

EVIL AND SUFFERING IN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

At one level it is easy to see why the topics of evil and suffering have been so much discussed in Jewish philosophy. The Jewish people have had a bumpy ride along the historical road and the question of why the innocent suffer arises for most Jews at most times. There have not been many periods during which there has been no persecution of Jews at least somewhere, and it is natural for the objects of the persecution to wonder why they are being subjected to such treatment. This is certainly not to suggest that this is an issue which only occurs in the thinking of Jews. Ever since human beings were able to stand back from the immediate exigencies of their lives and consider why the world is arranged as it is they have asked the questions 'Why is there evil in the world?'. 'Why do apparently good people suffer?' 'What is the point of suffering?' Not only do these questions take place on a personal level, but they also occur for groups, and many groups in history have been persecuted for the sole reason that they differed from more powerful or numerous groups, so that it is possible to differentiate at least two versions of the problem of suffering. One problem is to explain why individuals suffer although they are innocent. The other problem is to explain why individuals suffer as result of their membership of particular groups. Neither of these questions is in any way limited to Jews.

Jews have, however, asked themselves these questions frequently for a number of reasons. In the first place, Israel is supposed to be the chosen people of God through whom God's work of redemption will take place in the world. Israel made a covenant with God, and as a result of that agreement might expect preferential treatment by the deity, provided that it kept its side of the contract. Israel is the nation to which God has attached his name, and anyone who attacks Israel attacks God. It might seem rather surprising, then, that the Jewish people have had such a difficult time, since there has been plenty of

scope for God to intervene on behalf of his people. There are frequent references in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, to God's assistance and the dramatic effect it had on Israel's enemies, yet not a great deal of evidence from history that much of this went on. As we shall see, there is a variety of explanations for this state of affairs, and the explanations involve a particular interpretation of Jewish history. But in addition to the specifically Jewish aspect of the problem there is the entirely general question as to why the innocent suffer in a world created by a God. These topics are often intertwined in the literature, and we will show that Jewish philosophers had some very interesting comments to make about them.

A whole range of philosophical questions arise here, and in this book we will not be considering directly some of them. How can an omnipotent God be omniscient and immutable at the same time? If God can do anything, can he know what is going to happen in the future and affect what the future is going to be, so that the apparently contingent events in the world are really necessitated by his decisions? If he knows what goes on in the world, then his thoughts must change, and so he cannot be unchanging. How can we reconcile a God without sensory equipment with knowledge of the ordinary world? Can a God who concentrates upon abstract and universal matters know what takes place in the contingent realm? Are there any limitations on God's power? I have discussed some of these issues in my previous books, and the central concern here is not with these logical problems about how to reconcile God with his putative attributes. The central issue of the book is this. Let us take it that according to the Jewish religion God is omnipotent, omniscient and good. Let us also accept that he has a particular interest in the fate of Jews, both individually and as a group. How is it, then, that so many individual Jews, either as individuals or as members of a group, have suffered in the world although they appear to be innocent of any wrongdoing? This is part of a question which certainly has broader scope, namely, why would a good God allow evil in the world? If God could prevent evil from occurring, which we might expect him to be able to do given his power, why does he not prevent it from affecting our lives? This issue will also be discussed in the book, since it is vital for an understanding of the problem in so far as it applies specifically to Jews. Although the examples of the thinkers we are going to consider are often based upon Jewish topics and individuals, it will be found that they have much broader interest than one might expect. If

we refer again to the suggestion that the Jewish people are often represented theologically as symbolic of the human race as a whole, we can see that we are not dealing here with only a parochial topic. We are looking at an important issue in the philosophy of religion which has entirely general consequences.

