

The Problem

The Exile – Shall we sit inside or outside?

The Student – I'd like to sit inside. How about here? It's a bit noisy but at least we'll be out of the weather.

Ex. – It's good for philosophers to be out in the weather.

St. – Who said that? Diogenes?

Ex. – Possibly, though I think it's more like Rousseau.

St. – I come here quite a lot. I'm often on campus at the moment. I'm so busy! I never thought I'd be this busy. I've picked up a couple of teaching groups this semester and we've started a reading group amongst the grad students. We suggest a different paper each week for us to work through but we're all working on different things so there's quite a variety. The coffee's ok here. Nothing amazing, but good enough. Have you tried this cake they do? It's so expensive but so good though.

Ex. – No, I haven't. How is your philosophical work going?

St. – Well thanks, I think. I feel like I'm making good progress.

Ex. – Oh that's good! What sort of progress?

St. – I'm on to chapter three now and I'm finding a lot of good resources.

Ex. – That sounds good. But how are you doing?

St. – What, you mean how am I feeling about it?

Ex. – Yes, if you like.

St. – I'm a bit stressed about it, to be honest; it's hard work.

Ex. – How so hard work?

St. – It's quite technical, there's a lot of reading, and I want to make sure I get all the references right. I don't want to cite someone in the wrong way. I don't want to make it obvious if I don't understand it!

Ex. – That's understandable! What is it you're working on at the moment?

St. – I'm onto the main part of the argument, which is where I point out that the existing criticisms of theodicy don't take sufficient account of probabilistic reasoning. I found an interesting

article the other day. They were trying to argue that probabilistic reasoning shouldn't play any part in the debate about the problem of evil. They said we should all go back to working with purely *a priori* formulations.

Ex. – That sounds bold.

St. – Exactly! I can't see what they were getting at. Everyone knows Plantinga blew the logical problem of evil out of the water.

Ex. – Do you think so?

St. – Yes. I mean, he showed that there can't be an essential contradiction in the inconsistent triad. And without that then we ought to use probabilistic reasoning to present the argument. If you can't show that there's an explicit or formal contradiction between the three premises of the inconsistent triad – God is good, God is powerful, and evil exists – then in order for them to be inconsistent you'd have to show that they are implicitly contradictory, which means you'd need to find some *a priori* necessarily true propositions to add to the set that generates a formal contradiction. And that can't be done.

Ex. – I've heard that some people have tried?

St. – Yes, of course they've tried, but they all fail. Mostly they trade on weak analogies or assertions. There's nothing that necessarily shows that God is incompatible with the kind of evil we see in this world.

Ex. – So you want to argue on the basis of probability?

St. – Well, I only argue that we ought to argue on the basis of probabilistic reasoning. What you do with that is up to you, but what we know is that we can't argue without appealing to probabilistic inferences to the best explanation. It's a matter of weighing up evidence, like all knowledge; that's what we have to accept.

Ex. – But not all knowledge is a matter of weighing up evidence, is it?

St. – Well, perhaps not all, but certainly most. And certainly in the problem of evil it's a matter of weighing up how reasonable it is to believe in God on the basis of the evidence of evil and suffering.

Ex. – It sounds like your thesis is taking shape!

St. – Yes, I'm pretty confident. I'm working on my publications as well. I think I can get one out of chapter two and then one out of the main argument. It'd be really good if I could get them accepted before I submit.

Ex. – Based on what evidence?

St. – What do you mean?

Ex. – What evidence is there that it would be good to get your publications accepted before

you submit?

St. – Publications are really important for your career. That's how you earn your place, really; you show yourself to be one of the 'peers'. And I'm pretty sure if you have part of your PhD published already then they can't fail you.

Ex. – They're a means to an end, then?

St. – Yes, I suppose.

Ex. – To what end?

St. – To get a job, of course! I want to be a professional philosopher, so you need these kinds of things in order to show that you're qualified.

Ex. – That sounds like a shame.

St. – What do you mean?

Ex. – That your publications are just a means to an end.

St. – But that's the way the system works. That's how philosophy works. It all depends on the peer-review process. We need our work to meet a certain standard and the peer-review process ensures that that standard is met in publications and in qualifications like PhDs. If you have those then it means that you've shown yourself to be someone who knows what they're talking about.

Ex. – When it comes to philosophy?

St. – Yes, or other subjects. It works the same in all other subjects too, like the sciences or history or whatever.

Ex. – And the weight of evidence is important in those fields too.

St. – Yes, of course. It's really no different in the philosophy of religion. It's about making a strong case on the basis of evidence and argument.

Ex. – So you're working on making your case as strong as possible, I imagine?

St. – As much as I can! But like I say, it's difficult. I keep finding that people have already said what I want to say. You think you're on to something and work away on it for a few days or weeks, but then you stumble on someone saying something similar in an obscure article from ten years' ago! It's really annoying; such a waste of time.

Ex. – At least you know you're thinking on the right track.

St. – Yes, I suppose. But it's annoying when you're trying to create original work.

Ex. – Remind me of your work, then: you want to argue that we ought to solve the problem of evil using probabilistic reasoning?

St. – Sort of. I wouldn't say 'solve' the problem, but at least it needs to be addressed using probabilistic reasoning.

Ex. – In what way 'addressed'?

St. – Well, we can't expect to solve the problem, but we can make some attempt to say what's most reasonable to believe about it. Everyone agrees the 'answer', whatever that may be, is probably beyond our understanding. So the best we can do is argue on the basis of the evidence.

Ex. – And what do you think the evidence shows?

St. – I don't think the evidence shows anything compelling either way, to be honest. Every argument has its counterargument. That's why it's such a rich source of discussion for philosophers.

Ex. – Now I'm getting a bit confused. You said we ought to argue on the basis of evidence, right?

St. – Yes, that's right.

Ex. – But now you say that the evidence doesn't tell us anything compelling?

St. – Yes, nothing compelling. But that doesn't mean it's not evidence. It's about weighing up the probabilities. If you plug these things into a probabilistic calculus then it becomes much clearer.

Ex. – The clear conclusion that no one can know the answer?

St. – Funny! But yes, I suppose, if you like. I argue that we can't argue in certain ways.

Ex. – Because we can't know the answer?

St. – No, because those ways of arguing are wrong. You can't argue about the problem of evil using a logical argument; you have to weigh up the evidence.

Ex. – And if you weigh up the evidence then you discover that you can't know the answer?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – And so, what, people should stop talking about it?

St. – No, because you can keep weighing up evidence and try to make the best case.

Ex. – To what end? More publications?

St. – If you want to put it that way, I suppose that's the visible product. I guess that's all I'm aiming for at the moment! But in the long run we collectively move the debate forwards. Every

small step gives us a little bit more understanding. The debate is different now from what it was before.

Ex. – I agree with you there. I've often thought it might have gone off on the wrong track.

St. – In what way?

Ex. – It wasn't always about arguing for or against the rationality of theistic belief, for example.

St. – That's true. But that's what a lot of the philosophy of religion is about nowadays.

Ex. – That's as may be. But would we say that makes it right?

St. – No, not on that basis. Just because everyone thinks it doesn't make it true. But what's the alternative?

Ex. – Why do you do philosophy?

St. – What do you mean? Why do I like it?

Ex. – You do philosophy because you like it?

St. – Well, yes, I suppose. I find it interesting.

Ex. – What is interesting about it?

St. – Oh I don't know! You get to think about the big questions! You learn how to think about things in the right way, how to think clearly and logically. You get to be good at constructing arguments. And you can tackle complex material and make something creative out of it.

Ex. – And in the end you get a job doing these things?

St. – Ha! Hopefully!

Ex. – That's fair enough. And the problem of evil is interesting. Tell me what you think about this: I've often thought that Mackie was onto something when he suggested the problem of evil was about consistency of belief.

St. – But, like I said, Plantinga showed that there can be no essential inconsistency in belief when it comes to the problem of evil.

Ex. – I know, and I know that most people would agree with that. But the basic idea that thinking about the problem of evil is a matter of clarifying and if possible reconciling your beliefs about these things seems to me a truly philosophical ideal. The voices of ancient philosophy instruct us to 'know thyself' and to 'live in conformity with nature'. You've already said that true beliefs or answers are hard to come by in the problem of evil; it's difficult to know what the right answer is.

St. – Yes, because the evidence can be weighed for or against.

Ex. – Indeed. The answer is out of our reach. But knowing whether our beliefs are consistent, that is something that is within our grasp, isn't it?

St. – Yes, if you understand logic and apply it properly, you can see whether your beliefs contradict one another. But there's no essential contradiction in the inconsistent triad.

Ex. – So you've said. I wonder if that's true. It seems like a sweeping statement. Surely there must be some people who have inconsistent sets of beliefs about these things?

St. – Possibly some non-ideal people do. People believe all sorts of contradictory things! But philosophers construct arguments in ways that aren't contradictory. So if we follow a trained philosopher of religion then we can see how the problem of evil ought to be constructed. And then we'll see that there's no essential contradiction within the problem of evil.

Ex. – I think there is a way to construct the problem of evil that exposes an essential contradiction.

St. – Really? How?

Ex. – I think we can find an inconsistency in the inconsistent triad if we turn our attention to the relevant beliefs.

St. – What relevant beliefs?

Ex. – Moral beliefs.

St. – You mean beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad, etc.?

Ex. – Yes, more or less.

St. – But those are already assumed in the problem of evil. They go without saying. No one is confused about what we mean by good or evil or right or wrong.

Ex. – If that's true then they must be very contented philosophers! Who isn't slightly confused about what we mean by good and evil?

St. – Well, ok, in the finer details we can disagree about what's good and what's evil, but mostly we take the general consensus to be representative. Pain and suffering is bad, virtue is good, freedom is good, and all the rest. There's not much confusion here and we have to make some assumptions for the sake of argument.

Ex. – I'm not sure that's true, but it's not really the point I'm making. I think we can expose a contradiction in a set of beliefs about the problem of evil if we focus on moral beliefs, and specifically moral beliefs of a certain kind: what I would call moral modalities, or beliefs about moral necessity.

St. – That sounds weak from the outset. It's hard enough to say that a moral belief is true, let

alone that it's necessarily true! People disagree in their moral beliefs all the time, and the moral norms of society have changed a great deal over the ages.

Ex. – It's hard to argue with that. But what I have in mind is how certain moral judgements, whilst true, can differ in the way that they are true. For example, would you say that it's true that we ought to give to charity when we can?

St. – Yes, I'd say that's a good thing to do.

Ex. – And you'd say that we shouldn't lie to our friends?

St. – Well, we shouldn't make a habit of it. It's a nice ideal, but sometimes it's ok or even good to lie.

Ex. – And sometimes it's wrong to lie?

St. – Yes, sometimes.

Ex. – So in those times, you would say it's true that it's wrong to lie?

St. – In those times, specifically, then yes.

Ex. – But in other times it would be false?

St. – Yes, sometimes lying is permissible.

Ex. – So whether or not lying is permissible depends on the circumstances?

St. – Yes. There might be an underlying moral principle guiding our decision.

Ex. – That's fine. So sometimes it's true that lying is wrong and sometimes it's false that lying is wrong. And would you say the same about giving to charity? That sometimes we ought to and sometimes it's ok not to?

