are no rats on the moon. A good God would have put this right. Therefore a good God does not exist*'. As an argument this is curiously unpersuasive.

The axiom on which this argument trades is in fact quite difficult to construe. 'Good being' or 'good thing' are phrases problematic in sense – like 'good state of affairs'. Charitably interpreted, we could perhaps regard the words 'being' or 'thing' as mere place-holders, like the letter 'X' in 'a good X'. We might then be invited to say that the axiom is true for all substitutions. But this is evidently *not* the case – even when we confine our substitutions to words (like 'farmer') which describe intelligent agents. A good farmer (pianist, husband, acrobat, plumber, etc.) does not *ex officio* eliminate all the evils he can. It might be replied that this is because these descriptions pick out agents who have a certain role. A farmer has a role. He is not concerned, *qua* farmer, with evils incidental to this role. But does a good farmer eliminate all *agricultural* evils insofar as he can? Why should we

suppose that? Let us change the example. Angels, let us suppose, have no specific role. Could we then say that a good angel (without portfolio) would eliminate all the evils it could? How would we know that the concept worked like that?

Let us return to earth. Consider the phrase 'a good human being', about which we no doubt have a better, though still imperfect, understanding. It is noteworthy that the axiom fails in this case, a plain fact hidden by a fog of competitive moral fervour. To be a good human being, one is by no means required to eliminate all the evil one can (whether 'evil' is taken to be a misfortune or an evil deed). Think in particular about a choice of career. Certain ways of life are bound up with eliminating evils – one thinks of preachers, policemen – while other ways of life are not. However, one does not have to be a preacher or a policeman, even if such a choice is open to one. One might prefer to be a gardener – simply pleasing oneself in the making of such a choice. In normal circumstances it simply could not count as a defect to become a gardener. And even if one is in the business of eliminating evil, one surely does not have to do this all the time. Someone involved in preaching, relieving pain, or in breeding contented sentient beings, rats perhaps, can go on holiday or retire. Again, think of one's daily life. It is no defect *at all* to walk to the pub with one's friends at a time when one could be eliminating evil instead. And no-one is going to say with a straight face that walking to the pub is permitted only because this happens to be a necessary part of the best strategy for eliminating all the evil one can. Again, think of the duty to rescue in a case where a man could rescue either one or five – must he, all things being equal, rescue the five? Elizabeth Anscombe has cast doubt even here on the thought that one *must* rescue the larger number, arguing contrary to what one might at first suppose, that provided one were not acting for a bad reason it would be sufficient to save *someone*.²⁷ Perhaps her reasoning might not in the end convince, but she is not *plainly* wrong as the axiom might suggest. Again, supposed the life of Christ were offered us as a model. No-one reading the Gospels would see in them a Christ continually eliminating all the evil he could eliminate – and we can be sure that his relaxed everyday activities are mostly not recorded.²⁸ The story of the precious ointment that might have been sold for the good of the poor, and Christ's response to this objection, shows very well that it *can* be all right for a Christian not to relieve all suffering he can relieve, even where this is easy. In the story, it was sufficient to use the ointment *well*.

If God *did* have to act as a good human being has to act, He would not have to eliminate all the (pointless) evil He could, for that is not required of a good human being, as we have just shown. However, would we not expect that the Supreme Being would have the privilege of a *greater* liberty? Would we not expect Him to have prerogatives? People have said for centuries 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away', without for one moment believing that it is all right for *us* to take back what we have given. They have not seen this as a paradox. No-one suggests that we should seek to 'imitate God' insofar as we are able. In fact the complaint

‘That would be playing God’ has become a cliché of current debate even in the mouths of those who do not believe in God at all.

What makes the axiom appear to be true of God in particular is this: that we are used to the idea that human culpability for omission is related to the cost or difficulty of doing what is required. We might think here in particular of the duty to rescue. However, God, we will naturally suppose, does not find anything He can do difficult to do. So a good God, we will be inclined to think, will always rescue. But, in truth, we are only entitled to conclude hypothetically. We can only say that *if* God had a general duty to rescue He could hardly exonerate Himself on a particular occasion that saving the life in question would have been too dangerous or costly. We can by no means conclude that the ease of the task in itself imposes the duty to rescue, so that not-saving would count as ‘an omission’ – something God would be answerable for, and might hope to excuse (saying ‘I plead the free-will-defence’ or whatever). Do not people pray to be rescued? In fact, as we shall see, anyone who recites the Lord’s Prayer seriously will in effect have abandoned any trust in the axiom as it relates to God.

