Good and evil through the ages: extended texts

Here are the extended texts for section 11.

Plato was a Greek philosopher who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. He is one of the most influential of all philosophers, and his views of the Good made a large impact on later Western ideas, including those in theology. In this excerpt from one of his most famous works, *Republic*, Plato suggests that all knowledge and understanding depends on an implicit idea of the good (what he calls 'the form of the Good').

Setting his text out as a conversation between Socrates and Glaucon, Socrates explains how the sun gives light and illuminates the physical world. He goes on to say that the form of the good – the ideal form above all other forms – is better than the sun, because it enables us to understand all other forms. Knowing the good is higher than having knowledge or knowing the truth. (Some interpret the good as being 'god' in Plato's thought.)

'Is it not also true that the sun is not vision, yet as being the cause thereof is beheld by vision itself?'

'That is so,' he said.

'This, then, you must understand that I meant by the offspring of the good which the good begot to stand in a proportion with itself: as the good is in the intelligible region to reason and the objects of reason, so is this in the visible world to vision and the objects of vision.'

'How is that?' he said; 'explain further.'

'You are aware,' I said, 'that when the eyes are no longer turned upon objects upon whose colours the light of day falls but that of the dim luminaries of night, their edge is blunted and they appear almost blind, as if pure vision did not dwell in them.'

'Yes, indeed,' he said.

'But when, I take it, they are directed upon objects illumined by the sun, they see clearly, and vision appears to reside in these same eyes.'

'Certainly.'

'Apply this comparison to the soul also in this way. When it is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason; but when it inclines to that region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason.'

'Yes, it does.'

'This reality, then, is the idea of the good, that gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower. You must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge and of truth. It is more beautiful than knowledge and truth, beautiful though they are. But in our illustration, it is right to see light and vision as being like the sun, but never to think that they are the sun itself, so here it is right to consider knowledge and truth as being like the good, but to think that either of them is the good is not right. Still higher honour belongs to the good.'

'An inconceivable beauty you speak of', he said, 'if good is the source of knowledge and truth, and yet itself surpasses them in beauty.'

Plato (c428–348 BCE) *Republic*

Sections 508b–509a, based on the translation by Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1942). First published 1935.

Augustine was a North African Christian bishop who lived in the Roman Empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He is the most influential of all Western Christian theologians and is considered to represent the intellectual 'hinge' between the classical and medieval world in Europe. *The City of God*, his *magnum opus*, was written in response to the sack of Rome in 410 CE. Here he gives an account, influenced by Plato, of how all goodness in the created world is grounded in God, who is the supreme good. He also introduces his famous view of evil as 'privation'. For Augustine, as for Aquinas, evil does not have its own existence but is always instead a form of twisted and disordered good.

[T]he fact that 'God saw that it was good' is sufficient proof that what God created was made solely because of His goodness, not by reason of any necessity nor of any need to use the thing for Himself. In a word, it was made because it was good. (X1.24 p. 225)

Thus, there can be no unchangeable good except our one, true, and blessed God. All things which He has made are good because made by Him, but they are subject to change because they were made, not out of Him, but out of nothing. Although they are not supremely good, since God is a greater good than they, these mutable things are, nonetheless highly good by reason of their capacity for union with and, therefore, beatitude in the Immutable Good which is so completely their good that, without this good, misery is inevitable. (XII.1 p. 246)

In Scripture, those who oppose God's rule, not by nature but by sin, are called His enemies. They can do no damage to Him, but only to themselves; [for] God is immutable and completely invulnerable. Hence, the malice by which his so-called enemies oppose God is not a menace to Him, but merely bad for themselves … (XII.3 p. 249)

[A]lthough no defect can damage an unchangeable good[,] no nature can be damaged by a defect unless that nature itself is good for the simple reason that a defect exists only where harm is done … Thus good things without defects can sometimes be found; [but there can never be] absolutely bad things[,] for even those natures that were vitiated at the outset by an evil will are only evil in so far as they are defective while they are good in so far as they are natural. (XII.3 p. 250)

Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) *The City of God* (c.426 CE)

From *Writings of Augustine, Vol 7* City of God, Books VIII–XVI,
trans. Gerald G Walsh SJ and Grace Monahan, OSU.
Catholic University of America Press, 1952 (2008 reprint)

Thomas Aquinas was a thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher who synthesised the philosophy of Aristotle with the convictions of Augustinian Christianity. In this work, he responds to the problem of how evil can exist in light of the goodness and omnipotence of the Christian God. His answer is an elaboration on Augustine's understanding of evil as a 'privation' of the good. Nothing is evil in its nature; rather, there are only good natures that have become disordered or wrongly proportioned. Evil can thus be spoken of only as a concept or idea, not as a 'thing' with its own being.

'I say that evil is not an entity, but the subject that evil befalls is, since evil is only the privation of a particular good. For example, blindness itself is not an entity, but the subject that blindness befalls is.

