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The God of Love

1. Creative love, human and divine

The previous chapter argued that drawing an analogy between God and human parents actively undermined the claims of Swinburne and others about the in-principle relevance to God's existence of blemishes in the world such as the slightest toothache. It also argued that if God created the world from a love akin to human parental love, then he cannot be a God of the sort we find in theodicy, who would not refrain from creating the world with horrors (at least) as terrible as those of the actual world so long as they are outweighed by greater goods, but who would resile from creation on account of evil outweighing good by the margin of the slightest toothache. In this chapter I argue that the parental love image of God points us towards still more radical ideas. If the argument of Chapter 1 were the last word on the topic of God and evil, God might very well be dead. In this chapter I argue that the parental love image of God offers the believer a possible response both to standard atheology and to Karamazov's challenge: a response in the form of an appeal to love. The response does not ultimately succeed so long as we retain an anthropomorphic conception of God as an immaterial agent, a being who performs loving acts. It does succeed once we amend the analogy between God and human parents to acknowledge that while human parental love is indeed akin to divine love, this is not because both are instances of an agent performing loving acts. Rather in God there is no distinction between his nature and his action. He is love itself, and particular human parental loves (and others) are (imperfect) instantiations of that love. But I shall leave this development of the argument until the next chapter. In this chapter, working for the present within an anthropomorphic understanding of the analogy, I shall explore how
the appeal to love can open up a rival route out of the problem of evil to that offered by theodicy. The appeal concedes that Karamazov’s challenge is fatal to the moral arguments of theodicy. It recognises that just as Ivan’s compassionate indignation is an attack on God that breaks radically from the terms of that tradition, so a defence of God must also make that radical break. The debate between greater good atheology and greater good theodicy is reconfigured as a debate between morality and love, between an approach to the problem which brings God under moral judgement and an approach which (for the believer) does not. This in turn is a central plank in a wider reconfiguration of the problem of evil as what I shall call an existential problem, rather than an impersonal problem. This reconfigured debate is a conflict of two incommensurable worldviews.

This section of the chapter sets out the basics of the appeal to love making use of the analogy between God and human parents. Love is contrasted with morality in general, and in particular the greater good morality of atheology and theodicy and Ivan Karamazov’s morality of compassionate indignation. In Section 2 I clarify the radical difference between the old and the new forms of the debate over the problem of evil. There are two dimensions to this. The first is that in the old debate the believer submits God to moral judgement and judges him acquitted, but in the new debate the believer, in the name of love, exempts God from moral judgement. The second dimension, a consequence of this appeal to love, is the distinction between the old form of the debate as a technical and impersonal one and the new form as an existential one. This distinction is elucidated in terms of three concepts: objectification, expertise and authenticity. The final, third section introduces another, fourth crucial concept for the impersonal/existential distinction – the failure of what moral philosophers call the universalisability of moral judgements – and raises the suggestion that there is no single correct conclusion to the reconfigured problem of evil, a conclusion the same for everyone, but that belief may be the required position for some people and disbelief the required position for others, even though neither is at intellectual or moral fault. I also elucidate here the basic sense in which I contrast love with morality. Morality – as understood by most moral philosophers, and certainly by atheologists and theodics – is committed to universalisability. So too is Ivan Karamazov’s morality of compassionate indignation, albeit (as I shall explain) in an importantly different sense. Love in contrast – the kind of love I have in mind, and in the context of the problem of evil – is free of universalisable commitments.