We can indeed say something more radical. People regularly argue ‘Morality cannot be a matter of obedience to God’s commands. We would have first to know that God was *morally* good’ etc. However, as we have suggested, it would be at least problematic to refer to God’s goodness as *moral* goodness in the first place. ‘Is God’s goodness moral goodness?’ might be as unaskable as Wittgenstein’s question ‘Is it five o’clock on the Sun?’. That it is inappropriate to refer to God’s goodness as moral goodness was emphasized by Elizabeth Anscombe.²⁹ And, more recently, Brian Davies has several times suggested that God’s goodness should not be seen in this way.³⁰ To be sure, the question ‘Is God’s goodness *moral* goodness’ is pretty unclear, partly because the notion of the ‘moral’, even as it applies to the life of man, is none too clear. In truth, we are not very sure what counts even among human beings as ‘moral goodness’. Is prudence (wisdom) a *moral* quality? Many people will be inclined to say ‘of course not!’. But it appears in the list of the four cardinal virtues, and is often placed first. Thus, if one makes a point of buying one’s morning paper before the shop sells out of them, one *acts well*. What entitles us to say that such an action does not exhibit *moral* goodness? With this amount of disagreement about moral goodness in the human case, it is little wonder that we are somewhat unsure how or whether the concept can be applied to God. In all this we have needed to say very little about God. It is a merit in philosophical theology to say as little about God as possible.

Two accounts of God’s goodness

What account then can we give of God’s goodness? If we have not thought out the point that the goodness of X is related to what X is, we might be inclined to say that a good God would be all manner of things. Avuncular perhaps. Utilitarians might think of him as a happiness maximizer. Those who are ecological

might suppose that He would never harm a fig tree or a pig. Egalitarians might say that He cares for everyone's good equally. But all these conceptions are very evidently incompatible with the picture the Bible gives. God is to be feared. God destroys the fig tree. God 'unfairly' chose the Jews, and then smote their enemies. Jesus loved one of the disciples more than the others. And he said 'I came to bring not peace but the sword'. It would be very simple-minded to sit down in a sulk and say 'Very well then, God cannot be good!' The Bible seems to teach us, if we are to trust it, that we make these protests under an incorrect conception of God's goodness. And we should be the first to admit that our ideas in this matter could be faulty. Indeed the idea that the God who does these things would have to be a bad God is embarrassingly on a par with the old joke that God would not be worthy of tenure at an American university. ('He only wrote one book. And that was in Hebrew. He seems to have written very little else. There were no scholarly references or bibliography. His first two students failed their examination' etc.)

We might talk about a *dream-god*. A dream-god would be a god suitable to one's purposes, the sort of god one would make if one had a free hand. A god suitable to our purposes. (Here we may recall the account of goodness given by John Rawls and which we wanted to reject: 'A is a good X if and only if A has the properties ... which it is rational to want in an X'.) A dream-god would, these days, be an environmentalist. He would want to ban fox-hunting (but not to threaten any penalties for the same). Naturally, his behaviour would have to be 'accountable' and subject to periodic review. Of course, different people would have different dream-gods. There would almost always be an 'evidential problem of evil' against believing in the existence of *these* beings, a rather compelling case in fact. Anyone who is inclined to confuse their dream God with the God of the Bible should be warned by Nietzsche: 'You all *fear* the conclusion: "From the world that is known to us quite a different God would be *demonstrable*, such a one as would certainly not be a humanitarian"'.³¹

Leaving aside fancies and personal stipulations, we can come to some tentative understanding of the goodness of God. I offer two (compatible) solutions.

If our remarks about the concept of goodness are about right, the phrase 'a good supreme being' would presumably be understood in relation to what a supreme being *is*, or better, to what he or it *does*. This appears to yield a result. As we saw earlier, in the case of Jemima and Excalibur we understand 'A is good' in relation to the kind of thing named. 'God' is the name of an intelligent agent. 'God is good' says that God is good *qua* intelligent agent. Now the perfection of an intelligent agent does seem to be something we understand: it would surely consist in a combination of wisdom, insight and sufficient power – an inability to be stupid or frustrated. God is said to have these characteristics pre-eminently. So God would plainly be good, and indeed perfect.³² How could one have a reason not to do something if one had total control of the consequences? How could it be foolish to do this, that or the other? How could one act unwisely when nothing that one

cared about nor needed to care about was in jeopardy? In this elementary way, we seem to grasp the concept of God's goodness rather well, at least in outline. And no problems of evil arise. It might be thought that *everything* about God would have to be more or less beyond our ken. Perhaps Mansel thought so. But this would seem something of a prejudice. Do not people talk of the divine simplicity? We might even conclude that the goodness of God is 'moral goodness' after all, at least if our understanding of the ethical is closer to Aristotle, with his notion of the intellectual virtues, than to that of Bentham. A being of the power and knowledge said to characterize God simply *could not* be unwise.