St. – Yes of course. If you don't have any money to spare, you can hardly be expected to give what you don't have!

Ex. – Exactly! So whether or not you ought to give to charity depends on your circumstances.

St. – Yes.

Ex. – So with either lying or giving to charity, the answer to whether it is right or wrong is always 'it depends'?

St. – Yes, that sounds right.

Ex. – And can we call these moral contingencies? What I mean by that is that they are moral beliefs, the truth of which depends on contingent states of affairs.

St. – That sounds fair.

Ex. – And are there moral necessities? Are there moral beliefs, the truth of which does not depend on any contingent circumstances?

St. – I don't think so. What do you mean?

Ex. – You would say that it's true that you ought to give to charity and that you ought not lie to your friends, but that the truth of these beliefs depends on the particular circumstances. Would you say it is true that you ought not commit rape or murder?

St. – Yes, of course you ought not commit rape or murder!

Ex. – And does the truth of that depend on any circumstances?

St. – Well, I'm not sure. What sort of circumstances?

Ex. – Exactly, what sort? Under what circumstances would it be false that you ought not to rape? Under what circumstances is it permissible to commit a rape?

St. – None, I would say.

Ex. – And murder?

St. – In self-defence, perhaps.

Ex. – But would we call that murder?

St. – It's certainly killing another human being. It's homicide.

Ex. – Would you say murder is distinct from other forms of killing, such as accidental manslaughter or killing in self-defence, or killing in war, for example?

St. – Yes, it's distinct, but it's still killing.

Ex. – But we could specify that we use the term 'murder' to refer only to unjustified killing?

St. – You could specify that, but it's a bit *ad hoc*.

Ex. – Fair enough. Return to rape then. We would agree that there are no circumstances under which it is permissible to rape?

St. – No, none whatsoever.

Ex. – So the truth of the belief that you ought not rape is not contingent?

St. – No, not contingent on circumstances. But it does depend on your society's moral norms. Other societies haven't had any great moral prohibition on rape. The Vikings, for example, or some cultures where it is conceptually impossible for a man to rape his wife.

Ex. – Do you think, under those circumstances, it would be permissible to rape?

St. – I don't think that, obviously! But if I were in those societies I might think differently.

Ex. – Do you think a person's moral beliefs are determined by their society?

St. – Yes, in part at least. That seems obvious.

Ex. – And a person's moral beliefs significantly determine that person's character, in a sense making them who they are?

St. – Yes, I would say so.

Ex. – So do you think you would be 'you', in those different societies?

St. – I'm not sure what you're getting at! Do you mean the problem of personal identity?

Ex. – Put it this way: can you imagine any circumstances under which you would consider it permissible for you to commit a rape?

St. – No, absolutely not.

Ex. – But you can imagine yourself thinking differently?

St. – Yes, if I were brought up in a different society.

Ex. – And would you think that you were the same person, if you thought so differently?

St. – No, I suppose I'd say I would be a different person; the person or version of me that grew up in that society. I'd have been exposed to a different set of moral norms. I'd think differently about things. I'd judge things differently.

Ex. – Are you that person?

St. – What?

Ex. – Are you that person who thinks and judges differently?

St. – No, of course not. I am the way I am.

Ex. – So, given that you are not them, you don't think you can be held accountable for that other person's moral beliefs?

St. – No, they're not my moral beliefs.

Ex. – Would you follow that other person's advice?

St. – That person doesn't really exist, you know.

Ex. – Of course. But you wouldn't do what that person would think to be right? You wouldn't rape because that person thought it would be ok?

St. – No, of course not, because they have a different set of beliefs. I must follow my beliefs.

Ex. – And you believe there are no circumstances under which it is permissible to rape?

St. – No, none.

Ex. – Would you consent to calling that a moral necessity?

St. – I'm not sure, because it's not necessarily true. It would be false in other societies.

Ex. – And it might be false if you were a different person. But you are not a different person. You are you, responsible for your own ethical life and beliefs.

St. – Yes.

Ex. – And you believe there are no circumstances under which it is permissible to rape.

St. – Yes I've agreed to that already! The point is I'm not sure what follows from it.

Ex. – Fine. Imagine you did a rape.

St. – 'Did a rape'? What sort of a phrase is that?!

Ex. – Imagine you did what you understood ought never be done. Would you feel guilty? Ashamed?

St. – Of course.

Ex. – Why?

St. – Because I'd recognise that I'd done something wrong.

Ex. – Would you look to excuse yourself?

St. – I might say sorry.

Ex. – I don't mean apologising or confessing or seeking atonement, I mean would you make excuses for yourself? Would you try to justify your behaviour? Would you say that your victim deserved it? Would you say that you were drunk or angry or led into it? Would you try to say that it wasn't really your fault?

St. – I don't know. I might.

Ex. – But you agreed that there were no circumstances under which it would be permissible to commit a rape?

St. – Yes, what I'd have done would still be wrong. But perhaps there were mitigating circumstances.

Ex. – Such as being drunk?

St. – No, that wouldn't count.

Ex. – What then?

St. – I don't know. Perhaps I misunderstood something about the context.

Ex. – Such as?

St. – Look, I don't really want to go down this road. I don't want to justify or excuse that kind of thing. I just think I might try to explain myself.

Ex. – Explaining your behaviour is different from excusing it. I can say that a murderer committed a murder because they were angry about an adulterous affair, but that doesn't excuse the murder.

St. – Sure.

Ex. – And I might say that we went to war primarily to gain access to resources, but that explanation wouldn't make the war justified.

St. – Of course.

Ex. – So any explanation of your behaviour wouldn't necessarily serve to excuse that behaviour in any way?

St. – No, of course not. Not necessarily.

Ex. – And this is because there are no circumstances under which it is permissible to rape?

St. – That's right. Because there are no circumstances where it would be ok, no circumstances can make it ok. There are no excuses, only explanations.

Ex. – And, because it would not be an excuse, an explanation would not expiate your guilt?

St. – No, I would still be guilty. There are no excuses for such a thing.

Ex. – But this is different from lying to your friends, where there might be many different perfectly acceptable reasons for doing as you did?

St. – Yes, sometimes I think it's permissible to lie to your friends.

Ex. – And sometimes impermissible?

St. – Yes, sometimes.

Ex. – But never permissible to rape?

St. – No, never.

Ex. – You might distinguish between justified instances of lying to your friends, and unjustified instances?

St. – Yes, it would depend on the reasons for lying to them.

Ex. – But it would be tautologous to talk about an unjustified rape?

St. – Yes, I suppose so. It's redundant to say 'unjustified' because there can't be a justified rape. Rape is rape.

Ex. – So for one we say 'sometimes' and the other we say 'never'. One we say 'can be, or can not be' and the other we say 'can never be'. One we say isn't tautologous and the other we say is. One we call 'possible' and the other 'impossible'. Do you think it's reasonable to draw this distinction in terms of contingency and necessity? Some moral beliefs are 'true' but could be false, so are true contingently; other moral beliefs are 'true' and cannot be false, so are true necessarily. Some things are morally possible, such as lying to your friends, and others are morally impossible, such as raping them. Would you say that you can recognise a difference between the moral possibility of lying to your friends and the moral impossibility of raping them?

St. – Yes, of course I can! But this just sounds like Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties.

Ex. – That's fine. We can call them categorical if you like. Some moral beliefs are true categorically, *a priori*, as it were true by definition of the meaning of the terms and admitting no exception; others are true in a way that allows exceptions to the rule, or else are true contingently, depending on various things.

St. – But I don't agree with Kant's arguments for the Categorical Imperative.

Ex. – I know you don't, so we probably shouldn't cross any wires by using terms like categorical. Can we stick with necessity and contingency?

St. – But I don't think that these beliefs are necessarily true.

Ex. – Fine. Can we say that some moral beliefs identify a moral possibility and others identify a moral impossibility? That some things that you sometimes judge to be wrong remain within the realms of moral possibility, but others are always morally impossible? Some things are wrong but could be right, and some things are wrong and can never be right? Some things you can do, morally, but other things you find you cannot do? Some things you can't sign off on? You can't bring yourself to say that they're ok? Not without feeling some guilt or shame.

St. – You mean like Bernard Williams' moral incapacity?

Ex. – If you like. You're not ashamed to be someone who excuses some instances of lying, but you'd be ashamed to be someone who tries to excuse some instances of rape, for example?

St. – Yes, ok, I see.

Ex. – And imagine if you were an advisor to a politician or something like that. You can imagine that you might occasionally advise that this politician lie or not tell the whole truth in order to get themselves out of an embarrassing situation?

St. – It's not ideally virtuous, but yes, reputation management is very important in politics.

Ex. – And can you imagine advising a politician to have a journalist murdered, to prevent the embarrassing story from being published to the world?

St. – No, that's different.

Ex. – Can you imagine the politician's reaction to either case?

St. – I imagine the politician would be quite practised at lying to journalists but I'd hope they'd still be taken aback by the prospect of murdering them, at least in this country.

Ex. – We can hope. But anyway, you see the distinction I'm making, between the kind of moral wrong that remains within the realm of moral possibility and the kind of moral wrong that is beyond the realm of moral possibility? Both lying to journalists and killing them is wrong, as such, but the wrongness of the former is more contingent on circumstances than the latter. We can easily imagine circumstances where it might be right to lie to journalists; it's considerably more terrifying to imagine circumstances under which it might be right to have them killed. I would say that this captures a moral limit, expressing a difference between what is morally thinkable and what is morally unthinkable.

St. – Ok, I think I see what you mean. What does this have to do with the problem of evil?

Ex. – I think if we focus on the concept of the morally impossible then we can show that the set of beliefs including the belief that God is good, the belief that God is powerful, and the belief that evil exists, is inconsistent.

St. – How?

Ex. – If we say that the only 'evil' that we're interested in talking about is morally impossible evil like rape, child abuse, or genocide, then there can be no sensible way to talk about God's perfect goodness as being consistent with the permission of those things. In being expressions of moral necessity, we cannot admit there being any circumstances under which the permission of those morally-impossible evils would be justified. They are, therefore, unjustifiable. If God permits them to happen, He can have no good justification for doing so. But if He permits them without good justification then He cannot be considered perfectly good because He incurs the necessary guilt of having permitted the impermissible.

St. – I don't follow. How would God be responsible for those things?

Ex. – To do the morally impossible incurs an unavoidable guilt, does it not?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – There can be no excuse or justification that gets you off the hook, only confession and atonement and forgiveness?

St. – No, there is no excusing the morally impossible. But it's not like God is doing these things.

Ex. – True. The most anyone would say is that God is letting these things be done.

St. – Yes, and not even that. We would say that God doesn't want these things to be done.

Ex. – Much as you don't want rape to be done.

St. – Yes, quite.

Ex. – Do you think it's morally possible to let rape be done?

St. – In a sense, we do allow rape to happen if we let the criminal justice system continue as it is, knowing that it doesn't work as it ought to. Many rapists get away with it.

Ex. – But that doesn't change its status as being a morally impossible thing for you to do.

St. – No, but just because it's morally impossible for me doesn't mean it doesn't happen.