The starting-point for the discussion is in the Bible and the Book of Job is the most concentrated treatment of the issue. There are many other parts of the Bible which refer to the topic, and some of these will be mentioned, but it is in the Book of Job that it most dramatically arises and that work forms a continuing thread of commentary and exposition throughout Jewish civilisation. An extraordinarily large number of works have been written to explain the Book of Job, and it is a work to which Jewish (and not only Jewish) philosophers return again and again. It would have been interesting to consider in some depth the discussions of evil and suffering in the rabbinic literature, in popular Jewish literature and in Jewish theology as a whole, and there are references here to aspects of these works, but the emphasis in this book is on the treatment of the topic by philosophers, and specifically by Jewish philosophers. There are a variety of ways of tackling such a topic. One might look at its development in Jewish philosophy as a whole, thus including aspects of every Jewish philosopher's thoughts on it. This has not been the approach followed here. I have concentrated upon a few leading Jewish thinkers, those whom I felt had considered the issue in an important and creative manner. I hope that most readers will find that the majority of the thinkers whom I discuss find an uncontroversial place in this sort of discussion. There are certainly others who could easily have been included, and who are by no means lesser thinkers than the ones we deal with here. There are many twentieth-century philosophers who have very interesting things to say on our topic and whose views in general are very important. Soloveitchik comes to mind here, as do many other modern authors who wrote on the Holocaust. Also, there are many earlier philosophers such as Halevi and Hasdai Crescas whom it would have been intriguing to bring into the discussion. However, I think it preferable to give the topic a sharper focus by limiting the discussion to a number of thinkers who in some way embody a particular cultural and philosophical context. The aim has been to produce a survey of a religious tradition from a philosophical perspective and so it was considered acceptable to restrict the survey to some of the major figures who developed the original concepts.

Can we really talk about a tradition of Jewish philosophy? This is itself a controversial issue, and some of the thinkers we are considering here had quite stormy relationships with the religious establishment of their time. There are clearly many Jewish philosophers who have no professional interest in specifically Jewish formulations of issues such as those of evil and suffering, and it would be facile to introduce them into the discussion. On the other hand, there are thinkers who are ethnically Jewish and who are interested in the discussion, but who do not really take part in the continuing debate from Job onwards. The thinkers who have been included here represent a broad series of views of the topic of evil and suffering, and they actually constitute a group in the sense that they are all concerned with a similar formulation of the topic. Does this not imply that they left the topic in much the same state as they found it? This certainly is not the case, since, as one would expect, later commentators commented on the work of their predecessors and as we shall see the result is something of a progressive conceptual development of the topic. That is, over time the topic has become more refined and the kinds of argument which can be applied to it are better understood. The thinkers we discuss are clearly members of the same tradition, whether they appreciated it or not, and we have here sustained intellectual work on a range of issues extending over a very long period and reaching right up to our own time. Indeed, the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel has given the whole topic an enormous boost today, leading many Jewish intellectuals to look with renewed interest at what their forebears had to say about evil.

It is interesting to compare the way in which the philosophical tradition has developed as compared with the religious tradition. The latter is much more wedded to specifically religious texts, of course, and relies on the development of new and extended readings of those texts. Some of these readings continue to use the same exegetical approaches to interpreting scripture and history as obtained in the past, while more radical developments of Judaism involve quite distinct readings which, over time, become themselves the structure within which new readings can take place. It is not always easy to differentiate between the philosophical tradition and the religious tradition. There is no doubt that much of the latter is affected by the former, but the influence is certainly not all one way. As we shall see, there is a continual interplay of philosophical and religious arguments in the content of the philosophical tradition. This interplay is capable

of being rather problematic, since philosophy and religion are based upon distinct methodologies for much of their work, and it is always confusing if one has to assess reasoning which strays from one universe of discourse to another. But it will be very much the theme of this book that it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between philosophy and religion in discussing our topic. This is because the topic is itself so embedded in a variety of theoretical perspectives that it is not possible to extract it and cleanse it, as it were, of its non-philosophical accretions before subjecting it to logical analysis. As we shall see, the topic of evil is not only part of a variety of theoretical discourses, but it also has a vital practical and experiential side to it, and any philosophical account which is going to be worth establishing must pay due respect to that side. We are not dealing here with an abstract concept only; rather, it is an essential part of our experience of human existence, and its philosophical elucidation must pay attention to that experience. Any results which we derive should be in line with that experience, and help us to understand it.