Someone might suppose that moral goodness had nothing essentially to do with wisdom and what one had a reason to do. It was just there, like Mount Everest. And being there it was the measure of all alike. But that would be an uncomfortable concession. We need to make sense of moral belief, and this would represent a step into the dark. Even in regard to human goodness it is arguable that the only sin is stupidity.³³

Aquinas's account of God's goodness is somewhat different. It is noteworthy that when Aquinas discusses God's perfection,³⁴ he does not think of saying that God is 'morally good', that He wouldn't hurt a fly, or that He loves all of us equally. Aquinas seems to start (unpromisingly) from an abstract notion of 'a good entity', 'a good thing of the kind which could be a cause', where perfection is a matter of being complete, there being no possible flourishing yet to happen. In making something, stage by stage, we are said to be perfecting it. Analogously, fully grown oak trees would in this way have a perfection, though of a limited kind. They would be good as far as oak trees go. God would have this perfection too, like the fine oak tree, but in His case there would be no other kind of being capable of flourishing in a more magnificent way. For Aquinas, to be good was, in each case, to be 'realized'. I do not know whether this would make sense on closer enquiry. It does not come naturally for us to say that a bramble bush or a cat is becoming somehow better just by growing.³⁵

Whether one thinks of God as good *qua powerful and wise*, or as *fully realized*, no problem of evil even seems to arise. In fact, if we see God's goodness in either of these ways, certain moralistic claims, which might otherwise seem promising, will not appear so evident. William Alston for example says: 'Since he is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible for God to command us to act in ways which are not for the best.'³⁶ This sounds well. But why this necessity to confine commands to 'what is for the best'? It is plainly all right for us to do many things which are evidently not for the best, insofar as we understand such a phrase – neutral things, if there are such, or things which are good, where something even better could have been done. Why would it be inappropriate or impossible for a being who is perfectly good by nature to command us to do homely but perhaps useful actions which could not sensibly be supposed optimific?

Divine love

We have gone some way to meet John Mackie's challenge 'But why then call him good?'. No doubt there is more to be said which we cannot say. It seems entirely reasonable for Christians or Jews to say that they do not understand with complete clarity what is meant by God's goodness. In general, it is possible to know that p without wholly comprehending what it is to be the case that p . Philosophy, and not just the philosophy of religion, is so very often a matter of faith seeking understanding. Thoughtful people who know very well that $2 + 3 = 5$ cannot agree what numbers are. Frege in *The Foundations of Arithmetic* made fun of the answers given by the eminent to a very simple question: What is it to add one number to another? What indeed is it to add a number *to itself*?! Away from the world of mathematics we find the same thing. The doctor can know with untroubled certainty that the patient is now conscious, even though he might be the first to agree with those who say in his Sunday paper that consciousness is a mystery. It is little wonder that people are uncertain about the nature of divine goodness when they are even at sixes and sevens about the nature of human goodness.

It is obvious that we will not wholly understand what it is for God to be good. For, as we have said, the goodness of an X depends upon what X is, and in the case of God we are said to be only imperfectly capable of grasping this. If solving the problem of evil required such complete understanding, we would never be able to say goodbye to it for good and all ('in this life' a Christian might add). I must stress, however, that I am not at all saying that the notion of God's goodness is just incomprehensible. On the contrary, I have explained how we *can* make good sense of the notion, for we have seen how an all knowing and almighty agent must have a certain perfection.

Still, there is a particular aspect of God's goodness, or what we might take to be such, which we have not yet discussed. Isn't God said to love us, and isn't this supposed to be an aspect of his goodness? Doesn't the problem of evil come in here at least?

But it is part of the story that this love is a matter of gift, not debt. Or does anyone suppose that if God had gratuitously made one happy on a Tuesday He would have to follow suit on the Wednesday? Or again – to generalize a bit – does anyone suppose that God would be under an obligation to bring about 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'? And in particular, that He would have to keep on bringing unconceived 'possible people' into existence (to say nothing of 'possible dolphins', 'possible sentient beings' etc.) till there were no more such possibilities left?³⁷ But we need not confine ourselves to rhetorical questions. Traditional religious teaching strongly suggests that the good God does *not* automatically give us what, all in all, it would be good for us to have. For we are taught to pray for things. It could, I suppose, be replied that God could only answer these prayers when it was a matter of indifference for our welfare whether the request was granted or not. But that seems entirely contrary to the spirit of the teaching.

Christians are taught to pray for help in regard to important matters: 'Deliver us from evil'. This would be pointless if 'a good being' automatically 'eliminates evil insofar as it can'. If God's failure automatically to give us everything which it would be good for us to have is said to be a failure in 'perfect benevolence' then God is not, by the doctrine, claimed to be perfectly benevolent in *this* sense. So failures in 'perfect benevolence' cannot be used as evidence that the story is not true. In this way there is no problem of evil here. ('Benevolent' is not an attributive adjective as 'good' is.³⁸ But it still needs to be interpreted aright, taking into account what the religion claims.)

