

INTERVIEW VII

ML: Today, we're going to discuss theodicy and its several attempts to

~~reconcile the coexistence of evil and God.~~ Any venture that looks to deal

fits this category.
with the philosophical problem of evil, is theodicy. (And there are many.

God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself.

He, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity.

But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate *(H/S)* goodness all the more.

It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated ~~his~~

sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a

condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this

enormous desire in God to be glorified? Why is that so acceptable ^{to} ~~by~~ so

many branches of religion? We laugh at people who insist on being

constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes.

~~And~~ ^{and} crazy generals, ~~or~~ impossible authors, ~~or~~ mad kings and greed-bag

tycoons. One of the few things we all seem pretty certain of is that excessive

vanity, once it becomes a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized

vanity must be worse. Where is the need for it?.

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be

true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start

posing a few questions. Is ~~it that~~ ^{so} God's need to be loved ~~is~~ crucial because

God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest

and appreciated?
need to be adored. It is precisely when we are worn thin, *precisely these* when our

times when our
(courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is

attenuated. At such times, we *are* ~~may be~~ more in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: It is the only justification I can comprehend for God needing so much adoration from us.

ML: Moving to my second point, you *do* ~~find~~ *have any* interest in the argument that

He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who rule His places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your

love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to

to receive it and return it? What they're saying—without understanding,

because they never follow anything to ~~logical~~ conclusion—but one of the elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not *contemplating* ~~thinking through to~~ the consequences of their thought. For if God does need a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked.

Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are developing?

Now, all we have to work with in these theological speculations is what we know from our own experience. People who need love desperately are not often in good shape. If God created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God must also want us to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to God's advantage, I would argue,

for us to understand what God's needs might be. Unless, on the other hand,

human history has been so vile and so awful, so permeated by the Devil,

the large and little triumphs of
has a legitimate fear of being
that God ~~lives in terror, expecting to be~~ destroyed by mankind so soon as

humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility.

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can

test humanity and see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil

and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational, *it* can make us

better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the

child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if

the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of

detestable parents, fathers and mothers of that ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we say, "Now that you've been through this, you're a better person for it." We do that all the time to our children.

NM: On the other hand, there is also large vanity in the assumption that God knows all about evil. Why not try to live with the notion that God is trying to discover what evil is about? What if evil is, at present, more bottomless than good? Isn't that a corollary of the notion that God is not all-powerful? What, after all, is God's relation to evil? Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend evil all that well, any more than as parents we can understand it if our children are moving toward evil. Are parents always the first to know?

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the sole origin of

consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our ~~minds,~~ ^{comprehension}

^{of} and so be able to understand the world around us a little more. Do you

reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an

immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are

reduced if not

(destroyed. Suffering can maim more spirit than it creates. Some learn best

by suffering through small stages, shifts in one's uglier habits. If, for

example, if you want to become a better man or woman, that might require

not indulging greed.

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be

suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a

level so intense that one had to wonder whether one could go on. Was

existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense.

Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true that ^{a number} ~~those~~ who pass

through such storms of the soul can come out on the other side not

emotionally crippled, and have much to offer. But ^{most} ~~some~~ are hobbled, and

have lost too much.

ML: Let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain

exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will

exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world,

but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a

day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer

concerning the way and the means by which he will become wealthy. He

has nothing but his hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will

live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but our need for future

That is intrinsic to
promises, ~~which is a species of~~ salesmanship. "You won't know what true

wonderful!
happiness is until you buy this car. ~~Don't let people tell you it's a lemon; it's~~

~~a wonderful car,~~ You'll come back and thank me for having sold *it to* ~~you this~~

~~car."~~

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the
assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my
lights, ~~the~~ theological misdirection rears up right ~~here~~ at the start. Anyone
who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals *set up* ~~that~~ have come
down through evolution (and/or Intelligent Design) has to assume that God
may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw,
is going to be the best of its species." Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So

God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better pig. Then, man came into it and began in his turn to alter the animals. And often, improve them. (As we see on TV every year at the American Kennel