Ex. – True, because, as you know, moral necessity is not alethic like some other forms of necessity. The morally impossible can and does happen. The point is only whether it can happen and be judged, by anyone of sound moral mind, to be excusable or justifiable or otherwise 'ok'. If it were within the realms of moral possibility, then someone of sound moral mind could find some circumstances under which it would be permissible to rape, for example. But because you would judge that there are no such circumstances, you would say that rape can never be justified or excused, and so you would say that it is morally impossible.

St. – Yes yes, I've agreed with that.

Ex. – And do you think there are any circumstances where it's permissible to let a rape happen?

St. – If I had the ability to stop it, do you mean?

Ex. – Yes, if you could stop it.

St. – Then no, I think you should prevent rape if you can. Of course you should.

Ex. – Under any circumstances?

St. – Yes, under any circumstances.

Ex. – So if you were to allow a rape to happen, you would have done the morally impossible?

St. – Well, I'm not sure it's as bad as actually committing the act yourself, but yes I don't think I could just stand by and let it happen.

Ex. – You'd feel guilty if you did?

St. – Yes. Not as guilty as if I'd done it myself, but somewhat guilty.

Ex. – Let's imagine it. Imagine you witnessed one friend lying to another.

St. – Yes, ok, just lying?

Ex. – Yes, just lying. And then you tell this story to other friends the next day.

St. – Sure.

Ex. – Would you feel particularly ashamed of yourself?

St. – About telling the story?

Ex. – About standing by and letting your friend be lied to.

St. – I'm not sure. Maybe. Probably not, to be honest. I think I've had that happen to me a few times. It didn't really occur to me to feel guilty about what they've done. It's them that's lying, after all, not me. What would I have to be ashamed of?

Ex. – Fair enough. Now contrast that with a different example: imagine you witnessed one friend raping another. And then you are telling that story the next day. Could you tell that story without shame?

St. – I just stood by and let my friend be raped?

Ex. – Yes, you witnessed it and did nothing, and now you are telling your other friends about how you stood by and let your friend be raped. Are you ashamed?

St. – Yes, definitely.

Ex. – You feel guilty?

St. – Guilty that I did nothing, yes.

Ex. – Though you didn't do it yourself, you let the morally impossible happen?

St. – Yes, I don't think I could just stand by and let that happen. If it happened without me knowing then there wouldn't be much I could do about it. But if I were witnessing it, surely I'd have to do something.

Ex. – Would you try to make excuses for your behaviour? Would you say that you were drunk or tired or led into it?

St. – Well, I suppose I wouldn't accept that. Again, that's a sort of explanation of why I behaved as I did, but it's not really any kind of excuse. I'd still feel guilty.

Ex. – And so the difference between 'doing' and 'letting be done' doesn't make much difference when it comes to the morally impossible?

St. – It makes some difference. I'm not as guilty if I let something be done as I would be if I were to actually do the thing.

Ex. – Not as guilty, but still guilty?

St. – Yes still guilty. Less guilty, but guilty.

Ex. – Fine. So permitting the morally impossible incurs some guilt?

St. – Some guilt, yes.

Ex. – And this guilt can't be explained away?

St. – No, it's the same as other morally impossible things.

Ex. – Do you think that God is guilty, then?

St. – No! God can't feel guilty. God is morally perfect and so can't sin. And many philosophers would say that God is impassible and can't feel at all.

Ex. – Ok. Imagine the story we just told about you standing by and letting one friend rape another, only this time you have no moral sensibility. You tell this story the next day and feel no shame because you have no moral conscience. Would that lack of guilt make you a good person?

St. – No of course not. It would make me worse!

Ex. – As you say, you'd be a worse person for doing wrong and not feeling any guilt or shame. So whether or not God feels ashamed or acknowledges any guilt is beside the point?

St. – I'm not sure what you're driving at. God is morally perfect and so can't do anything wrong.

Ex. – That goes without saying. But God does let the morally impossible happen?

St. – Well, I'm not sure I'd say He lets it happen.

Ex. – The morally impossible happens, sometimes?

St. – Yes, I'd say.

Ex. – And God witnesses it?

St. – Presumably. God is omniscient.

Ex. – And God does nothing to stop it happening?

St. – We don't know that God does nothing. He might be working through people, in their hearts, to try to stop these things from happening.

Ex. – But whatever God might be doing, it's not enough to stop the morally impossible from happening? Because it does happen.

St. – Yes, it does happen.

Ex. – So God witnesses the morally impossible happening and does not stop it? He does not intervene?

St. – No, He doesn't intervene. But He might have good reason not to intervene.

Ex. – Such as?

St. – You'd have to look to theodicy there. The soul-making theodicy would say that God has an end in mind for us and that we need to go through a soul-making process in order to achieve that aim. We need to live in a hostile and challenging environment in order for us to develop virtues. But He needs to keep at an epistemic distance from us in order to allow us to form our characters without His interference. If He were intervening all the time to help us then we'd never develop as souls and wouldn't achieve the moral and spiritual perfection that is His aim for us.

Ex. – Do you think that rape is character building?

St. – What? No of course not!

Ex. – And do you think that child abuse is good for a child?

St. – No, of course not.

Ex. – You wouldn't let someone abuse their child, even if they said that the abuse was for the good of the child?

St. – No, but no one could argue that child abuse is good for children.

Ex. – And if someone were to try to argue that, that child abuse was good for children, you'd say they reveal themselves to be someone who doesn't understand something important about morality? They'd show themselves to be someone who has nothing to say to you?

St. – Yes, they'd be no good parent. But I see where you're going here and God is not abusing His children!

Ex. – He's just standing by and letting them be abused? Some of them, at least.

St. – But that's not really how it works. The free-will theodicy would say that God is not responsible for these evils because they are the product of our freely-chosen actions. Giving His creatures free will is extremely important, but if God gives His creatures free will then there's nothing even He can do about what they do with that free will. The only way God could stop these things from happening would be to take away our free will and that would be worse for us. It's up to us to stop these terrible things from happening.

Ex. – And we do all we can to stop them from happening?

St. – Yes, most of us. I think we're getting better as a society and as a human race. We're showing progress.

Ex. – We do all we can. Does God do all He can?

St. – He does all He can without violating our free will.

Ex. – The free will of rapists and child abusers?

St. – Not that old mistake! It's not about not interfering with our free will, it's about our free will acting as a logical limit on God's omnipotence. It's quite technical, but God cannot create actual worlds where the actuality of those worlds depends on our free choices from amongst a range of possible worlds. Because we have free will, we decide which possible worlds become actual, and once we do that then God can't do anything about it. If someone chooses to have toast for breakfast rather than cereal, their free choice makes the 'toast' world actual and the 'cereal' world a possible way the world could have been; but God can't make that counterfactual 'cereal' world actual because God can't make them have cereal because that's their decision to make. So it's not in God's power to decide what we have for breakfast and it's also not in His power to decide what the child abuser does.

Ex. – And so He stands by and watches the morally impossible happen?

St. – Yes, in effect, if you must put it that way.

Ex. – And feels no guilt?

St. – No, God can't feel guilt. He's done nothing wrong.

Ex. – God is wholly good?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – And feels no guilt about standing by and letting the morally impossible happen?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – Do you think there's a contradiction there?

St. – But God can't feel guilt.

Ex. – Like someone without a moral conscience?

St. – No, like someone who can't do any wrong. God can't feel guilt because He can't do anything wrong. He can't incur guilt.

Ex. – But permitting the morally impossible necessarily incurs guilt, doesn't it? Isn't that what we agreed?

St. – But it's different for God. God's in a very different relation to these events than we are. The same kinds of rules can't apply. Many philosophers would say that God is timeless and eternal, for example, and it's difficult to understand what moral actions look like from the perspective of eternity.

Ex. – You would say that God is good?

St. – Yes, and not just good but wholly or perfectly good.

Ex. – What do you mean by that?

St. – Well, only that God is the perfection of goodness, the highest goodness that there can be; that God's goodness is an expression of God's nature, and God's nature is perfect and so His goodness must be perfect. God cannot sin, but this isn't a limit on God's power because it is logically impossible for a perfectly good being to be anything less than perfect, and sin would be an imperfection, so to say that God can sin would be like saying a triangle can have four sides. God is necessarily, perfectly, completely good.

Ex. – Morally good?

St. – Yes morally good.

Ex. – Not just good like a good hammer, that is good as bashing nails, or good like a good meal that is good for you?

St. – No, God is morally good.

Ex. – You'd assign God a moral status, then?

St. – What do you mean?

Ex. – I mean you wouldn't say that God is like a stone or a car or a picture or something, that we might describe as 'good' but only mean that its useful or well-functioning or that we like it in some way?

St. – No, God's goodness is more than that.

Ex. – And you wouldn't say that God is an evil God?

St. – No, definitely not! You don't understand. As I said, God is that thing greater than which

cannot be conceived, and goodness is a great-making property, and so God must have that property to its highest degree.

Ex. – Moral goodness?

St. – Yes moral goodness!

Ex. – Ok. So God has a moral status, and that status is positive?

St. – That's an odd way of putting it, but yes.

Ex. – And not a negative moral status?

St. – No, not a negative moral status!

Ex. – So it's not like saying a cloud is angry? Which would be to assign a positive emotional status to a cloud: that cloud has or is that certain emotion. But given that clouds do not feel emotions, it's senseless to assign them an emotional status. So we know it's nonsense to say that a cloud is angry, in any real sense.

St. – No that would be meaningless. There are no conditions under which the statement 'the cloud is angry' could be true or false, and so it is a meaningless statement.

Ex. – And so it would be equally meaningless, in a sense, to say that the cloud is not angry?

St. – Yes, but that would be closer to the truth than saying that the cloud has that emotion.

Ex. – Because if it is meaningless to say that a cloud is angry, then it isn't angry?

St. – Yes, certainly.

Ex. – But really we're saying that the cloud isn't the kind of thing that can have an emotional status?

St. – Yes, that's right. It's a category error.

Ex. – But saying the cloud could be angry, but isn't, would be to say a different thing?

St. – Yes! But why are you talking about clouds?!

Ex. – Just to show that to assign some thing a positive status is to include that thing in the conceptual space of that status. To say it is a certain way is to say that it can be that way. To assign something a status is to say that it makes sense to assign that thing that status. Doesn't that seem obvious and unavoidable?

St. – Yes, obvious.

Ex. – So to say that a cloud is angry is to include the cloud in the conceptual space of 'things that get angry'. In order to say a cloud is or isn't angry you'd have to say it makes sense to call

clouds angry. And that, we agree, is a mistake.

St. – Yes, it's a category mistake.

Ex. – And to say, meaningfully, that the cloud is not angry would be to repeat the same mistake?

St. – Yes, it's more accurate to say that clouds are not the kind of thing that can be angry.

Ex. – And you say that God is good?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – Morally good?

St. – Yes!

Ex. – And God is not evil?

St. – No!

Ex. – So you assign God a moral status? A positive moral status?

St. – Yes, I do. God is positively perfectly morally good. That is why He cannot do anything wrong or be guilty.

Ex. – Would you say that morally good people have a capacity to respond to moral reasons? That if a good person recognises something as being morally good, then this recognition gives them a reason to do or promote or favour that thing?