Of course I have done nothing to characterize the remarkable extent of God's love as it appears in Christian revelation. God is said to have become man and to have died for us, hoping that we shall thereby enjoy His company for ever. And if there is a God, even the superficial evidence, revelation apart, seems to show a God who is good to us. People nearly always think of their lives as a blessing. Even a man who lives in hardship is very glad to be alive. News that he was about to die (let us say, suddenly and painlessly) would nearly always come as very bad news indeed. One would hate to be the bearer of it. And even those living through a crisis in their lives, and who might therefore welcome such news, would so often be glad later to realize that the news had been mistaken. In fact, people tend to be happier in this life than a believer has reason to expect. For according to the story, God commands men to do this and that *for their need and benefit*. But of course, they disobey these commands with spectacular frequency: they continually lie, steal, kill the innocent, commit adultery, covet their neighbours' goods, and so on and so forth. And yet after all that, all that which poisons their lives, they are *still* glad to be alive.

How this love is a part of God's goodness is, as I suggested, something of a mystery. But for the purposes of this essay we need not deny that this might be an aspect of the goodness of God. For it has little bearing on the problem we now have to face.

Hello to the problem of veracity

Mill's question

Christianity is, at least in great measure, a revealed religion. If the criteria of divine goodness are not the same as the criteria of human goodness, what makes us think that a good or perfect God would not deceive us about important matters, or that He would not lie to us? What gives us the assurance that what is apparently shown is not deliberately a mirage, put there for our good, for the good of other creatures, or for a dozen other reasons? Perhaps there is some reason why lying would be a bad action for *any* rational agent. When Kant states in the Preface to the *Groundwork* that morality must be the same for all rational beings, he uses as his example the requirement not to lie, saying that 'the command "Thou shalt not

lie” could not hold merely for men, other rational beings having no obligation not to abide by it’. This example must have seemed particularly telling. But it is hard to know what this reason could be.

Mansel was (in a way) correct about God’s goodness, as we have seen. But Mill was also correct to raise our present problem. Mill says: ‘Unless I believe God to possess the same moral attributes which I find, in however an inferior degree, in a good man, what ground of assurance have I of God’s veracity?’³⁹ C. S. Lewis, writing in his notebook after the death of his wife, wrote similarly: ‘It is true that we have His threats and promises. But why should we believe them? If cruelty is from His point of view “good”, telling lies may be good too.’⁴⁰ We must, however, be cautious in interpreting such a remark if we are not to go astray. We have not been arguing, in the first part of this essay, that since the concept of God’s goodness is quite incomprehensible to us, His goodness might, for all we can tell, be consistent with cruelty, or might even call for Him to be cruel. Writing in his sorrow, C. S. Lewis gives a melodramatic twist to our question which we should avoid. Thomas Hobbes, often thought to have had a tough or sour opinion of human nature, thought that cruelty was actually impossible. That is to say, it was not possible, he thought, for us to delight in the misery of others.⁴¹ What Hobbes said about man might more plausibly be said about God. If so, cruelty would be impossible to God, and so of course, could be no part of His goodness.

So, the solving of the problem of evil brings in its train the problem of veracity. It is as if the tablecloth is too small for the table. Pull it over to cover one end, and a gap opens up at the other. But the analogy is not exact. We do not have a choice. I think we *have* to pull the tablecloth in the direction indicated in this paper. We would have to take the view of God’s goodness I have outlined even if we were *not* puzzled by a problem of evil. (We could suppose that we had discovered a bad stain at one end of the table which simply *had* to be covered.)

Veracity: a human need only?

The problem of veracity arises and is interesting, not from what we do not know, but from what we do. It arises from our understanding, such as it is, of divine and human goodness. Why after all is it bad for human beings to lie?

Well, we are taught two homely lessons. The first is prudential. Those who lie are eventually found out, and are then not trusted. The second mentions a standard we need to uphold communally. Trust among men is both necessary and fragile. So we have to teach against the lie. The teaching indeed needs to be rather tough – though this is rather concealed by the fact that some lies are about trivial matters. The teaching needs to be tough, for if we make exceptions ‘for necessity’ it might not work. For it is just ‘necessity’ which tempts us to lie. (The teaching against outright lying will have a particular force in certain contexts. It is, we might say, particularly disgraceful for a doctor to lie. Patients are vulnerable. And they have to be able to trust their doctors. Doctors need to be trusted, and – sadly – are

already under suspicion. Furthermore, the matter at stake is characteristically important.)

This, it would seem, explains why it is wrong for us to lie. But we need to add a caution. I said 'it would seem' for we are often not very good at answering questions of this kind. We can easily know that a kind of action is bad and yet give an inadequate account of the matter – even (or especially) if we are moral philosophers. Here, as so often, our everyday knowledge runs ahead of our philosophical understanding. We often get some of the picture right. We say relevant things. But we do not see the whole. People who put their trust in 'practical ethicists' and their theories are often quite unaware of our fallibility in this regard.

