

The Problem of Evil

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

One of the most important British philosophers of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill was born in London and educated by his father. As a child prodigy, Mill learned Greek at the age of three and Latin at the age of eight. When he was fourteen he had already received a thorough classical education. At the age of seventeen he began to work as a clerk at the East India Company and eventually became director of the company. In 1865 he was elected to Parliament. Mill wrote on many different subjects including Logic, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Religion, Political Philosophy, and Ethics. His principle works are *A System of Logic* (1843), *Utilitarianism* (1863), *On Liberty* (1859) and *The Subjection of Woman* (1869). Our present reading is from *Three Essays on Religion* (1874).

Vocabulary:

Benevolence:	goodness
Omnipotent:	all-powerful
Maleficent:	doing evil or harm
Capricious:	a tendency to change one's mind without reason
Despotic:	tyrannical
Intractableness:	not easily managed or controlled
Rectifying:	putting right or setting right
Pernicious:	causing harm

Predilections:	preferences
Antithesis:	opposite
Aberration:	abnormality; mental disorder
Consecration:	when something is made holy
Fetters:	anything that confines or restrains

Concepts:

Omnipotent Creator:
Theory of Creation:
Principle of Good:
Nature:
Providence:

Questions:

- 1. According to Mill, how do some define the goodness of God?*
- 2. If God were omnipotent, what does Mill say the relationship between happiness and behavior would be?*
- 3. What is an inescapable conclusion regarding the misery in the world?*
- 4. What is Mill's argument against God being both all-good and all-powerful?*
- 5. When are men's practical beliefs most inconsistent?*
- 6. What do men believe is impressed upon nature?*
- 7. Explain how Mill feels about Providence?*

If the maker of the world can do all that he wills, then he wills misery, and there is no escape from the conclusion. The more consistent of those who have deemed themselves qualified to "vindicate the ways of God to man" have endeavored to avoid the alternative by hardening their hearts, and denying that misery is an evil. The goodness of God, they say, does not consist in willing the happiness of his creatures, but their virtue; and the universe, if not a happy, is a just, universe. But waving the objections to this scheme of ethics, it does not at all get rid of the difficulty. If the Creator of mankind willed that they should all be virtuous, his designs are as completely baffled as if he had willed that they should all be happy. The order of nature is constructed with even less regard to the requirements of justice than to those of benevolence. If the law of all creation were justice and the Creator omnipotent, then, in whatever amount suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person's share of them would be exactly proportioned to that person's good or evil deeds. No human being would have a worse lot than another, without worse deserts. Accident or favoritism would have no part in such a world, but every human life would be the playing out of a drama constructed

like a perfect moral tale. No one is able to blind himself to the fact that the world we live in is totally different from this; inasmuch as the necessity of redressing the balance has been deemed one of the strongest arguments for another life after death, this amounts to an admission that the order of things in this life is often an example of injustice, not justice. If it be said that God does not take sufficient account of pleasure and pain to make them the reward or punishment of the good or the wicked, but that virtue is itself the greatest good and vice the greatest evil, then these at least ought to be dispensed to all according to what they have done to deserve them. Instead, every kind of moral depravity is entailed upon multitudes by the fatality of their birth; through the fault of their parents, of society, or of uncontrollable circumstances, certainly through no fault of their own. Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.

The only admissible moral theory of Creation is that the Principle of Good cannot at once and altogether subdue the powers of evil, either physical or moral; could not place mankind in a world free

from the necessity of an incessant struggle with the maleficent powers, or make them always victorious in that struggle, but could and did make them capable of carrying on the fight with vigor and with progressively increasing success. Of all the religious explanations of the order of nature, this alone is neither contradictory to itself, nor to the facts for which it attempts to account.

...And I venture to assert that such has really been, though often unconsciously, the faith of all who have drawn strength and support of any worthy kind from trust in a superintending Providence. There is no subject on which men's practical belief is more incorrectly indicated by the words they use to express it, than religion. Many have derived a base confidence from imagining themselves to be favorites of an omnipotent but capricious and despotic Deity. But those who have been in goodness by relying on the sympathizing support of a powerful and good Governor of the world, have, I am satisfied, never really believed that Governor to be, in the strict sense of the term, omnipotent. They have always saved his goodness at the expense of his power. They have believed, perhaps, that he could, if he willed, remove all the thorns from their individual path, but not without causing greater harm to someone else, or

frustrating some purpose of greater importance to the general well-being. They have believed that for any one thing, but not any combination of things: that his government, like human government, was a system of adjustments and compromises; that the world is inevitably imperfect, contrary to his intention. And since the exertion of all his power to make it as little imperfect as possible, leaves it no better than it is, they cannot but regard that power, though vastly beyond human estimate, yet as in itself not merely finite, but extremely limited.