St. – Yes, of course. I am a motivational judgement internalist; I think that to recognise something as a moral reason is in itself to be motivated by that reason. Moral reasons have a 'to be doneness' in them. The reason to do something is internal to the recognition of that something as being a good thing to do.

Ex. – And morally bad people have the same capacity?

St. – Not the same capacity.

Ex. – They cannot respond to moral reasons?

St. – No, they can, they just choose not to.

Ex. – So they have a capacity to respond to moral reasons, but are for whatever reason not disposed to govern their behaviour by those reasons? They don't think the reasons are compelling?

St. – Yes, bad people tend to favour other reasons over moral reasons. They might prioritise self-interest.

Ex. – No doubt a kind of ignorance, but let's put that aside. How would we describe something that did not have a capacity to respond to moral reasons?

St. – How do you mean?

Ex. – For example if something cannot recognise anything as morally good or bad; can they be motivated by moral reasons?

St. – No, the motivation is internal to the judgement. So if they can't judge something to be good, they can't be motivated by it. They can't see the reason in the first place.

Ex. – And how would you describe such a thing?

St. – I'd call it amoral, I suppose. Neither morally good nor morally bad.

Ex. – Like a cloud being neither angry nor not angry?

St. – Is it like that? I'm not sure it's that clear cut.

Ex. – Would you describe your car as being morally good, for example?

St. – No, I wouldn't. Obviously.

Ex. – But you might describe it as a good car?

St. – Yes, it's good for other reasons. But it's not a moral agent. It has no subjective consciousness.

Ex. – It can't respond to moral reasons?

St. – No, it can't recognise moral reasons.

Ex. – So it would be equally meaningless to call it a morally bad car, if it didn't start on the day that you needed to make a journey?

St. – Yes, of course.

Ex. – Your car lacks a moral status.

St. – Yes, it lacks a moral status. Though I still think that's an odd way to put it.

Ex. – And would you call your dog a good dog?

St. – Yes, for the most part. He has his moments.

Ex. – But not morally good?

St. – No, not in the full sense that you mean. My dog is not a moral agent, at least not in the

same way I am. I have a capacity to reason and therefore can think and decide on a course of action, and this means I have moral accountability.

Ex. – But, whatever reasons your dog responds to, you'd hesitate to call them moral reasons?

St. – No, they're not moral reasons. I suspect he learns by conditioning and has some innate predispositions that have come about through evolution and selective breeding.

Ex. – And neither count as reasons to assign a moral status?

St. – Not in the way that you're using that phrase, no. I don't think so, anyway.

Ex. – It's ambiguous?

St. – A little. I know philosophers debate these things. It's not really my field of expertise. Obviously my dog has a moral status in the way that philosophers usually use that phrase, meaning I have moral obligations to my dog. But that's different from saying that my dog has a moral capacity, like I do, which is what you mean I think.

Ex. – Ok. But God's moral capacity is not ambiguous?

St. – Not as ambiguous as my dog's, but it's still not totally clear.

Ex. – I thought you said that God was positively perfectly morally good?

St. – Yes, but you know what I mean. There are ontological arguments that show that God, if He exists, must exist and must have all the perfections. And goodness is a perfection and so God must have it.

Ex. – Moral perfection?

St. – Yes moral perfection! You keep saying the same things! What are you driving at? It's like we're going round in circles!

Ex. – I'm sorry, I know I'm being awkward. Maybe we can take a break and digress for a bit. Why do you think we're talking about this, after all? What's the point in this conversation?

St. – I thought you said that you had a logical version of the problem of evil?

Ex. – Yes, I said that. But why would I say that?

St. – You wanted to know what I thought about it. So far you haven't given me a chance to tell you! You need to make the argument clear enough for it to be seen for what it is. Only then can I point out the flaws in it.

Ex. – And that's your role, as you see it? To point out the flaws in my argument?

St. – Well, yes, in a way. I meant to say that only then can I point out the flaws in it, if there are any flaws. That's how we get to the truth. We give our arguments in the strongest possible

way and then see if they stand up to critical scrutiny. But you need to give me your argument if I'm to be able to scrutinise it.

Ex. – Why would I give you my argument?

St. – I don't understand.

Ex. – Why would I give you my argument? For what reason?

St. – I don't know. You want to persuade me of the truth of the point that you want to make?

Ex. – Do I have a point that I want to make?

St. – I don't know! You haven't told me!

Ex. – What is the point that I'm trying to make, do you think?

St. – You said that you had a successful version of the logical problem of evil. So the point you're trying to make is that theism is irrational. The existence of evil is necessarily incompatible with the existence of God, and therefore, since evil definitely exists, God cannot exist. And so atheism is true and theism is false. But I've told you that line of reasoning will never work because we have to use probabilistic reasoning about these matters.

Ex. – I thought we'd started by agreeing that the logical problem of evil was about clarifying and if possible reconciling beliefs about God and the evils of the world? That it's a matter of consistency of belief, not necessarily of proving a point.

St. – Yes, that's right.

Ex. – And I said that the beliefs that I was interested in were moral beliefs.

St. – Yes, you seem to be trying to construct an argument out of moral necessity, which is a weak concept to begin with.

Ex. – But you agreed that there was such a difference between the morally possible and the morally impossible?

St. – Yes, I did. And we can call that necessity and contingency if you like, but I can't see how it can help you make your point.

Ex. – My point. And what is my point? Why am I sitting here philosophising with you about the problem of evil?

St. – I don't know! You asked me how my work was going and I told you, and then you said you thought Mackie was onto something and that you thought you had a successful version of the logical problem of evil, one that defeated Plantinga's critique.

Ex. – But I also said that the problem of evil wasn't always about settling the rationality of theistic belief.

St. – Yes, you did. But I wish you'd say what you're getting at rather than dancing around the point. Enough with the questions! Say what you think! Like I say, I can only tell you what I think about what you think once I've been told what you think!

Ex. – Ok, ok. Let me tell you what I think. I think there's something odd about discussing the weightiest matters for trivial ends. I think it's odd that a capable and thoughtful student such as yourself can think only of qualifications and publications and of a vague hope of moving the debate forwards. If I'm being honest, I think philosophers have lost sight of their true purpose, their 'that for the sake of which' they philosophise, especially about the problem of evil. Once upon a time, the purpose of philosophizing about the problem was to correct our attitude to the world, one way or another. Whether to alleviate our anxieties about pleasing the gods, or to remind us of our faulty opinions, or to reassure us about the ultimate underlying goodness of the physical world, we wanted to reconcile our beliefs about God and evil in order to orient ourselves rightly in the world. Like all philosophy, the true purpose of philosophising about the problem of evil was to improve the health of our souls; it was done to help us understand what it is to live well as a human being and to equip us with some resources to make an attempt at doing so. This seems to me to have been a noble aim and worthy purpose, but can we say the same now? How could offering excuses for the permission of the terrible evils of the world help you to orient yourself rightly in this world? What purpose would nit-picking about the improbability of God's existence serve? There might be answers to these rhetorical questions, but if we don't know why we are philosophizing about the problem of evil, how can we possibly know whether or when we have achieved what we set out to do?

At some point the problem of evil stopped being something that was meant to help us live well as human beings. It became a matter of weighing up the rationality of theism. From there the story continued into the free-will defence and soul-making theodicy, and sceptical theism, and patient-centred conditions, and horrendous evils, and cumulative case arguments, and inferences to the best explanation, and justifications for genocide, and now the terms of the debate have been completely established. Our position is entrenched. The debate is about whether or not there is good reason to believe the evils of this world are justified by a morally-sufficient reason. Those are the terms of the debate – those are our trenches – and all we can seem to do is work with what we have or slowly dig ourselves in deeper. Do you think we should keep digging? Why? For what purpose? What are you hoping will happen? I question whether we might have lost sight of our purpose, our 'that for the sake of which' we are philosophising about the problem of evil. It seems to me that most philosophical discussion of the problem of evil, and most philosophy of religion, and most contemporary philosophy, is characterised by an eagerness to further fortify ourselves against the opposing position, or else find new positions along the line to fortify. It is hard, dirty work. And all the while we are living in trenches. It is not a healthy place to be.

Trench warfare is a grim simile for philosophy. Perhaps you think it's hyperbolic. Perhaps you'd prefer to see it as a tennis match that has been stuck at deuce for two-thousand years. Any simile will work so long as it captures the sense that there are some clearly-defined historically-established positions endlessly opposing one another with little evidence of progress. The tennis match simile captures this and perhaps also a sense of the futility of the game, but perhaps you can still enjoy hitting a good shot once in a while? Tennis is a leisure activity, after all; there's no absolute duty not to play tennis badly or even to play tennis at all. But the questions of philosophy have always seemed to me to be more important than this. As ancient philosophers would say, this is the Olympic games! This is a matter of life and death! And not just a matter of life and death but of something more important: of living and dying *well*. It's not just a casual game of tennis. To see it as such allows you to trivialise the task in a way that radically undersells what we do, or at

least what we ought to be doing. And I would add another feature in any simile, which is that the longer you play the game in this way, or remain entrenched, the harder it is to see the purpose of this practice, to the point that it's not clear what progress would look like. Progress towards what? Winning the game? Is it a game? Ending the war? Is it a war? What is expected here? Is it just a matter of returning your opponent's serve? How petty this is! What do I care about metaphorical tennis?! Can I seriously dedicate my life to such a thing?

When you are in a trench, it is difficult to see out; it is difficult to see that there might be another way. You are not inclined to look for another way because sticking your head above the parapet is a risky business. And so you keep your head down and keep digging. You look left and right and see other people digging, and they congratulate you on your work, even awarding you occasional medals for your service. It provides you with a living. You're not sure why you are doing what you do but you feel like you have no choice but to keep on digging. Your position depends upon it. We dedicate our lives to these matters. Shouldn't we be clear about their value? We, of all people. Don't we call ourselves philosophers?

St. – But that, forgive me, but I think that's hopelessly naive. That's just not how the system works nowadays. Philosophy is a profession. It's funded mainly by students paying to do degree programmes, and you know the rest. You need to prove yourself qualified to teach those courses, and that requires the peer-review process and all the rest. Yes, in a sense publications are just a means to an end, but the end is that the subject is kept alive in universities for future generations of students.

Ex. – What is kept alive?

St. – Philosophy. It's a competitive market out there, and the sciences and more vocational subjects are always challenging our place in universities.

Ex. – I think philosophy is dying.

St. – Now you're being melodramatic!

Ex. – I know, but never mind. All I mean to suggest is that we might be losing something important. I think we've already lost it, to be honest, and we're only now realising it, but too late. It would be very difficult to reverse the momentum that has built up, almost impossible. Can you imagine selling a philosophical education on the basis of it improving the health of your soul? You do the open days; what do you sell the degree on?

St. – We say that philosophy teaches you to think well and clearly, and to be an adaptable and creative thinker, and it teaches you to be good at constructing and criticising arguments, and ultimately the statistics show that it tends to give higher earnings potential over a lifetime than other arts and humanities subjects. And also it's interesting and students really enjoy thinking about philosophical questions, especially nowadays. But we tend to have an eye on what the parents would like to hear, as much as the students, so we tend to focus on the career potential. We stress that it doesn't close any doors and leaves your options open, so it's a good choice if you're someone who doesn't know what they want to do. But that you should have a good chance of making something of your degree, especially if you supplement it with some more vocational work experience. We try to show how it's respectable to parents who might want their children to study something more science based.