But *if* what we have said wholly explains why it is bad to lie, then it would seem that we would have no reason for our assurance that a good God would not lie to men. A bold child might say to us: 'You say that if I tell lies, then sooner or later I will be found out, and no-one will trust me. Well, I will not be found out. I am just too clever!'. We tell the child not to be silly. But God could say exactly what the child says, and not be silly at all. It would be the simple truth. God is plenty clever enough. And God is not dependent on a community in which trust is necessary and fragile. He is self-sufficient. The evident differences in the human and divine natures seem to show, then, that veracity is not among the divine virtues.

Lying seems to be bad simply because of certain constancies in *human* nature. The direct question: 'Tell me true, no evasions' is a device which allows for a certain amount of concealment (which is necessary) and deceptiveness in human affairs, without leaving us helpless. We all of us need sometimes to be able to put others on the spot. Of course, the other can refuse to answer. He can say: 'I am a lawyer. I obviously cannot discuss my client's affairs'. But even here we know where we are. We human beings need to protect the workings of this device among human beings. We know how to set about protecting it. The basis of this bit of morality is what we humans need and what we can do to secure it. It is intelligible only within the human community.

The irrelevance of benevolence etc.

At this point, someone might remind us that God is benevolent. Surely, it will be said, a benevolent God would not lie. But lying would sometimes be required by charity even among us men if it were not wrong for us to lie. We are often tempted to lie for reasons of kindness. Descartes says in the Fourth Meditation: 'The desire to deceive without doubt testifies to malice or feebleness, and accordingly cannot be found in God.'⁴² Perhaps this thought had come down to him from St Anselm who claims in his *Proslogion*, Chapter 7, that God could only lie if he lacked power, the 'can' here being a sign of weakness (as in 'Smith can easily forget all sorts of important appointments'). Be that as it may, a little Cartesian doubt would not have come amiss at this point. The authors of the second set of Objections (collected by Mersenne) saw a difficulty here:

Fourthly, you deny that God lies or deceives; whereas some schoolmen may be found who affirm this. Thus Gabriel [Gabriel Biel], Ariminensis [Gregory of Rimini] and others think that in the absolute sense of the expression God does utter falsehoods, i.e. what is the opposite of His intention and contrary to that what he has decreed; as when he unconditionally announced to the people of Nineveh through the Prophet, Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed; and when in many other cases He declared things that by no means came to pass, because His words were not meant to correspond with His intention or His decree. But if God could harden the heart of Pharaoh and blind his eyes, if He communicated to his prophets a spirit of lying, whence do you conclude that we cannot be deceived by Him? May not God so deal with men as a physician treats his patients, or as a father his children, dissimulation being employed in both cases, and that wisely and with profit? For if God showed to us His truth undimmed, what eyes, what mental vision could endure it?⁴³

Descartes' reply is none too reassuring. He suggests that it is at least arguable that God might convey lies to men where 'there is no evil intent'. He writes: 'I should be loathe to censure those who say that God can utter verbal deceptions through His prophets (deceptions which, like those that doctors use for the benefit of their patients, are lies in which there is no evil intention).'⁴⁴ We can see from this reply that Descartes has explicitly given up on the 'malice' point from the Fourth Meditation. How about the companion point about 'feebleness'? Someone might say that we human beings only lie reluctantly when we are in a tight corner, and that God could never find Himself in such a fix. But it is not true that human lying is restricted in this way. And it would be even less restricted were we not convinced that it was bad to lie.

Suppose we were correct in what we said about God's goodness: that it is the perfection of an agent, the inability to fail through defects of power or knowledge. That plainly does not exclude 'revealing' what is not the case. Or suppose we favoured the account in Aquinas: that God's goodness is His completeness, nothing remaining to be developed. Why should a complete being not lie? There seems to be no connection at all between the concepts. Or suppose that God's goodness was His delightfulness to the blessed in heaven. How could we know that their delight would be in any way marred on finding that they had officially been told untruths while they were yet on earth? Someone here and now might say with indignant assurance: 'I would be cross, very cross. It would quite spoil my day!'. But it would be rash to predict how one would feel.

At the end of Book 2 of *The Republic* Plato argues that God (or the gods) would not deceive us, not because lying would be wrong but because He (they) would have no motive to lie. Thus, God would not have to lie through fear of His enemies. Nor because His friends were foolish, and might do something drastic or silly if they were not lied to. There is very little reassurance here. Plato, for example, simply assumes that none of God's friends could be foolish; since we are all foolish in one way or another it is a good job that this proposition is so implausible. And isn't it easy after all to imagine why God might want to lie? God wants things done,

if not for His sake then for ours, and lying is sometimes effective. In any case, who could possibly know what God might have a reason for doing? Oliver Goldsmith liked to say that he had too high a regard for truth than to trot it out on every occasion. Might not God, rather in this spirit, make do with falsehoods on week-days?