Replies to the Objections:

1. We call something evil in two ways: in one way, absolutely; in the second way, in a particular respect. And we call what is evil as such evil absolutely, and this consists in something being deprived of a particular good that is required for its perfection. For example, sickness is evil for an animal because it deprives the animal of the balance of fluids that is required for the perfection of the animal's existing. And we call evil in a particular respect what is not evil as such; rather we call evil in a particular respect what befalls something because it is deprived of a good that is required for the perfection of something else, not one that is required for its own perfection. For example, fire is deprived of the form of water, which is required for the perfection of water, not of a form that is required for the perfection of fire. And so fire is evil for water, not evil as such (p. 59) …

19. We speak of being in two ways. [On the one hand,] neither evil nor any privation is a being or an entity. We speak of being in the second way as a response to the question, "Does evil exist?" and then evil, just like blindness, exists. Nonetheless, evil is not an entity, since being an entity signifies both the response to the question "Does it exist?" and the response to the question "What is it?"

20. Evil is indeed in things, although as a privation and not as an entity, and in concept as something understood, and so we can say that evil is a conceptual being and not a real being, since evil is something in the intellect and not an entity.' (p. 62)

Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), *On Evil* (c.1270 CE)

trans. Richard Regan, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
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Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth-century mystic and anchoress (a type of nun who spent her life in a single room attached to a church) who lived in Norwich. She is also the first known woman author of a book in English: her *Showings*, which describes and reflects theologically on a series of visions she had while very ill. Her influential theology expresses a profound Christian optimism grounded in a deep sense of the goodness of God. Here she suggests that while God in his mysterious wisdom tolerates evil and sin for now, it will ultimately be swallowed up by his goodness and mercy.

'For by the same blessed power, wisdom and love by which he made all things, our good Lord always leads them to the same end, and he himself will bring them there, and at the right time we shall see it … Everything which our Lord God does is righteous, and all which he tolerates is honourable; and in these two are good and evil comprehended. For our Lord does everything which is good, and our Lord tolerates what is evil. I do not say that evil is honourable, but I say that our Lord God's toleration is honourable, through which his goodness will be known eternally, and his wonderful meekness and mildness by this working of mercy and grace.

'Righteousness is that which is so good that it cannot be better than it is, for God himself is true righteousness, and all his works are righteously performed, as they are ordained from eternity by his exalted power, his exalted wisdom, his exalted goodness. And what he has ordained for the best he constantly brings to pass in the same way, and directs to the same end. And he is always fully pleased with himself and all his works … All the souls which will be saved in heaven without end are made righteous in the sight of God and by his own goodness, in which righteousness we are endlessly and marvellously protected, above all creatures.

'And mercy is an operation which comes from the goodness of God, and it will go on operating so long as sin is permitted to harass righteous souls. And when sin is no longer permitted to harass, then the operation of mercy will cease. And then all will be brought into righteousness and stand fast there forever. By his toleration we fall, and in his blessed love, with his power and his wisdom, we are protected, and by mercy and grace we are raised to much more joy. And so in righteousness and in mercy he wishes to be known and loved, now and forever. And the soul that wisely contemplates in grace is well satisfied with both, and endlessly delights.' (Thirty-Sixth Chapter, pp. 237–38)

'[O]ur Lord God is so good, so gentle and so courteous that he can never assign final failure to those in whom he will always be blessed and praised.' (Fifty-Third Chapter, p. 282)

Julian of Norwich (1343–c.1416) *Showings* (from c.1370)

Long Text, trans. Edmund Colledge and
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James Cone (1938–2018) was an American theologian who founded black liberation theology. Cone argued that African-American experiences of suffering offer a fundamental challenge to traditionally white and European theologies, and he sought to do theology explicitly from the perspective of black experience. In this excerpt, Cone discusses the convictions about suffering, evil, and the goodness of God that are implicit in the spirituals (songs and hymns) composed by black slaves in America.

'The black slaves' response to the experience of suffering corresponded closely to the biblical message and its emphasis that God is the ultimate answer to the question of faith. In the spirituals, the black slaves' experience of suffering and despair defined for them the major issue in their view of the world. They do not really question the justice and goodness of God. It was taken for granted that God is righteous and will vindicate the poor and the weak. Indeed it was the point of departure for faith. The singers of spirituals had another concern, centered on the *faithfulness* of the community of believers in a world full of trouble. They wondered not whether God is just and right but whether the sadness and pain of the world would cause them to lose faith in the gospel of God. They were concerned about the solidarity of the community of sufferers. Will the wretched of the earth be able to experience the harsh realities of despair and loneliness and take this pain upon themselves and not lose faith in the faithfulness of God? There was no attempt to evade the reality of suffering. Black slaves faced the reality of the world "ladened wid trouble, an' burden'd wid grief," but they believed that they could go to Jesus in secret and get relief. They appealed to Jesus not so much to remove the trouble (though that was included), but to keep them from "sinkin' down."

