THE META-ETHICAL DIMENSION OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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My discussion of Professor McMahon's recent article ¹ is unlike the standard response appearing in the journals in that I wish to support rather than refute his arguments. Specifically, I shall endeavor to supplement Professor McMahon's findings by showing how it comes about that the familiar argument from evils ² gains the persuasiveness which he notes.³ Recognizing that the problem of evil pertains in significant ways to the discipline of meta-ethics, I shall advance to investigate some logical peculiarities of the language in which the problem of evil is stated. I concur in what I take to be Professor McMahon's overall conclusion, namely, that a satisfactory solution of the problem of evil has not been elaborated by either theist or anti-theist; I shall add to this conclusion some observations about "meta-ethical commitment."

In what follows I shall discuss these claims.

(1) The argument from evils may be stated in moral language ⁴ interpretable so as automatically and artificially to render the problem of evil insoluble.
(2) If the terms in which the problem of evil is stated are given a utilitarian reading, the problem will be recognized as a genuine one.
(3) Although there seem to be good reasons for preferring a utilitarian reading, from the standpoint of meta-language there appears to be no way of deciding with finality between meta-ethically closed (as in [1] above) and meta-ethically open (as in [2]) statement of the problem of evil.

1. Emotive, Intuitive, and Theonomous Interpretations

Twentieth century studies in the language of morality have amply established that in some of its uses moral discourse operates chiefly at an emotive level. When so employed, both its original impact and its persuasiveness function almost exclusively by appeal to immediate feelings. In such uses of moral language there is little or no appeal to cognitive meanings or

² By the problem of evil I mean the intellectual puzzlement engendered by the double consideration that there are evils in the world and that an omnipotent benevolent God would not permit evil to exist. By the argument from evil I mean the philosophical claim that the existence of evils precludes the existence of the God of traditional Western religions.
³ "The anti-theist case has a great emotional appeal and is thus often quite persuasive." op. cit., p. 90.
⁴ I shall use the term moral language in an extended sense broad enough to take in any expression of value predicable of persons, acts or events.
their critical ingestion; as a matter of fact, the exercise of rational criticism might easily destroy the emotive effectiveness of some such employments of moral language (e.g., backbiting, gossip, a hate-monger's harangue).

The argument from evils is persuasively quite effective at the emotive level. As the argument is commonly wielded, it develops from an enumeration of cataclysms, agonies and injustices which is emotively sufficient to move the listener by touching clusters of con-attitudes and evoking felt agreement to the proposition, "There are evils in the world." (The further steps in the argument, notably the ascription of responsibility for the existence of these evils to a creator-God, are not of immediate concern to the analysis at this time).

The original emotive appeal of the argument is displayed in another consideration, namely, if the listener does not react emotively to the speaker's picture of cataclysms, injustices and sufferings (if the listener shrugs or merely says, "So what?") then the argument from evils simply does proceed to its intended conclusion. The speaker may think his listener barbaric and insensitive, but he has no way of forcing the argument, save repeating his picture with added emphasis or supplementing it with more provocative examples.5

One should not be surprised at the emotive success of the argument from evils. It would be logically and psychologically odd that an ordinary human being should not react emotively to the injustices and suffering in the world by feeling a strong con-attitude and by being willing to call these events evil. One should indeed be astounded, however, if the emotive effect of the argument were accepted without philosophical critique.

I take it as evident, at least on a prima facie basis, that one may meaningfully ask: Is it evil that there are evils? 6 But being able to ask this philosophical question places one in the position of having gotten beyond the bounds of a merely emotive approach, since in the posing of this question moral language is being used in some sense additional to the purely emotive sense. Emotively it would be nonsensical to ask: Is it evil that there are evils?, for on a purely emotive reading the question translates:

Does one have a con-attitude toward that toward which one has a con-attitude?

It might be objected that there are contexts in which the question: Does one have a con-attitude toward that toward which one has a con-attitude? might meaningfully be asked.7 It seems, for instance, one might ask this question if the point of one's inquiry were to ascertain the proper character of a feeling which appears fuzzy or ambiguous. Thus one might be asking

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5 Another illustration of the primarily emotive character of the argument derives from the contexts of its greatest impact. Frequently it is persons like the father who has lost his only son, or the soldier who has witnessed wholesale human slaughter, that are most convinced by the argument -- persons, that is, who have been deeply affected by very strong emotional situations.

6 See McMahon, op. cit., p. 85.

7 The question is not to be read: Is it evil that there are things viewed with a con-