It is important to put the thinkers we are going to discuss here within some sort of cultural context. Although they were concerned with aspects of the same problem, they came from different backgrounds and there often seems to be as much to distinguish them as to bring them together. They were all part of a Gentile culture and often represented that culture in their work. What is the point, then, of calling them Jewish philosophers? The justification is that they took aspects of the general culture in which they lived and used it to transform Jewish philosophy. This set up an interesting dialectic between the Jewish and the general culture which persists to this day, and has to persist as long as the Jewish community is not completely assimilated into the general community. Jewish philosophers were impressed by the contributions which non-Jewish culture made to thought, and so were happy to employ new ways of thinking, but at the same time they sought to protect the distinctiveness of Judaism as a faith and Jewish philosophy as a possibility. But the clash between the two cultures of Judaism on the one hand, and philosophy on the other, will be evident in much of their work.

Two important theoretical issues about methodology have arisen in writing this book. The first relates to the distinctness of the issue we are considering here, why innocent people suffer, from other related issues. There will be a good deal of discussion in this book on how God relates to events in this world, but not much on the logical status of

future contingent events, given that God may know how they are going to turn out before they happen. We will not be saying much here about the puzzles which arise in trying to reconcile God's various attributes – these have been discussed in my previous work – but it may be that the answers to such questions have an important bearing upon our main concerns here which does not come out in the present treatment. We are just going to have to assume for the sake of this discussion that it is possible for God to be good, omnipotent, omniscient and so on without any logical problems which cannot be settled in a way acceptable to religion. If this assumption is false, or only partially true, then any results we obtain here may be suspect. What we shall have shown, though, is what can be derived from the ordinary conception of God, the notion of God and what he can do and know, which is accepted by most believers, and there is some value in exploring the implications of that notion with respect to responsibility for evil and suffering in the world. If our notion of what God can do and know is in need of refinement at a later stage as a result of logical problems with that combination of attributes, then our conclusions about evil and suffering may need to be modified. We are assuming here that the ordinary conception of the deity is more-or-less workable as a concept, although we shall certainly look at ways of altering it to make it more intellectually respectable, given the theories we shall consider.

The other theoretical difficulty is a more serious one, and this concerns the very process of Jewish philosophy itself. What is Jewish philosophy? One might be tempted to reply that it is philosophy applied to Jewish cultural objects and ideas. When one looks at the literature of Jewish philosophy it has a certain fairly constant form. First of all there is the philosophy, the precise nature of which depends upon the school of philosophy from which the philosopher operates. Then there are the Jewish parts of the text, the quotations from the Bible, parts of the Talmud and Midrash, legal judgments and items from Jewish history. Many other specifically Jewish texts can be included also, such as relevant novels and poems, and aspects of Jewish ritual life, and so on. What tends to happen is that there is a mixture of content, so that there is a bit of philosophy and a bit of Jewish material, and one works on the others until we get a conclusion which is designed to throw philosophical light upon a Jewish topic. Much of this sort of writing is very interesting, and authors blend together the philosophy and the Judaism in perceptive and attractive

ways. It can be done well and it can be done poorly, and there does not seem to be anything wrong with this way of doing philosophy in itself. It is the norm when we look at philosophy of religion to combine the application of philosophical methods with aspects of religious life and tradition.

Is it as simple as that, though? If we look at the sort of non-philosophical literature produced by a religion we should notice how varied it is and how different are the techniques for dealing with it. The Jewish novelist produces material which operates on entirely different principles compared with the Talmudist or the rabbi. The cabbalist and the historian might both be dealing with Jewish topics, but they deal with them in very different ways. The philosopher looks at this confusion of methodologies and adds to them her own. One way of representing what happens is to say that the philosopher uses the most general demonstrative methods and is capable of subsuming all the other approaches to the topic under the one philosophical approach. Complex religious issues have aspects which are capable of being analysed philosophically, although there are also, no doubt, aspects of religion which are not so amenable to philosophical attention. After all, a religion satisfies many human demands and not all of these are usefully explored by the techniques of the philosopher. The philosopher is primarily concerned with the rational aspects of religion, and the rest of the form of life can be better explored using other more appropriate methods.