And if all this is not enough, there is a further difficulty in providing for the trustworthiness of revelation. At the outset of this section, I mentioned lying *and* deceiving. When discussing human conduct we make a distinction between the two. Even if we think that lying, defined with a suitable narrowness, is never permissible, we will want to say something different about merely deceiving – deliberately giving a false impression. We think that this last can be all right in some circumstances. But if God's goodness is 'like ours' it would be all right on occasion for *Him* to give a false impression too. Needless to say, He would be very good at it. Now divine revelation might take the form of *how things are made by God to appear*. But if this is so, whence comes our trust in such a revelation?

It must be admitted that we do not depend upon argument to justify our reliance on what we have been taught by others, or have picked up from them. On the contrary, there is necessarily no such justification. For it is a precondition of our being able to enquire into anything at all that we, more or less uncritically, adopt a mass of background beliefs which we have picked up by being told things, beliefs which are not easy to survey as they are not, as it were, 'before our minds'. And in a like manner, if there had been a revelation, it might seem not irrational simply to accept much of what one had been 'told'. Yet this does not give us the reassurance we need. For divine revelation would be a teaching from an exotic or uncanny source, and a faith based on such a revelation could hardly survive the rational complaint that at best one could never quite know when it would let one down.

A religion of revelation needs to be able to assume that God *cannot* lie or deceive, just as He cannot undo the past.⁴⁵ How this assumption could be made out is something of a mystery. It is a mystery into which we are plunged by what I have argued to be the natural and necessary solution to the problem of evil. Perhaps we will be invited to say that lying is a 'misuse of speech', since speech is meant to convey truth. It then might be claimed somehow that God could not misuse anything; there seems to be plausibility in that vague thought. But if lying is not thought independently to be bad, why should we not simply regard it as a *secondary* use of speech, like telling a joke or a story? Descartes seems to say that because God is 'the highest truth' it is 'contradictory that anything should proceed from him that positively tends towards falsity'.⁴⁶ In the words of Hopkins,

Truth himself speaks truly
Or there's nothing true.⁴⁷

Since we do not well understand what it means to say that God is truth itself, we

will often be unable to determine what the logical consequences of that thought would be. It seems to be a Platonic thought: that truth itself creates everyday truths and nothing but truths, and could not promote falsehood.

We could perhaps reach for an explanation rather like this. Darkness does not spread darkness. But it is in the nature of light to spread light. God, the Light of the World, can do no other than illuminate our minds if His rays reach them at all. (But this of course is just a picture, not an argument.)⁴⁸

Notes

1. This formulation of the problem avoids the suggestion that God is 'omnipotent' about which there are well-known difficulties. It is merely assumed that He has sufficient power.
2. As a referee for this journal remarked: 'Mill's work is rarely anthologized in philosophy of religion texts and rarely (if ever) mentioned in the main introductions to philosophy of religion texts currently in vogue'. Desultory research in the library seems to bear this out. However, a relevant extract from H. L. Mansel's *The Limits of Religious Thought*, together with Mill's comments, can usefully be found in Paul Helm (ed.) *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
3. J. S. Mill *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 9 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 103. McTaggart greatly admired Mill's stand. He said that it was 'one of the great turning points in the religious development of the world'; J. McTaggart *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), 214. If the argument of this paper is on the right lines, it is perhaps time the world turned back again.
4. J. L. Mackie *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 156. I should perhaps add the rest of John Mackie's attack in case it should be thought that I have missed out something important: 'In effect God is being called good, while at the same time he is being described as bad, that is as having purposes and acting upon motives which in ordinary circumstances we would recognise as bad But to argue in this way is merely to defend a shadow, while abandoning the substance, of the traditional claim that God is wholly good.' (156). Clearly, someone who maintains that what counts as God's goodness might be other than we might at first expect is not playing idle games. He is not like the person who wants to make out that grass is purple by saying that *for him* 'purple' is to be the name of the colour of spinach leaves and the 'go' traffic light. Note the phrase 'in ordinary circumstances'. If it is bad for humans to do something it would not be bad for God to do, this would not be explained by talking about circumstances, ordinary or exceptional.
5. Put simply, the logical syntax of this is as follows. A first-level predicate is a sentence 'with a hole in it' suitable to be filled by a proper name. '- is a horse', 'Smith met -' would be examples. A second-level predicate is a sentence with a hole in it suitable to be filled by a first-level predicate. Quantifiers are second level predicates. But there can be predicates of *mixed* level: that is to say sentences with two independently fillable holes calling for a name in one hole and a first level predicate in the other. Gottlob Frege recognizes this possibility in his book *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* (Jena: Hermann Pohle, 1893), vol. 1, sec. 22, where he talks about functions of mixed level. Now '- is good' and '- is three' look like first-level predicates but must be regarded as predicates of mixed level. For more on the idea of 'levels', see Michael Dummett *Frege: The Philosophy of Language* (2nd edn, London: Duckworth, 1981), chs 2 and 3. The rough and ready expository phrase 'sentence with a hole in it' is due to Arthur Prior.
6. That 'the logical behaviour of 'good' as an adjective' is of this kind is pointed out rather clearly in Bernard Williams's well-known introductory text, *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), in the chapter entitled 'Good'. Bernard Williams claims that G. E. Moore had been 'radically misguided' to think of *good* as if it were grammatically similar to *yellow* (54). An item is *simply* yellow, an item is only good *qua* this or *qua* that. Professor Williams follows Peter Geach 'Good and evil', *Analysis*, 17 (1956), 33-42, reprinted in Philippa Foot *Theories of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 64-73.
7. 'The Meaning of "Good"', a chapter in W. D. Ross *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 65-74. The terms 'attributive' and 'predicative' come from grammar, but are used here, and in