Ex. – As I say, there's a weight of momentum.

St. – But don't you think we counter that momentum towards the sciences by keeping up the quality of philosophical work? The more good publications we can get out there and the more we can move these debates forward, the stronger the subject will be.

Ex. – Is it stronger? I don't see it. I see something becoming only more trivial and pedantic.

St. – I think your experience has made you too pessimistic.

Ex. – Maybe. But I mean, is philosophy asking the right questions?

St. – How do you mean? Most of the questions of philosophy are as old as philosophy itself.

Ex. – No, I suppose I mean is philosophy asking the right questions in the right way?

St. – Do you mean is its methodology correct?

Ex. – Not even that, to be honest. I'm reaching for what defines the discipline, what its true essence is, and whether that true essence of philosophy is best exemplified in the way it is at the moment. Let me put it this way: what is characteristic of the daily activity of philosophical work? Research work, I mean, not necessarily teaching, though that no doubt inherits most of what is characteristic of philosophical research.

St. – Characteristic of daily activity? You mean what do we do with our time?

Ex. – Sort of. I mean consider what we began by talking about. You mentioned PhDs and publications, the peer-review system, getting jobs and all that, but then we moved on to discussing an argument in the philosophy of religion.

St. – You still haven't told me your argument, by the way.

Ex. – I think I am, but never mind that. What we were talking about just then, would we say that is characteristic of philosophy?

St. – Oh I see, yes I would say so. I mean, you have a way of posing everything as a question, when you take to playing at being Socrates, but the basic back-and-forth of someone putting forward a thesis and someone else countering it with an antithesis, with the critical interaction bringing about some kind of new synthesis, that is the basic process of philosophical dialectic.

Ex. – And this is what we're doing, when we write and publish our publications?

St. – Yes, exactly. And the peer-review process makes sure nothing misleading creeps into the discussion. Or it tries to, at least.

Ex. – So the task at hand is to create a thesis that can stand up to critical scrutiny? Or else critically scrutinise someone else's thesis?

St. – Yes, in short.

Ex. – And this process can proceed without any deeper purpose?

St. – Yes, I suppose it can. I imagine most philosophers are invested in their work.

Ex. – But they don't have to be?

St. – No, they don't have to be.

Ex. – They don't have to be able to account for the purpose of what they do? They can just do it?

St. – Yes, I suppose. The purpose for the dialectic is not a necessary part of the dialectic, if you want to put it that way.

Ex. – That's a nice way of putting it, I like it. I think you've hit upon what I meant to say.

St. – You think the purpose of philosophy should be a necessary part of what it does, essentially?

Ex. – Yes, exactly that. That's exactly what I mean.

St. – Doesn't it do that already?

Ex. – That's what I don't see. All I see is a bunch of people trying to show themselves to be cleverer than the one across the way from them.

St. – Come on, that's not fair!

Ex. – How many articles have you read where the main point of the argument is that, whilst a certain position is already understood to fail in many ways, here's one more way in which it's failed that people haven't spotted yet?

St. – Yes, ok, but...

Ex. – And how many times have you seen a philosopher argue for something that they do not and probably cannot really believe?

St. – Yes, but that's just what I mean about moving the debate forwards. Like in science, negative results are as useful as positive results.

Ex. – And how often have you, in conferences and the like, got philosophers to talk as ordinary people, stripped of all their technical jargon, often after a drink or two, and when you ask them about the big picture version of their point you find that it's really quite a basic and unremarkable prejudice?

St. – But, again, that's not how it works. Or rather, that's exactly how the system works. We need to specialise into these technical disciplines in order to understand them better.

Ex. – I had an unfair game that I liked to play, back in my more combative days, where I would ask philosophers the question: ‘What difference would it make if you were right?’ Mostly I was disappointed with the answers, which tended towards self-justifying and faux-humble appeals to not knowing what might come of these debates, one day. Whatever the answers were, it was clear to me that more often than not they hadn’t even thought about it. They were just following in the lines of reasoning, finding one more way to show themselves cleverer than whoever else was in that debate, trying to avoid looking stupid.

St. – It’s not about being clever or stupid.

Ex. – Showing or seeming that you’re clever or stupid.

St. – Yes, right, it’s not about showing whether you’re clever or stupid. It’s just how philosophy works!

Ex. – And there’s me thinking philosophy was meant to teach us how to live well as human beings and equip us to do so.

St. – No no, that’s just a subset of the discipline. Some philosophers used to think that but it’s not the consensus. Those ideas have been absorbed into sub-disciplines within the subject as a whole, like the branches of ethics: applied, normative, and metaethics.

Ex. – And studying those branches would teach me how to live well as a human being?

St. – I think you’re asking too much. What you’re asking for is more in the domain of psychology.

Ex. – Is it? Am I mentally ill?

St. – No, of course not. That’s not what I mean.

Ex. – What do you mean, then?

St. – I mean that questions about human wellbeing are normally answered by psychologists nowadays. It’s not the business of philosophy.

Ex. – And what is the business of philosophy?

St. – Philosophers want to understand things.

Ex. – But not to understand ourselves? That we leave to the psychologists.

St. – No no, you’re being facetious, that’s not it.

Ex. – Isn’t it? Consider what you do, for example. Why do you talk about the problem of evil?

St. – Well, ultimately, I suppose, we’re trying to understand God and the rationality of belief in God. That’s what I mean when I say that philosophers are trying to understand things.

Ex. – And you try to understand God before you try to understand yourself?

St. – That's not what I mean.

Ex. – Isn't it? You argue about the problem of evil, to what end? To speak for or against the rationality of theism?

St. – Yes, in the end.

Ex. – But not to understand your own moral beliefs?

St. – That's a different question.

Ex. – Is it?

St. – Yes, I think so.

Ex. – And you hope to understand whether or not it's rational for you to believe in God, in light of the evil of the world, without first understanding your own moral perspective?

St. – I think those two tasks are separate.

Ex. – And the task of settling the rationality of theistic belief is more important for you than the task of understanding your own moral perspective?

St. – It could be. If morality depends on the existence of God then the truth of all moral beliefs would depend on whether or not God exists.

Ex. – Do you think that morality depends on the existence of God?

St. – No, I don't, but I mean if it were to then knowing whether or not God exists would be really important. Definitively important, for morality.

Ex. – But you don't think morality depends on God?

St. – No.

Ex. – And you don't think God's existence can be settled either way by the problem of evil?

St. – No, there's nothing completely compelling.

Ex. – And you think that reflecting on your own moral beliefs can expose inconsistencies and irrationalities?

St. – Yes, I do, with logic.

Ex. – And you think this is a good and important thing to do?

St. – Yes, of course.

Ex. – It helps you to get true beliefs about what really matters?

St. – Yes, I suppose, it helps you on that way, if it's possible.

Ex. – And is there anything more important to a philosopher than having true beliefs about what really matters?

St. – Not in ideal terms. It's hard to argue against that.

Ex. – And yet you choose to focus on a task, speaking for or against the rationality of theistic belief, that you don't believe in, and you don't think can be done, and you don't think has anything important to say about your moral beliefs?

St. – But that's... I work in the philosophy of religion. That's the point about philosophy being a profession. Questions of value are in a different sub-discipline. To ask those questions requires that you do metaethics or some form of ethics. That's not what I'm working on. That's someone else's business. I work in the philosophy of religion, so I address the questions of that sub-discipline.

Ex. – And you leave the pursuit of having true beliefs about what really matters to others?

St. – That's a bit unfair.

Ex. – Can't you do both?

St. – Of course, but that's not going to help me with my PhD.

Ex. – It's hard to argue with that. Ok, shall we return to the argument about the problem of evil?

St. – What argument?! You've still not told me your argument!

Ex. – I think I have, but I think it's possible you haven't heard it. I'll repeat it and make it as clear as I can, though stop me if I'm being condescending or if I say anything that you object to: I think that the problem of evil is a matter of having a consistent set of beliefs about God and the evils of the world. I think if we focus our attention on specifically moral beliefs then we can expose an inconsistency in the so-called 'inconsistent triad' of God's goodness, God's power, and the existence of evil. If we accept our recognition of the morally impossible, then the morally impossible cannot be permitted without incurring some guilt. God lets the morally impossible happen and so must incur some guilt for doing so. And yet, as you'd say, God is perfectly good and so cannot be guilty at all. This is an inconsistent set of beliefs. The inconsistency isn't a matter of metaphysical or logical necessity, but moral necessity. It is morally impossible to believe in a good and powerful God in a world with evil and suffering as we know it.

St. – But I'm not sure God's moral goodness works in the same way as our moral goodness.

Ex. – And are we interested in how God's morality works, or are we interested in the consistency of our belief?

St. – Aren't they the same thing? How are they different?

Ex. – Do you think you can understand how God's morality works?

St. – No, I don't, of course it's beyond me.

Ex. – Do you think you can understand your own consistency of belief?

St. – Yes yes, but that's not the point.

Ex. – Isn't it? I say that the only good reason to philosophise about the problem of evil is to get a clearer picture of your own moral world. You subject your life to examination, you put your thoughts to the test, like a good student of Socrates, and you look for inconsistencies in what you believe. I think there is an inconsistency in calling God good, positively perfectly morally good, when God permits the morally impossible. I say you clarify and resolve this inconsistency only by rejecting your belief in the morally impossible, which is in itself a morally impossible thing for you to do, or else rejecting your belief in a positively perfectly morally good and powerful God.

St. – Right, but if God's moral goodness doesn't work in the same way as ours then that inference doesn't follow. For all we know, perhaps God can permit the morally impossible and has good reason for doing so. And if He does then there wouldn't be any inconsistency in that set of beliefs. That's Plantinga's point, of course, and the point of many others.

Ex. – But doesn't that force you to change what you understand about moral necessity? The whole point of moral necessity was that it admitted no exceptions. There are no circumstances under which such a thing could be justified or excused. Now you say that there might be, for God?

St. – Yes, there might be, for God.

Ex. – So there are circumstances under which the morally impossible is possible?

St. – Yes, for God, perhaps.

Ex. – So the impossible is possible?

St. – For God! Why not?

Ex. – I just think it is a strange inconsistency. Let's go back. You mentioned truth conditions earlier. What if we worked with those terms: What are the conditions under which it would be true to say that something has a moral status – moral agency, if you like – and what are the conditions under which it would be false to say that they or it has a moral status?

St. – I don't know, it's not really my field.

Ex. – But when would you assign something a moral status and when would you not? Would you assign a moral status to a stone, for example?

St. – No, not to a stone.

Ex. – Never?

St. – No, never.

Ex. – Why not?

St. – Because a stone can't think or move. A stone can't choose. A stone can't make a moral choice. It's just an inert object with no capacity for thought or action.

Ex. – Right, and so what about something that can think and move, like a rabbit or a horse or a dog. Would you assign them a moral status?