One thing we rarely notice when we look at an example of Jewish philosophy is how mixed are the systems of thought we are confronting. There is a tendency to think of the variety as all part of the same organic unity, since they are all aspects of Jewish culture. And they are, but this should not be allowed to hide from us the fact that Jewish culture incorporates a large plurality of theoretical and practical perspectives, and we should be careful about taking an instance of such a plurality and being confident that we know what is going on. Within the system of the Talmud we do know what is going on. Within the cabbala, within the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer, within Maimonides we know what is happening, or at least the sort of thing which is happening, but it is important to note that whatever is going on is distinct from what goes on within a different area. Novelists and jurists are not engaged on the same activity, although they might both be acting within a Jewish context. The rules of religious law and the rules of artistic expression are different from

each other. When the philosopher introduces examples from the very varied corpus of literature available from Jewish writing, what is being done is to establish a general way of thinking which is then subjected to philosophical analysis of one type or another. Since philosophy is often regarded as the most general approach to a topic, this seems highly appropriate. The philosopher subsumes the other forms of looking at an issue under the particular philosophical methodology which is being employed, and as a result we get another and even more abstract approach to the topic.

So when we come to the topic of this book we shall find that philosophers consider a whole variety of sources when they discuss evil and suffering. Some of these sources are biblical, legal, artistic, historical and ritual, while others, of course, are clearly philosophical. The medieval thinkers had a neat way of describing all these different approaches to a topic by using Aristotle's division of areas of discourse in terms of different logical methods. The poet uses a different form of reasoning as compared with the politician, and the theologian a distinct way of arguing as compared with the philosopher. These different forms of argument work within their own sphere of operation, but if they are extended to a different universe of discourse they no longer make sense. For example, the politician and the prophet use figurative language incorporating vivid examples in their discourse, since the aim is to move an audience in a particular practical direction; Aristotle's account of rhetorical reasoning can be used to characterise this method. There is nothing wrong with such an approach, but it would be entirely out of place were it to be employed by someone else: the theologian, for example. His or her techniques are different from those of the prophet, although the same subject-matter may be discussed. The theologian seeks to get to a conclusion by working dialectically from premisses within a religion to conclusions which display the implications of those premisses, and yet which are limited in generality by the nature of where they start. Provided everyone sticks to his or her own area of thought there is no conceptual confusion. The philosopher works at the highest level of generality and certainty, and philosophical analysis can encompass everything else of a lower logical order.

When we consider the issue of evil and suffering there does seem to be a set of problems which are specifically philosophical, and we might expect the philosopher to concentrate upon those problems. If God is able to prevent suffering, and does not, then the philosopher

has to show how this can be explained, if it can be, in terms of the concepts in which the problem is expressed. Those concepts can be developed into other concepts, of course, but we have to start with the way in which the problem is expressed in the religion. That is why we need to look at formulations of the problem from a variety of different perspectives in the religion to give as broad an understanding as possible of how that religion sees the issue. I used to think that it was possible to make a clear distinction between those aspects of a topic which are philosophical and those aspects which are not, but now I am not so sure. The idea that the philosophical analysis of a topic can encapsulate all the other approaches to it may have to be abandoned. The problem here is that so much of the essential core of the topic necessarily escapes the philosopher's gaze, since it consists of material which is not amenable to philosophical treatment. We shall see towards the end of the book how far this limits the strength of any conclusions which we can derive. Perhaps we shall have to see philosophy as just one way of approaching an issue, rather than the very best way.