Professor Geach's later 'Good and evil', in a logical sense. The surface structure of a sentence does not render an occurrence of the word *good* 'predicative' as both authors note. In 'Oxford is hopeless', the adjective occurs predicatively in the grammatical sense, but if the context suggests that we are to understand the sentence as 'Oxford is a hopeless football team', or 'Oxford is a hopeless university' then logically speaking the use will be attributive. The big question could then be put as follows: is there such a thing as a *logically* predicative use of 'hopeless'? Are there, might there be, items which are so to speak *just* hopeless, but not hopeless at being this or doing that? Or would the very supposition be a nonsense?

8. *Ibid.*, 65.
9. *Ibid.*, 73.
10. I owe this suggestion to Peter Byrne, who refers to William Alston 'Some thoughts for divine command theorists', in his *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 253–273.
11. Here of course I am following Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 50, G. E. M. Anscombe (transl.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958). Admittedly, Wittgenstein's view on this matter has not gone uncriticized. See Saul Kripke *Meaning and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 54–57. At least part of Professor Kripke's problem stems from the possibility of change in the object picked as a standard. 'Even a man who strictly uses King Henry's arm as his one standard of length can say, counterfactually, that if certain things had happened to the king, the exact distance between the end of one of his fingers and his nose would not have been exactly a yard' (76). Perhaps we would not be bothered by such counterfactuals if a changeless God were taken as our standard of goodness. More troubling is the thought that if everything depends upon a standard of goodness the matter seems trivial: 'A good spaniel's ears are to be just as long as *this* spaniel's ears'.
12. John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 399, see also 405. Rawls himself says that his definition 'is likely to be more suitable for some cases than others'. In the case of 'good roots' he says that we 'adopt the point of view' of the plant, although 'there is some artificiality in doing this' (403). That might suggest that there is some artificiality in talking about good roots, but this would certainly not be true.
13. That a tortoise which moves so slowly is not thereby defective is an example I owe to Philippa Foot *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 35.
14. Immanuel Kant *Anthropology Treated Pragmatically*, transl. in Gabriele Rabel *Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 349.
15. Thinking naturally here of the title of G. H. von Wright's book, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge, 1963).
16. See the discussion in Dummett *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 550–551.
17. For example, Nelson Pike in the introduction to his collection *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 3, where he is discussing Mill's complaint. 'But what about the theologian (and there have been many) who affirms that God is perfectly good and who adds that the term 'good' as applied to God does not have the meaning it has when applied to things other than God?'.
18. Immanuel Kant Preface to *Groundwork*, vi. References are to the second German edition, as indicated in H. J. Paton's translation, *The Moral Law*, 2nd edn (London: Hutchinson, 1953). It is curious that in Paton's substantial 'analysis of the argument' this crucial thesis about the uniformity of moral requirement goes unremarked.
19. I have tried elsewhere to raise a doubt on this score. See my paper 'Was Mill a utilitarian?', *Utilitas*, 10 (1998), 33–67.
20. Von Wright *The Varieties of Goodness*, first quotation 213, second quotation 214, italics in text. That our concept of the moral law 'for the protection of men in multitudes' presupposes that those who live under this law are somehow equally vulnerable was, of course, stressed by Hobbes; see Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*, the beginning of ch. 13: 'Men by nature equal'.
21. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 63, A. 2.
22. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137a. It is *possible* that Aristotle is thinking of distributive justice only, for the paragraph talks of 'having too much or too little', and he says that the gods cannot have too much of anything. The broader context is not however restricted to matters of distributive justice, but talks about wounding, and offering bribes.