Oh Lord, Oh, My Lord!
Oh, My Good Lord! Keep me from sinkin' down.
Oh Lord, Oh, My Lord!
Oh, My Good Lord! Keep me from sinkin' down.' (p. 57)

'The theological assumption of black slave religion as expressed in the spirituals was that *slavery contradicts God*, and *God will therefore liberate black people*. All else was secondary and complemented that basic perspective. But how did black slaves *know* that God was liberating them? Black slaves did not ask that epistemological question. As with all faith assumptions, the *truth* of a theological assertion is found in the givenness of existence itself and not in theory. Black slaves did not devise philosophical and theological methodologies in order to test the truth of God's revelation as liberation. From their viewpoint it did not need testing. They had already encountered its truth and had been liberated by it. Instead of testing God, they *ritualized* God in song and sermon. That was what the spirituals were all about – a ritualization of God in song. They are not documents for philosophy; they are material for worship and praise to the One who had continued to be present with black humanity despite European insanity.' (pp. 65–66)

James Cone (1938–2018), *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972)

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991
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John Swinton is a theologian at Aberdeen University and former hospital chaplain whose work has focused especially on mental health and the experience of disability. In this excerpt, he critiques abstract philosophical treatments of the problems of evil and suffering. Swinton advocates instead for a theological approach that works out of specific experiences of suffering and evil to help Christians to cope with as well as resist suffering rather than trying to explain or justify it.

‘Rather than seeing evil and suffering as simply philosophical and theological problems to be solved, I begin in a different place, by recognizing that the problem of evil is a deeply meaningful and often spiritual human experience before it becomes an object for theological and philosophical reflection. The problem of evil becomes a philosophical conundrum only in response to real, living human experiences. In other words, theodicy is a second-order activity; experience comes first … As one reads various theodicies that are put forward, rarely do the specifics of the lived reality of the human experience of evil, pain, and suffering enter the philosophical equation … Such theodicies deal with evil as an abstract, generalized concept that needs to be brought into line with the supposed reality of an abstract (and abstracted) generic “god”, a god whose character and goodness, it is assumed, we can understand quite apart from any specific actions by this god within history or in relation to any particular individual or group … I offer an alternative perspective. I maintain that theodicy should not be understood as a series of disembodied arguments designed to defend God’s love, goodness, and power. We require a different mode of understanding, a mode of theodicy that is embodied within the life and practices of the Christian community. Such a mode of theodicy does not seek primarily to *explain* evil and suffering, but rather presents ways in which evil and suffering can be *resisted* and *transformed* by the Christian community and in so doing, can enable Christians to live faithfully in the midst of unanswered questions as they await God’s redemption of the whole of creation.’ (pp. 3–4)

John Swinton (b. 1957) *Raging with Compassion:*
Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil
London: SCM Press, 2018

Karen Kilby is a Catholic theologian at Durham University who is well known for her ‘apophatic’ approach to theological questions – that is, she believes that one of the most important jobs for the theologian is to point out where Christians claim to know too much about God and his purposes. Here, Kilby argues that the problem of evil is simultaneously an important and legitimate question and one that is ‘utterly unanswerable’, and calls for theologians to ‘live with’ the problem of evil rather than trying either to ignore it or to explain it away.

‘My proposal, then, is that … these concrete and theological versions of the so-called “problem of evil” ought to be acknowledged as completely legitimate *and* as utterly unanswerable. Christians believe God is working salvation and trust that ultimately God will bring good out of all conceivable evils, but this does not make these evils goods, nor render their presence explicable, nor allow us to understand how they can take place in the good creation of a loving and faithful God. Sometimes of course we can already see, and must look for, good coming out of evil – suffering can bring growth, sin is an occasion to turn back to God’s forgiveness with trust, dependence and gratitude. But we cannot turn these things into explanations, in part because suffering can also, through no fault of the sufferer, bring about degradation and corruption, and sin can build on itself and perpetuate itself. When we see good coming from evil, we can see this as the beginning of the hoped for work of God, but not the beginning of any kind of explanation.

‘I have said that questions arise which should not be pushed aside and cannot be answered. Another way to articulate this is to say that it is of the very nature of Christian theology to make affirmations about the goodness, faithfulness and creative power of God on the one hand, and the brokenness of creation on the other, that it cannot co-ordinate or make sense of. There are points, then, at which systematic theology ought to be, if not systematically incoherent, then at least systematically dissonant. Just as believers may have to live with evils they cannot make sense of or integrate into any larger positive picture, so too theologians may have to live with points of systematic incoherence that they cannot make go away, not even by dismissing the problem and changing the subject, and that we cannot resolve, not even by saying that God suffers.’

Karen Kilby (b. 1964) ‘God, Evil and the Limits of Theology’,
New Blackfriars 84(983) (Wiley, 2003), p. 24.
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