It is worth pointing out that the individuals we discuss in this book are rarely professional philosophers in a contemporary sense. Most of them were involved in a whole range of activities, and often philosophy was quite tangential to their main interests. Nonetheless, they produced an important and extended debate on a central issue, that of the justification of evil and suffering in a world created by God. Often their discussion of this topic is part of a much wider discussion, and I hope that I have managed to convey enough about their general approach to philosophy to make their treatment of the topic comprehensible. Since they were rarely simply philosophers, they brought in a wide range of arguments in their discussion of the topic. I have tried to concentrate upon the more philosophical features of that range, but the reader should be aware that the texts being considered are part of a long and rich tradition of writing which is only occasionally directly concerned with philosophical issues. The chief concern of such writing is often the continuation of the tradition itself with all its complexity, and by concentrating upon the philosophy there is no attempt at presenting an accurate version of the whole tradition as it has developed. On the other hand, by following up a particular issue along its philosophical development over a long period we might get a glimpse of how a tradition grows and changes in response to a number of different factors. There have been few issues in Jewish cultural life

with the omnipresence and poignancy of evil and suffering, and the history of their philosophical treatment should throw light upon the tradition of Jewish intellectual life itself.

It is worth adding, though, that the main concentration here will be on the philosophical implications of the discussions concerning evil and suffering, and no attempt will be made at encompassing the broader aspects of these issues in any more detail than is required for their philosophical understanding. This is not because it is thought that the extra-philosophical aspects of the discussion are unimportant, nor because they are unrelated to the philosophical argument, but a history of the culture of the topic is far beyond the scope of this enquiry. Yet it is not easy to distinguish between the philosophical and the non-philosophical aspects of the topic. We have to beware of the common practice of allowing an easy interplay of philosophical and non-philosophical ideas, which tends to establish a conclusion in a rhetorically attractive manner, but which really has very little logical force. The sorts of language which sound impressive from the ministerial pulpit in a synagogue are designed to move the congregation to action, and they work if the speaker is able to understand the kind of points which will move his audience. It depends also on the nature of the audience. Some audiences are amenable to a more technical and logical discussion than are others, and the skilful speaker will adapt his text to the requirements of the situation. This is even more true of religious writings. These are many-faceted works, with a whole variety of feasible interpretations which are designed to appeal to a diversity of readers and potential worshippers.

Let us see how this point relates to the Book of Job, which is at issue in this discussion. The text starts with Job complaining about the injustice of his fate, and he is taken to be seeking an explanation for the apparent existence of innocent suffering. Job is himself virtuous and certainly does not deserve what is happening to him. He then wonders why the sort of God in whom he believes, an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God, allows these things to happen to him, or actually makes them happen. Job's friends take a variety of lines on his troubles, often arguing that he cannot be as innocent as he thinks he is, and so deserves his suffering. God does respond to Job, but not directly. He shows Job how powerless and ignorant he is by comparison with the deity, and this does the trick of persuading Job to accept his suffering, and as a result by the end of the Book he is rewarded by the return, and even increase, of his possessions. God does not criticise

Job for demanding an answer from God for the latter's apparent mismanagement of the world. On the contrary, God is critical of Job's friends for having blindly upheld the existence and pervasiveness of divine justice.

It has often been wondered by commentators why Job is satisfied with the response he gets from God. Why should the demonstration of divine power bring Job round to the acceptance of his sufferings, given that those sufferings are not caused by Job's guilt? We wonder why Job is satisfied with God's answer, which does not even seem to be an answer to Job's question. If we look at the context more carefully we can see that Job is not brought around by the demonstration of divine power so much as by the argument that the difference between God's point of view and his own is so great. Our grasp of reality is very limited, since we are finite creatures and there is clearly a relatively near horizon with respect to the extent of our knowledge. God, on the other hand, is infinite and understands exactly why everything is as it is. We are obliged to find out what the nature of his creation is, whereas he has maker's knowledge, he knows precisely the reasons for things being as they are. Were the world to be based upon an open principle of fairness, which balanced deserts with rewards and punishments, it would represent the sort of moral organisation which comes closest to our ways of thinking that things should be arranged, and yet we should then have no need for a supernatural mechanism which is assumed to lie behind the world. Job is impressed by what God says because Job comes to understand that the nature of divine action is based on mystery, and that mystery represents the religious aspect of the world.