23. Thomas Hobbes 'Of liberty and necessity', *English Works*, vol. 4, Molesworth edn (London: John Bohn, 1840), 249–250, some italics omitted. I have considerably shortened Hobbes's text. Not surprisingly he quotes St Paul on the potter: 'Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same stuff to make one vessel to honour, another to dishonour?'. (Hobbes writes similarly in 'The questions concerning liberty, necessity and chance'; Hobbes *English Works*, vol. 5, 115–116.) It is difficult to see how Hobbes could have made anything of the Kantian idea that morality must be the same for all rational beings. Even the most fundamental among the Hobbsian laws of nature, 'seek peace', could hardly be offered as advice to an almighty agent.
24. See Philippa Foot 'Morality, action and outcome' in T. Honderich (ed.) *Objectivity and Value* (London: Routledge, 1985), 23–38; Philippa Foot 'Utilitarianism and the virtues', *Mind*, 94 (1985), 224–242.
25. Peter Geach *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 80.
26. This is listed by John Mackie as among the 'additional premises' or 'quasi-logical rules' needed to state the problem of evil fully. See J. L. Mackie 'Evil and omnipotence', *Mind*, 64 (1955) 200–201, many times reprinted. It is often suggested that the axiom needs to be stated more narrowly – that we must add 'unless the being has a moral justification' etc. In my discussion I leave out of account George Schlesinger's excellent and pertinent observation that where there is an unending set of possible good deeds it can hardly be a ground of complaint that there are still more to do; see, e.g., George Schlesinger *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 55.
27. G. E. M. Anscombe 'Who is wronged?', *Oxford Review*, 5 (1967), 16–17.
28. One might feel similar doubts about Jeremy Bentham's forthright theology: 'God is not good, if he prohibits our possessing the least atom of clear happiness which he has given us the physical capacity of attaining'; UC 70A.25, quoted in Ross Harrison *Bentham* (London: Routledge 1983), 176.
29. G. E. M. Anscombe 'Modern moral philosophy', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 34.
30. Brian Davies *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); *idem Thinking About God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985); *idem* 'How is God love?', in Luke Gormally (ed.) *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 97–110; *idem The Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (London: Cassel, 1998).
31. This comes from the posthumous notes of F. W. Nietzsche gathered together under the title *The Will to Power* (para. 1036) and therefore not passed for publication by the author. Yet no-one familiar with Nietzsche could suppose this to be an uncharacteristic remark.
32. Instead of wisdom, insight and sufficient power, one might simply say *power*. That is what it all amounts to. It is not at all surprising, if what we have said is correct, that Aquinas could write that 'God's power is his goodness'; *Summa Theologica*, I, Ilae, q.2, Art 4, *ad ium*. In the above context no-one could see this as a simple praise of brute force. (The fact that we talk in this way about *brute* force is of course significant.)
33. As Wilde suggested; Oscar Wilde *The Critic as Artist*, 1891, part 2. The remark occurs a few paragraphs from the end.
34. Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Q.4.
35. Perhaps too, we find the influence of the Aristotelian thought that an eternal being would have no weaknesses, as an eternity of time would have already searched these out and tested the being to destruction. Goodness of this kind is akin to durability. There are suggestions of this in Aristotle *Metaphysics*, Book 9, 8–9.
36. Alston 'Some suggestions for divine command theorists', 266.
37. I am thinking here of R. M. Hare's objections to contraception. See references under 'contraception, abortion and infanticide' in his *Essays on Bioethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), where anxiety is expressed that many possible people are not accorded being. True enough, we humans would not have to feel too badly about our contraceptive practices (including abstinence and abortion, etc.) if the world was already deemed to be overcrowded. But God, I suppose, could hardly excuse Himself from creative duties on such a ground.
38. When Hume touches on our topic, he often mentions benevolence. e.g. 'And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that ... you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures?'; David Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Norman Kemp Smith (ed.), Part 10, 2nd edn (London: Nelson, 1947) 198. See also 211, 212, 219.

39. Mill *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 103. Mill's next sentence reads: 'All trust in a Revelation presupposes a conviction that God's attributes are the same, in all but degree, with the best human attributes.' This seems to be overdoing it.
40. C. S. Lewis *A Grief Observed*, first published under the name N. W. Clerk (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 28.
41. 'Contempt, or little sense of the calamity of others, is that which men call CRUELTY; proceeding from security of their own fortune. For, that any man should take pleasure in other men's great harms, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible'; Hobbes *Leviathan*, ch. 6.
42. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 172.
43. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 27.
44. *Ibid.*, 40.
45. Peter Geach has made this point in criticizing the idea of divine omnipotence in his *Providence and Evil*, 15. Compare Kant's thought that for the divine will, and more generally a 'holy will', there are no imperatives, and the word 'ought' is out of place, as conformity with the law happens of necessity; Kant *Groundwork*, 39.
46. Haldane and Ross, *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2, 41.
47. Gerard Manley Hopkins, translating Aquinas' *Adoro Te*. I owe this apposite reference to Clara Brooke, who had written it out in her book of telephone numbers, addresses etc.
48. Versions of this paper was read at the Centenary Conference of the Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds, 1992. Other versions have been read at Oxford, the University of British Columbia, and at Harrogate Grammar School, and I would like to thank my patient, and perhaps puzzled, audiences.