St. – You mean a moral capacity? I'm not sure, maybe. Haven't we covered this already?

Ex. – Could you convict them of a crime?

St. – A horse or dog? No, but the law is different from morality.

Ex. – Ok. Could you ask the rabbit or the horse or the dog to apologise?

St. – No.

Ex. – Would you expect them to understand what they have done, if they have done you wrong?

St. – No, not in any real sense. Sometimes I think my dog looks guilty, like he knows what he's done, but I think it's more just that he feels my disapproval, or maybe remembers my disapproval from times he's done that kind of thing in the past.

Ex. – And would you call that moral understanding?

St. – No, not moral understanding in the full sense. Only a limited sense.

Ex. – And that limited understanding makes you feel like you can't assign him a moral capacity?

St. – Not the same as I would a human, no.

Ex. – Does God have a limited moral understanding?

St. – No, I would say not.

Ex. – So this can't be any reason to deny God a moral capacity? Given that God doesn't lack moral understanding, His lack of understanding can't be a reason to deny Him a moral capacity.

St. – Yes, I would say so. But there might be other reasons.

Ex. – So you wouldn't assign a stone a moral status because it is an inert object that cannot

think or move, and you wouldn't assign non-human animals a full moral status because they lack moral understanding. But God can think, you would say, and can act, and does not lack moral understanding?

St. – No, and as I've said I wouldn't see a problem with assigning God a 'moral status', as you say. God is morally good, and not morally evil. So unlike the cloud it makes sense to talk about God in moral terms.

Ex. – Would you assign a moral capacity to someone who is asleep or in a coma?

St. – I'm not sure what you mean! Why can't you just make your point? But if they're in a coma then they can't think or act, so they can't do anything, so how could they do anything that would incur a moral judgement?

Ex. – So it's their inactivity that exempts them from moral judgement?

St. – Yes, they don't do anything that could be right or wrong.

Ex. – And if a man chose to sit and do nothing, to be totally inactive, is he similarly exempt?

St. – No, because he could do something but chooses not to. The coma patient doesn't have the capacity for moral action.

Ex. – So it is the lack of capacity for action that exempts them from moral judgement?

St. – Yes, it's about their capacity for moral action.

Ex. – What if a man is a prisoner in chains, watching a torture, unable to do anything to prevent the torture; we'd agree that he lacks a capacity for moral action? He cannot stop the torture or join in with the torturers, so he cannot do right or wrong?

St. – Yes, if he's in chains then he can't do anything.

Ex. – And so he can do no wrong, or right?

St. – No, he can't.

Ex. – He is exempt from moral judgement?

St. – Yes, what can he do?

Ex. – What if he sits there in chains laughing at the torture, enjoying seeing a fellow prisoner suffer?

St. – Ok, I see where you're going. Yes, he still has a capacity for morally-relevant action, even if he can't actually do anything about what's going on. He can respond appropriately or inappropriately with his judgement; he can condone or condemn the torture, even if he can't stop it. This is like Epictetus isn't it? And I know you like to bring him into every conversation. That you can chain my leg but my will not even Zeus himself can chain, etc.

Ex. – Exactly. And as Epictetus would say, as you know all too well, we have been given a great gift by the gods, the powers of desire and aversion and the rational ability to manage these things. So if someone wants something bad, or isn't averse to something bad, even if they don't do anything about it, is that morally good, would you say?

St. – They haven't done anything wrong.

Ex. – No, they haven't done anything wrong. But if you were to learn about their desires or lack of aversion: say you were to discover that one of your friends really wanted to commit a violent rape, and that the only reason they didn't try to do what they wanted was because they were scared of the consequences of getting caught, would you see them in the same way? Would you think they were a good person, just because they were scared of the consequences of getting caught?

St. – No, I'd look at them differently. I'd say there was something wrong with wanting that kind of thing.

Ex. – Like the prisoner enjoying watching torture?

St. – Yes, the same. There is a lack of moral rightness in their response or desires, even if they don't act on those desires. I suppose it's better if the wannabe rapist doesn't act on their desires, but it would be better if they didn't have the desires in the first place.

Ex. – A good person wouldn't have those desires?

St. – No, exactly, a really good person wouldn't want to do evil in the first place and so wouldn't have to be persuaded by the threat of punishment.

Ex. – What if our prisoner didn't enjoy the torture, but was merely indifferent to it?

St. – Perhaps they've been numbed by the brutality of their situation.

Ex. – True true, and too true. People can easily become monsters in their misery. But even so, we'd consider this a shame? That someone loses their moral responsiveness in this way?

St. – Yes, if we think that torture is wrong then we shouldn't be indifferent to it. We couldn't be indifferent to it, unless we were numbed by our bad experiences.

Ex. – And likewise with rape? If you discover that a friend, whilst not necessarily wanting rape to happen, was genuinely indifferent to its happening; you would think they were missing something important?

St. – Yes, in terms of desire and aversion, I think you ought to be averse to rape. You ought to care that it happens and you ought to want that it doesn't happen, etc., etc.

Ex. – To be unresponsive to these morally important things is to lack something important?

St. – Yes, I would say. You ought to respond. Or rather, you ought to have some properly-

directed responsiveness.

Ex. – And this is the same as your motivational judgement internalism, do you think?

St. – Yes, I suppose it is. If they recognise the reason, or say they do, but do not show any kind of responsiveness, whether or not they act, then I would question whether they really recognised the reason in the first place. If they really recognised the moral reason then they ought to recognise the ‘to be doneness’ that comes with that, and that ought to give rise to some level of moral responsiveness. If you say that rape or torture is wrong then you ought to be aversely affected by it happening. If you were genuinely indifferent to it then I don’t think I’d believe that you really thought it was all that wrong. I’d think you were just keeping up appearances, saying what you thought people expected you to say, but not really believing it in yourself.

Ex. – Underneath the surface they have no moral understanding or responsiveness, but they can make a show of it?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – Like a psychopath?

St. – Yes, exactly, like a psychopath.

Ex. – Do you think psychopaths have a moral status? Are they good people, or bad people, or amoral and lacking any kind of moral status?

St. – If they lack a capacity for moral responsiveness, do you mean? I think it depends on what they do. Obviously if they’re a serial killer then they’re not a good person! But if they go about their lives without causing any harm, could we say that they’re bad? It’s not really their fault, after all, how they are.

Ex. – But you wouldn’t hesitate to assign them a moral status? It makes sense to talk about psychopaths being good or bad people?

St. – Yes, of course. But I see what you mean: even though they lack a capacity for moral understanding or responsiveness. I suppose I’d say they’re still a human being, even if they are a different kind of human being, and so they get a moral status just because of that.

Ex. – But their lack of capacity for moral responsiveness doesn’t exclude them from the conceptual space of moral judgement?

St. – No, if you want to put it that way.

Ex. – If anything, in fact, their lack of moral responsiveness sadly weighs against the positivity of their moral status from the outset. They face an uphill battle to be good, because they don’t have the natural dispositions towards goodness that most human beings inherit.

St. – Yes, I suppose. But that’s no excuse.

Ex. – They ought to know better?

St. – No, they can't know better.

Ex. – They ought to be better?

St. – No, they can't be better. I suppose they ought to behave well, in spite of themselves.

Ex. – We can at least ask that they do what they can to be good and not do evil?

St. – Yes, and not just do what they can but actually not do evil. That's the important bit.

Ex. – They shouldn't do the morally impossible?

St. – Now I see where you're going, but God is not a psychopath!

Ex. – No no, I know. That's not my point. My point is only that you wouldn't hesitate to assign a moral status to a psychopath, even though they might lack a capacity for moral responsiveness that we might otherwise expect of human beings. Ordinarily, a lack of moral responsiveness would in itself be morally culpable, like a prisoner taking pleasure from watching torture, or someone being indifferent to rape. But even when that capacity for moral responsiveness is not there, we'd still be happy assign a moral status to something that we include in the conceptual space of moral agency.

St. – What do you think defines a moral agent?

Ex. – I don't know, to be honest. I think I know it when I see it. I think I'm more concerned with coming to understand myself and how to live as well as I can. But in that, I certainly recognise myself as a 'moral agent', as you would say. That's not something I can discard; it's forced on me; it's a practical necessity. I recognise that I think and choose, and therefore that I must think and choose, and if I must do that then I must decide my reasons for thinking and choosing in certain ways. I must decide my goals, my aims, my purposes, my desires and aversions, and some kind of coherent framework or rationale by which to understand these things. And if I settle on a good version of all this then I need to make some efforts to train myself to actually live in a way that is aligned with those choices. That's my business as a philosopher, as I see it, and whilst I don't expect to finish this task or to be a Socrates, it is enough for me that I don't lag behind. I must do what I can.

St. – I'm not sure your philosophical business would be very profitable!

Ex. – Well, that depends on what you mean by profit.

St. – So why do you concern yourself with God, then, if you don't believe in God?

Ex. – I'm not sure I do concern myself with God; I concern myself with beliefs, moral beliefs, and I consider the consistency of them in order to understand them better.

St. – And that's why you make this argument about the problem of evil?

Ex. – Yes, I suppose so. Though really it's because it's what you happen to be working on and

I'm talking to you. It'd be different if I were talking to someone else.

St. – I see. But why not just talk about the moral beliefs directly?

Ex. – I thought I was.

St. – But I mean, why talk about them in the context of the problem of evil?

Ex. – Because the problem of evil contains this very interesting claim: that there exists a perfectly good being. Could there be a clearer picture of what I want to understand?

St. – Ok. So God is an example of moral perfection. And, what, you want to know how to emulate God's example?

Ex. – No, I wouldn't say that. I am clearly no God! Though if we were to listen to Epictetus then we should see ourselves as having been given at least one god-like attribute: our reason. He would say that we can imitate the gods and be as god-like as possible by exercising that divine attribute. As I see it, reason is put to use in order to understand ideas, and it's the idea of goodness that I want to understand. And then along comes someone who says not only that this idea is real, but that it is made real in the form of a divine being; and not only that, but this divine being is also all-powerful, and all the rest, and that this all-powerful realisation of moral goodness is compatible with the worst evils of the world. It's this that I struggle with: how to reconcile the idea of goodness that I have with the terrible evils of the world. Intuitively I think they ought to be opposed.

St. – And God is opposed to evil, of course.

Ex. – Of course. You say that. Everyone says that. But He doesn't stop it, does He?

St. – No, but perhaps He has good reason, reasons that we can't understand.

Ex. – And can there be any good reason to permit the morally impossible?

St. – Well, perhaps not that I can understand.

Ex. – Is it possible for us to suppose a reason?

St. – What do you mean? It's clearly possible that there are reasons that we can't understand. We don't know what we don't know, and we can't know what we can't know.

Ex. – Yes, you mean epistemically, perhaps; but I mean is it morally possible for us to suppose a reason?

St. – I'm not sure. I would say it depends.

Ex. – Depends on what? But never mind that again. I mean to ask whether it is morally possible for us to endorse or sign off on a reason to excuse or justify the permission of the morally impossible?

St. – And you'd say that we can't, because the nature of moral necessity is that it won't allow us to excuse it?