Now, Job could have rejected this explanation. He could have insisted on receiving an answer to his original question, which was why God allowed the innocent to suffer. Job comes to see that the question which he originally posed is in fact the wrong question. The right question which should replace it concerns our relationship with God. God does not really respond to this question either, but the important development in the Book is that Job comes to see that his original question requires alteration. Through his experiences Job grows into a different sort of person, and the material rewards which he eventually receives are symbolic of the ways in which he has changed. This explains why God criticises Job's friends. They do not change at all, they remain the same throughout and do not cease repeating the same tired religious banalities, while Job does not allow

his sufferings to sink him into either a cowed submission to God or a strident opposition to God. This brings out something which is worth noticing about religious language. It is designed to help its readers and hearers work out for themselves how they are to behave and what they are to think. If it was immediately obvious what the language meant, then it would be easy to know what is intended by it. We could just follow the instructions and directions, and so arrive efficiently at the end to which the language points. This is what Job's friends try to do, and as a result they are rebuked by God. One might think that God would approve of their apparent orthodoxy and willingness to accept the pervasiveness of divine justice, but this is not so. What God values is the ability to work through one's problems, or at least to make the effort to come to terms with one's experiences. Job's friends never do this, they are not affected by Job's experiences at all. This has important implications for our understanding of the sort of religious language which both Job and his friends employ. It has to be flexible enough for different users to be able to decide how they are going to work it. The language has to be able both to guide its users on where they wish to go and also advise them as to where they ought to go, and it must be open enough to allow for a wide variety of feasible interpretations, since otherwise it would not give its users the opportunity to decide for themselves how they were going to use it.

This is certainly not the place to get involved in the analysis of how religious language differs from other types of language, but it is certainly relevant to say something about how it is possible to use philosophy to make relevant points about non-philosophical, and here religious, texts. It is of the nature of philosophical language to be closed, in the sense that it operates via deductive reasoning to try to establish a conclusion which follows logically from premisses, and the process is a necessary one. The philosopher tries to refine the concepts which are used to such an extent that they inevitably point in a particular direction, since any subsequent looseness in expression will invalidate the argument, or at the very least restrict its general value. It follows that there is going to be a big problem in combining religious statements which stem from a religious tradition and philosophical analysis. The former are going to be useful only if they provide adherents of the religion with enough room for interpretation for them to grow and develop with the user. Religious statements will be suggestive, and they can only be suggestive if they are open. It follows that we have to be very careful about combining such

statements with a philosophical treatment, since it is much too easy to select religious examples which can be made to fit a whole variety of philosophical theories.

We have seen that it could be argued that the problem which Job sets up in his Book is not so much about the rationale for the suffering of the innocent, but is rather about our relationship with God. This is perhaps hardly surprising, since the question about innocent suffering is only a question if the assumption is made that there is a being available who could undo the evil if he thought it desirable to act in this way. Quite naturally, we might move from raising the question of innocent suffering in a world potentially controlled by a being who could do something to relieve that suffering, who knows about its existence and who is full of good intentions towards his creation, to an enquiry into the nature of the being concerned. There must, after all, be something about him which explains his apparent inactivity when one might otherwise expect him to act, and so the discussion would move on to the nature of God and his relationship with us. It is very much on this form of the discussion that this book is based. This does not mean that we will not really be investigating the issues of evil and suffering, though, since, as Job discovered, these issues go hand in hand with an enquiry into the nature of God's relationship with us. While the approach which is being followed here is very different from that of the great twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, we can make use of his technique of *erfahrende Philosophie*, a philosophy of experience which seeks to understand what is behind the way in which people feel problems affect them, how the structure of our experience gives rise to and necessitates a metaphysical investigation into the presuppositions of that experience. It is of the nature of philosophy to be able to cope with only an aspect of the total historical experience of the Jewish people. Different and more expressive forms of representation are more appropriate for other aspects of that experience, but there is definitely an important role for rational enquiry into that experience too, and it is the intention of the discussion in this book to establish the value of such an approach.

The notion of an *erfahrende Philosophie* inevitably raises the question yet again of the link between philosophy and religion. There is no problem in understanding how philosophy can be expected to deal with the formal aspects of any system of thought, including religion. The sorts of concept which occur in religion can be abstracted and subjected to philosophical treatment, and the form of that treatment