...But even though unable to believe that Nature, as a whole, is a realization of the designs of perfect wisdom and benevolence, men do not willingly renounce the idea that some part of Nature, at least, must be intended as an exemplar, or type; that on some portion or other of the Creator's works, the image of the moral qualities which they are accustomed to ascribe to him, must be impressed; that if not all which is, yet something which is, must not only be a faultless model of what ought to be, but must be intended to be our guide and standard in rectifying the rest. It does not suffice them to believe, that what tends to good is to be imitated and perfected, and what tends to evil is to be corrected: they are anxious for some more definite indi-

cation of the Creator's designs; and being persuaded that this must somewhere be met within his works, undertake the dangerous responsibility of picking and choosing among them in quest of it. A choice which, except so far as directed by the general maxim that he intends all the good and none of the evil, must of necessity be perfectly arbitrary; and if it leads to any conclusions other than such as can be deduced from that maxim, must be, exactly in that proportion, pernicious.

It has never been settled by any accredited doctrine, what particular departments of the order of nature shall be reputed to be designed for our moral instruction and guidance; and accordingly each person's individual predilections, or momentary convenience, have decided what parts of the divine government the practical conclusions that he was desirous of establishing, should be recommended to approval as being analogous. One such recommendation must be as fallacious as another, for it is impossible to decide that certain of the Creator's works are more truly expressions of his character than the rest; and the only selection which does not lead to immoral results, is the selection of those which most conduce to the general good, in other words, of those which point to an end which, if the entire scheme is the expression of a single

omnipotent and consistent will, is evidently not the end intended by it.

There is, however, one particular element in the construction of the world, which, to minds on the look-out for special indication of the Creator's will, has appeared, not without plausibility, peculiarly fitted to afford them. The active impulses of human and other animated beings. One can imagine such persons arguing that when the Author of Nature only made circumstances, he may not have meant to indicate the manner in which his rational creatures were to adjust themselves to those circumstances; but that when he implanted positive stimuli in the creatures themselves, stirring them up to a particular kind of action, it is impossible to doubt that he intended that sort of action to be practiced by them. This reasoning, followed out consistently, would lead to the conclusion that the Deity intended, and approves, whatever human beings do; since all that they do, being the consequence of some of the impulses with which their Creator must have endowed them, all must equally be considered as done in obedience to his will. As this practical conclusion was shrunk from, it was necessary to draw a distinction, and to pronounce that not the whole, but only parts of the active nature of mankind point to a special intention of the Creator

in respect to their conduct. These parts it seemed natural to suppose, must be those in which the Creator's hand is manifested rather than the man's own: and hence the frequent antithesis between man as God made him, and man as he has made himself. Since what is done with deliberation seems more the man's own act, and he is held more completely responsible for it than for what he does from sudden impulse, the considerate part of human conduct is apt to be set down as man's share in the business, and the inconsiderate as God's. The result is the vein of sentiment so common in the modern world (though unknown to the philosophic ancients) which exalts instinct at the expense of reason; an aberration rendered still more mischievous by the opinion commonly held in conjunction with it, that every, or almost every, feeling or impulse which acts promptly without waiting to ask questions, is an instinct. Thus, almost every variety of unreflecting and uncalculating impulse receives a kind of consecration, except those which, though unreflecting at the moment, owe their origin to previous habits of reflection: these, being evidently not instinctive, do not meet with the favor accorded to the rest; so that all unreflecting impulses are invested with authority over reason, except the only ones which are most prob-

ably right. I do not mean, of course, that this mode of judgment is even pretended to be consistently carried out: life could not go on if it were not admitted that impulses must be controlled, and that reason ought to govern our actions. The pretension is not to drive Reason from the helm but rather to bind her by articles to steer only in a particular way. Instinct is not to govern, but reason is to practice some vague and unassignable amount of deference to instinct. Though the impression in favor of instinct as being a peculiar manifestation of the divine purposes, has not been cast into the form of a consistent general theory, it remains a standing prejudice, capable of being stirred up into hostility to reason in any case in which the dictate of the rational faculty has not acquired the authority of prescription.

I conceive that there is a radical absurdity in all these attempts to discover, in detail, what are the designs of Providence, in order when they are discovered to help Providence in bringing them about. Those who argue, from particular indications, that Providence intends this or that, either believe that the Creator can do all that he wills or that he cannot. If the first supposition is adopted—if Providence is omnipotent, Providence intends whatever happens,

and the fact of its happening proves that Providence intended it. If so, everything which a human being can do is predestined by Providence and is a fulfillment of its designs. But if as is the more religious theory, Providence intends not all which happens, but only what is good, then indeed man has it in his power, by his voluntary actions, to aid the intentions of Providence; but he can only learn those intentions by considering what tends to promote the general good, and not what man has a natural inclination to; for, limited as, on this showing, the divine power must be, by inscrutable but insurmountable obstacles, who knows that man *could* have been created without desires which never are to be, and even which never ought to be, fulfilled? The inclinations with which man has been endowed, as well as any of the other contrivances which we observe in Nature, may be the expression not of the divine will, but of the fetters which impede its free action; and to take hints from these for the guidance of our own conduct may be falling into a trap laid by the enemy. The assumption that everything which infinite goodness can desire, actually comes to pass in this universe, or at least that we must never say or suppose that it does not, is worthy only of those whose slavish fears make them offer the homage of lies to a

Being who, they profess to think, is incapable of being deceived and holds all falsehood in abomination.

From John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 1874.