Ex. – Yes, exactly. If you are confident enough to state that something is morally impossible, what you mean is that there can be no circumstances in which it is right or good; there is no possibility, moral possibility, of excusing or justifying it. It's simply something that ought not to be, end of story; no ifs, no buts, no excuses.

St. – But what if you are wrong in your judgement that this thing is morally impossible? What if there is a good reason for it after all?

Ex. – That's possible, of course. As you say, we don't know what we don't know. But then it's simply a matter of denying that the thing is morally impossible. You cannot say that something is morally impossible and that it is possible that it has a good reason to allow it to be done. If it's morally impossible then there can never be a good reason to do it; so if there is the possibility of there being a good reason to do it or allow it to be done, then it cannot be morally impossible. It is not a moral necessity but a moral contingency, for you. And you discover this when you subject your life and thoughts to examination.

St. – And so why can't all theists just say that there are only moral contingencies, never moral necessities?

Ex. – They can say that, of course. It would be a consistent position. But do they believe this? Do they think it might be ok to rape, or abuse a child, or perpetrate a genocide, or enslave someone? Or do they think that these things should never be done?

St. – I think they'd say that it would always be wrong for a human being to do these things or let them be done, but that things are different for God.

Ex. – That it is morally possible for God to abuse a child?

St. – Well, no, because God doesn't do these things.

Ex. – That it is morally possible for God to allow a child to be abused?

St. – Yes, I suppose that.

Ex. – And be indifferent to the child's suffering?

St. – Not indifferent, necessarily.

Ex. – To be morally responsive to the child's suffering, yet still choose to do nothing?

St. – Yes, but chooses not to intervene for good reasons.

Ex. – Morally-sufficient reasons?

St. – Yes, morally-sufficient reasons. We can't see or understand these reasons, but that doesn't mean that those reasons aren't there, for God.

Ex. – And God is perfectly morally good?

St. – Yes, and knowledgable and the rest. He is in a radically different epistemic position and so knows so much more than we ever could.

Ex. – And in being perfectly morally good, and knowledgable and the rest, God is the perfect picture of the idea of moral goodness?

St. – Perfect moral goodness. Lacking in nothing.

Ex. – The true picture of the idea of perfect moral goodness is the one in which we can and do find morally-sufficient reason to permit rape, child abuse, slavery, and genocide?

St. – That doesn't sound right.

Ex. – It's not a picture I can recognise.

St. – Yes but you can't recognise it just because you can't see God's reasons. But we shouldn't be surprised if we can't see God's reasons because He is in that radically different epistemic position.

Ex. – I should try to see those reasons, to move closer to moral perfection?

St. – Yes, if you want to understand God better. And so I suppose if you want to understand goodness better, too.

Ex. – I should try to see the good reasons for rape, child abuse, genocide, and the like?

St. – No... No...

Ex. – It doesn't sound particularly virtuous.

St. – It's not about trying to make these things good or try to see the good in them. It's not about trying to excuse them. It's about trying to understand God and why He might create a world with these things in it.

Ex. – According to an idea of perfect goodness?

St. – Yes, exactly.

Ex. – Let me put it simply: My idea of goodness, perfect or otherwise, is one that understands that you shouldn't ever rape or murder, or abuse a child, or enslave someone, or perpetrate a genocide, or any of the other many and varied things that I would identify as examples of the morally impossible. I say these things are inexcusable, unjustifiable; I say there can be no circumstances in which they are permissible; I say there can be no good reason for their permission. If, now, you say that there are, in fact, good and morally-sufficient reasons for their permission, I can say only that it contradicts what I understand about goodness. I am not arrogant enough to assume my idea of goodness is perfected or finished, so perhaps I can listen to you and

learn a good lesson or two. I have open ears. And your lesson is that I should try to entertain the notion that it might be good, sometimes, to permit a bit of child abuse? That it might be good to allow a little genocide? That sometimes, even if not always, rape is something that ought to be permitted? What lessons are these!

St. – But that's not the point of theodicy.

Ex. – So what is its point?

St. – It's not meant to teach you moral lessons; it's meant to teach you about God.

Ex. – Why God permits evil?

St. – Yes, exactly.

Ex. – And to understand this more, we must turn away from what we understand, morally? To strengthen our understanding of God and evil, we must weaken our moral understanding? Does that sound like a good trade?

St. – That's not it at all. It sounds like you're confused and overlapping two distinct tasks: one task is about solving the problem of evil, in a theoretical space, and the other is about gaining moral understanding. And in fact, the way you talk about it it's as if that task of gaining moral understanding is really the practical task of deciding what to do as a human being, how you should live, etc. These are distinct parts of philosophy and you can't expect them to match up. That's like expecting physics to overlap with psychology, or chemistry with history! They are distinct tasks with distinct approaches and methods and terminology. The problem of evil is about settling the rationality of theistic belief, but only on the basis of the evidence of evil and suffering in the world. That's the only scope of the discussion. To participate properly in the discussion you need to remain within the scope of it, or else it's just a free for all. I mean, why don't we just publish a piece of music, and expect that to be some kind of response to the problem of evil!

Ex. – And why not? Have there not been musical responses to suffering? Do they not capture something meaningful and important? A response in human terms? But anyway. Perhaps you're right and I am confused. Perhaps I ought to stick within the scope of the philosophical discussion. Let me reiterate: A good and powerful God permits the morally-impossible to happen. The morally impossible can have no good reason to justify its permission, yet God permits it for some good reason that we cannot understand. That is a contradiction. If it is permitted for good reason, then it is not morally impossible; if it is morally impossible, there can be no good reason for its permission. You can believe in God or the morally impossible, but you cannot believe both. And that means that to believe in God is to reject the morally impossible. If you cannot bring yourself to do that, morally, then continuing in your theistic belief will leave you inconsistent with yourself.

St. – But what if God has no choice but to permit the morally impossible? What if the only way He can prevent these things from happening is by doing something logically impossible, like violating our free will, or else has a forced choice between two morally-impossible things?

Ex. – Like a kind of Sophie's choice?

St. – Yes, exactly. What if the only way God can stop one morally-impossible thing is by doing

another morally-impossible thing? What should He do then? If He has no choice but to permit the morally impossible then He can hardly be guilty for anything.

Ex. – Do you think Sophie felt guilty for making her choice?

St. – I've not actually seen that film.

Ex. – Neither have I, nor read the book. I think the original example comes from that great lecture by Camus, doesn't it? I can't remember. But we understand the basic outline: a woman is forced to choose which of her two children will live and which will die. She must choose to send one of her children to die in order that the other has a chance of living. She has no choice but to choose, and so she chooses to do the morally impossible and send one of her children to die, because it is physically and morally impossible to do otherwise.

St. – Yes, exactly, so how could we say that she's done anything wrong?

Ex. – Do you think she would feel guilty?

St. – Yes, certainly she'd feel it.

Ex. – She wouldn't feel proud or indifferent about sending her child to die?

St. – No, of course not.

Ex. – She'd recognise that she had done something terribly wrong?

St. – Well, yes, she'd feel it. But I'm not sure she would actually have done anything wrong, in the grand scheme of things. I mean, what else was she supposed to do?

Ex. – Yes, what else was she supposed to do? It's built into the example that there is nothing else she could have done: she must, necessarily, make one morally impossible choice or another. She must choose between two choices that she knows neither of which she can choose. She must choose what she cannot choose. Would you say that this is a helpful analogy to God's paradoxical situation? If a morally perfect God is permitting the morally impossible, I mean.

St. – Yes, if God permits the morally impossible because to do otherwise would violate another moral impossibility. Say if He can prevent the morally impossible but only by violating the free will of His creatures, and say that free will is logically necessary and acts as a limit on God's actions. Or perhaps it's morally necessary that the morally impossible happens sometimes, or something.

Ex. – Good, so we're happy with our analogy? And we say that God incurs no guilt, as Sophie incurs no guilt?

St. – Sort of. No real guilt, in the grand scheme of things, because there was nothing else that could have been done.

Ex. – You hesitate?

St. – Well, as you say, Sophie would still feel guilty, but that's beside the point I think.

Ex. – We would expect someone to feel a bit guilty about sending their child to die?

St. – Yes, exactly. I suppose it would be odd if they were indifferent to that. I can't really imagine what it would be like, being truthful, so I'd hesitate to say.

Ex. – But it would be strange if someone were indifferent to having sent their child to die?

St. – Yes. I'd imagine if they seemed like they didn't care then it would only be a coping strategy or something, a way to protect themselves from grief.

Ex. – Grief, yes. There's something more than grief in Sophie's choice, though. I would say there is the grief of losing a child, then the added trauma of having to be the one to cause it, in some sense, even though we know it's built into the example that there's nothing else she could have done, that it's really the Nazis doing all the causing and she's just another victim of their power. But somehow in spite of that, the thing we realise as being distinctive about Sophie's choice is not just the fact that her child died but that she was in some sense forced to participate in the death of her child, she was forced to bring it about, through her choice. Isn't that why it has its impact, as an example to think about? Isn't that its distinctive feature?

St. – Yes, bad enough to lose a child but worse to have to play a part in it.

Ex. – So she feels bad enough for losing the child, but worse because of making the choice?

St. – Yes.

Ex. – Meaning in a sense it would be better, for her, if she hadn't had to make the choice?

St. – Yes, I suppose so. I imagine she might say 'don't make me choose', or 'I can't choose', or something. But like I say, it's hard to say what this would be like in reality.

Ex. – Of course, it's just an example. But because of this distinctive feature of the 'Sophie's choice' scenario, the 'having to choose' is somehow an added badness?

St. – Yes, it makes the situation worse.

Ex. – Because it's a choice that you don't want to make?

St. – Of course.

Ex. – And a choice between two bad options? Two irredeemably bad options.

St. – Yes, neither are tolerable but you have to choose one intolerable option.

Ex. – So given that it's a bad choice between bad options, an intolerable choice between intolerable options, it would be strange to insist that Sophie see nothing at all wrong in what she'd done. It would be strange to insist that she ought to shrug it off as if it were nothing to her. That if she were somehow affected by not just the grief at the death of her child but by her having to

choose it, which is the key feature of the example, then we should insist that her sense of guilt is irrational and ought to be dismissed as meaningless, because there was nothing else she could have done. It would be strange to try to convince her that she ought to feel exactly the same as any mother who has lost a child, that her choosing makes no difference to her situation. It would be strange to insist that her situation was not, in reality, any different from any grieving mother's, wouldn't it?

St. – Her situation isn't the same as every grieving mother, that's the point of the example.

Ex. – And the added trauma is having to have made a bad choice about these morally impossible things?

St. – Yes, to put it bluntly.

Ex. – So would you say that the more perfect picture of moral understanding is the one in which Sophie sees no difference between herself and any other grieving mother, or the one in which she recognises her situation to be in a sense worse? And obviously, it's just an example, so really what I'm asking here is which picture of moral understanding we think is more accurate: the one where Sophie's situation is no different from any other grieving mother, or the one where her situation is distinct?

St. – I would say they are distinct, the two cases. There is more in Sophie's choice than just losing a child.

Ex. – So it's right and fitting for Sophie, and us, to see something particularly morally tragic about her case?

St. – Yes, that's the only point of the example.

Ex. – And it would be strange to be indifferent to this moral tragedy?

St. – Yes, strange to be indifferent. You're going in circles again!

Ex. – But you must see where I'm going with this? We accepted the analogy between God and Sophie's choice, and now we're saying it would be strange to imagine Sophie indifferent to what she had done, that the more accurate picture of moral understanding is the one that sees an important difference between those situations in which these morally impossible things just happen, like any grieving mother who loses a child, and those situations in which you somehow play a part in their happening, like Sophie, even if you had no choice. It matters that you chose the morally impossible, even if you had no other choice, and so we should not be indifferent to that choice or to the morally impossible result. And so, by analogy, God should not be indifferent to that choice or that result.

St. – But I'm still not sure how God can be affected by moral feelings like that.

Ex. – However the recognition might manifest, we would expect God to recognise and acknowledge the moral tragedy that He has participated in by allowing the morally impossible to happen.

St. – Yes, ok, He can recognise it for what it is. But what follows from that in terms of the problem of evil?

Ex. – God recognises and is responsive to the moral tragedy of having permitted the morally impossible? A motivational judgement internalist like yourself must agree that the recognition of the moral reason necessitates some kind of responsiveness.

St. – Yes, ok, recognises and is responsive. But what would that mean?

Ex. – God recognises that He has done wrong, even though he had no choice, and is responsive to that recognition? Like Sophie in her grief over her choice?

St. – I suppose. But what else could He have done?

Ex. – That doesn't matter, just as it doesn't matter for Sophie or any other morally tragic case where you must do what you cannot. That you are damned if you do and damned if you don't doesn't mean you aren't damned either way. If we stay true to our ideas about moral necessity, then even though God might have to permit the morally impossible, He cannot escape the negative impact that this has on His moral status. If He is fully aware of what He does, recognising it for what it is and having a capacity for necessitated moral responsiveness, then He becomes a grief-stricken and guilt-ridden God, a damned God, a God who knows He has done wrong, even if He had no other option. He would not offer excuses or justifications. He would seek our forgiveness and look to atone. If He does not have this moral responsiveness then He would be callous and insensitive. Not even God would call Himself 'good' under either circumstance. He would say 'Oh Me, what have I done?' He would ask His children to forgive Him, for He knows what He has done.

St. – Now you're getting carried away!

Ex. – I know, I know, a rhetorical flourish. Rhetorical and blasphemous too. Not as blasphemous as saying that such a God might be inclined to nail Himself to a cross to atone for His sins. But enough of that. You're right I am getting carried away. And I'd be ashamed for someone to hear me talk like this. The point is only one of consistency.

St. – So you think that anyone who permits the morally impossible necessarily incurs some guilt, regardless of whether or not they had any other choice?

Ex. – I certainly think they wouldn't feel good about it. And I think if they are indifferent to what they have done then they do not recognise the meaning of what they have done, yes. I think when you find yourself in a situation where you must do the morally impossible – which does happen, because the world is not kind – and if you are not a psychopath or lacking in moral understanding, you do what you have to do with a very heavy heart, fully aware of the wrong that you are doing but knowing you cannot do otherwise. As I say, that you are damned if you do and damned if you don't leaves you damned either way; necessary evils are still evils. The idea I have of moral goodness is not one in which we emerge from moral tragedy feeling proud or even indifferent; it's the one in which we emerge feeling dirty, stained, lowered and reduced by what we have had to do. We can't call ourselves good for doing what we know should never be done, even when we had no choice. At most we would say that we did what we had to do, but we are sorry that we had to do it.

St. – And you think this shows an inconsistency in the problem of evil because God cannot call Himself morally perfect? Not if He permits the morally impossible, even when He has no choice.

Ex. – He can call Himself what He likes. But I can't understand that as a picture of moral perfection, no. The God of theodicy, who is said to permit all these moral impossibilities for some good reason? I say that story just doesn't understand or recognise what it means to be morally impossible. They don't see the nature of moral necessity. These things are rightly thought of as unjustifiable. Or what else, the God who knows that He permits things that ought never be permitted, fully recognising and responsive to what that means, yet retains a perfect moral status? I say no one in their right moral mind would permit so much moral atrocity and still be able to see themselves as untarnished by it.

St. – This is like D. Z. Phillips' 'second-thought' argument?

Ex. – Very much like that.

St. – So you'd say that Sophie is morally tarnished? Even though she had no choice.

Ex. – I'd say she might always feel the inclination to apologise to the child that she sent to die, even though she had no choice. I would say she would carry with her a sense that she had done, had to do, something terrible.

St. – You wouldn't call her morally good, because of that?

Ex. – I would call her good, precisely because she suffers from her choice. But by analogy – between Sophie and God, I mean – we'd have to talk about her being not just good but morally perfect, and I'd hesitate there, in part because that language starts to lose meaning with finite and imperfect human beings. Besides, she wouldn't let me call her so, I think. But it's hardly my business to judge. And it's just an example. I would call her human. But I can't say the same about God. Not a God that is the product of an ontological argument, at least.

St. – But doesn't this force you to make a moral judgement about God? And Sophie, for that matter, or anyone else who has been through a morally tragic situation, if you say they necessarily incur some guilt. How can you say it's not your business to judge when all you're offering is a convoluted way of judging? A convoluted way of showing them to be guilty, in your eyes.

Ex. – I would say guilty in their eyes, necessarily, and not necessarily mine. Their ethical life is their business and mine is mine. But you're right. There's a danger of drifting into moralising if we don't keep our feet. Maybe I made a misstep in the way I presented the argument. Maybe I made a misstep in presenting it as an argument. It's easy to get lost in well-mapped paths. And when you're lost, you can find yourself inadvertently doing exactly what you're trying to avoid, simply because it is familiar ground. My default mode is still a product of my philosophical education and profession, and I constantly find myself falling back into the habit of trying to win the argument. It's amazing how often I catch myself doing this; amazing, given how hard I am trying to avoid doing just that. I suppose you get caught up in the process and you forget yourself. When we're not sure how to proceed we jump to the nearest familiar path. And moral philosophy is a very familiar path, as is the philosophy of religion. The trenches are deep, and inviting in their promise of safety.

I'm getting rhetorical again. I say nothing about Sophie; that's not my business. And I say nothing about God either, because there I've said too much already. I am interested in understanding what it is to live well as a human being and how I am to make an attempt at doing so. I think that philosophising about the problem of evil can show me the value of suffering, and I am grateful for those lessons, but also that this has limits. At its limits, I encounter the morally impossible. In recognising something as a moral necessity like this, I say it is something that is at the limits of moral thinking, and that moral judgement in some sense defines the limits of my moral thinking. When I become clearer about the limits of my moral thinking, the picture of my moral world becomes clearer to me: I see its edges, its boundaries, its gaps and spaces where I can only say 'here there be dragons'. I see the shape of my moral world. I come to understand my moral perspective, and if I can hold that clear in mind then, in the end, it will help me choose to live in ways that I would, on reflection, choose, and avoid falling into things that I would not. And so in any case, all I can really say is that for me it would be inconsistent to believe in a good and powerful God given the evil and suffering in the world, because to believe such a thing is beyond my moral limits.

St. – I see. I understand. But why can't it be the case that you ought to just expand your moral limits? Maybe you ought to consider the alternatives and not close your mind?

Ex. – But that is exactly why it is so important to see this as a moral matter. If it were a question of logic or metaphysics or theology – or evidence, as you say – then the call to keep an open mind might be a virtuous one. But to ask me to go beyond my moral limits is to ask me to do something that I understand I *ought* not do. That is the nature of moral necessity. If someone is found to have abused a child, you naturally think that is a wrong and bad thing to have done, and you might judge and say as much. And if someone responded: 'Well, now, we don't know that. Let's keep an open mind.' What is there to say to such a person? Other than that we clearly live in very different moral worlds. In my world, child abuse is a terrible thing and is never permissible or excusable. The world of the one asking me to keep an open mind about the possibility that it might not be such a bad thing after all is not one that I can make much sense of. I would say it's an incoherent moral world. At the very least it would be exposed by simple Socratic questioning, I think. How would they feel if they were abused as a child, for example, or if their children were abused, and would they consider that a just or desirable state of affairs. Can they make that choice for all on behalf of all, etc., etc. But those are invitations to embark on the process of finding moral understanding, not attempts at persuading anyone of anything in particular, let alone deciding the rationality of theistic belief. And as I said, those questions and that process pokes and prods and explores the limits of your moral world. That helps it take shape and become clear in your mind. And that can equip you to become a better philosopher and a better human being. That, I think, is the true and worthy purpose of philosophising about the problem of evil.

In the end, I would say my argument is that there is a contradiction between a certain conception of ethics and a certain conception of the philosophy of religion; or rather, to be more specific, a certain conception of theistic belief within the philosophy of religion, and the role that the problem of evil plays in that conception of theistic belief. The conception of ethics I have in mind is the one that says that ethics is never the servant of our purposes but only their judge. The conception of philosophy of religion I have in mind is the one that says that the rationality of theistic belief can (and should, perhaps must) be defended on the basis of supposing the ways in which evil and suffering, even the worst kinds of evil and suffering, can be seen to serve good purposes and be justified by that. I subscribe to the former conception of ethics, and I see it as incompatible with the latter conception of the philosophy of religion, and so I reject the latter for the sake of preserving the former. You shouldn't defend the rationality of theistic belief on the

basis of finding good reasons to permit the impermissible. And so perhaps that means you shouldn't defend the rationality of theistic belief. Like Job, you should realise that you've said too much already.

If the goal of the philosophy of religion were only to defend the rationality of theistic belief, then perhaps things would be different. Perhaps then you could sacrifice your ethics at the altar of that goal. But I don't think that is or can be any true and worthy purpose for philosophy, and I don't think ethics can be put to work for a purpose that it precludes.

St. – And, what was it I said before, the purpose of philosophy should be a necessary part of what it does?

Ex. – Essentially, I think you said. Philosophy is what it does. And what it does is done for a reason, a good reason, and with good reason. In essence it *is* that good reason, and that is why it is intrinsically valuable. It is not only a means to an end. It's only this that allows us to say with sincerity that the unexamined life is not worthy of a human being.

St. – And so if you're doing philosophy for no good reason then, what, you're not really doing philosophy at all?

Ex. – Exactly. I think so, anyway. I'm not sure what I'd call it but I suppose we might say 'sophistry' or something. That's familiar, at least. It connotes more or less the right kind of thing, to philosophers.

St. – I'm not sure what to make of this. What you say is interesting. It feels like it's reminded me of something I've forgotten. But I'm not sure how useful it is. How would this help me with my PhD, for example? And how would it work putting this into any kind of publication? It's not much good saying that philosophy's lost its purpose. Or at least, it's not like you can argue that, it being just an assertion that philosophy ought to be a certain way but isn't. What can I do other than work with what we have? Especially if I want to be a part of that world, I have to fit in with what that world wants. I have to compete on their terms. I can't dictate the terms.

Ex. – It's true you've got your work to do and that's the way it is. But I hope you remember and never lose sight of the true and worthy purpose that philosophy can have, once had, and could have again. You of all people are best-placed to keep that alive.

St. – I hope I can. I guess we'll see.