Club.) ~~My underlying notion is not that God knows completely what He or~~

~~She is doing, but rather that God is searching to do the best He or She can,~~

~~do to improve things.~~ Yet, the moment you accept a darker notion of

existence—that is, live with the assumption there are hazards and perils

added by the Devil, then God's effort becomes a contest where no one,

human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. One must commit

oneself to such a contest or be certain to fail! In contrast, look at how our

minds, our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all being done for God's

greater glory. All we have to do is keep patient and pass through our

suffering. Because at the end, a happy ending is guaranteed No! I much

prefer the Greek's assumption that tragedy lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way are we entitled to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all of us, and we need only keep our minds clean and, most preferably, theologically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of Maya. Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say: what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or it's unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural disaster, are really not so. It could all be part of God's scheme. *Eastern thought --* ~~All eastern religions~~ Taoism, Buddhism,

Hinduism, Confucianism, take^s this stance—they do not engage the problem of evil. You are mistaken, they would claim, if you think it is really there.

NM: This argument could survive until the 20th century came along. I think

the Holocaust shattered it. Shattered it force majeure. A useful notion,

force majeure ~~it~~ says that these particular facts are so strong that they

dictate the first way, and maybe the only way, you can approach the

problem.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, ~~and~~ the atom bomb. The

mystery of ^{human} suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. In

consequence, the notion that evil is illusion becomes offensive. Of course,

Maya assumes that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is

illusion—wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all

Maya. But I must say I find that almost as offensive. It suggests that we are

at best no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture.

Indeed, the notion that all life is illusion is not a bad way for the upper classes of India to salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty around them. But that's another discussion.

*comparing
with
Vishnu
and
Brahma*

If you believe in karma as I do, ~~and so~~ believe not only in rebirth, but in subtle divine judgment (hopefully it is subtle) concerning the manner in which you will be reborn, another part of me remains sardonic and expects

that God may have His or Her bureaucratic problems with reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm or flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive this unforgivably crude presentation of celestial mechanics, but it must serve for the moment. When reincarnation is flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they are

abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft of awareness at the moment of their death—they can possess no sense of why they now must die—then they have less preparation within themselves as they enter reincarnation. The most sensitive part of their mortal anticipation has been lopped off. *It is worth repeating.* I would argue that a sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that comes to one after a modicum of thought and fear and resolve and expectation. I believe there is a difference then, and, it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many human entrances into death. I *also* *believe there may have been* ~~think there was also~~ confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare for ~~God and~~ the angels. Reincarnation was flooded with near to nameless dead.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

NM: I believe it's analogous, but not identical.

ML: So every time this has happened, like at the battle of Stalingrad, all of those. . .

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, prepared to die. What was most diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were most careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive showers. Courtesy of the camp. So, please undress. Those prisoners who

were most obsessed with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers.

A minute later, they were dying with fire in their lungs, and screaming,

"You lied, you cheated me." I am arguing that for a thousand people to die

in a large room at a given moment of betrayal is different—dying in a rage,

feeling that God or someone or something on high betrayed them.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a ^{last} ~~good~~ chance

they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous

problems to the powers of reincarnation than the ~~terrible~~ ^{terrible} gasings of the

Holocaust. I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying.

I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were

ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? Certainly the laws concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that set of proportions. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is equal to assuming that He or She never suffers ^{before} ~~by~~ even a passing despair ^{at} ~~a~~ huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every event? Or is in command of every energy for every occasion? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every oncoming situation was delineated in advance.

ML: So, what happened to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this ^{speculation.} ~~large assumption.~~ I would say most ^{of those} ~~of them~~ who desired reincarnation did receive it, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This flows from the argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to

heaven or hell is to encounter some angelic witty presence who decides how

you are going to be reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present,

that is as close as you will get to heaven or hell, knowledge that you will

have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when

the Creator

God is not functioning at His or Her best ^{but} because God is too beleaguered,

too extenuated, too despairing, too exhausted, then the choices ^{that are} made for

reincarnation can ^{be} become gross—there's not enough of God to go around.

It is a way of saying that the

~~The~~ Holocaust deadened God's wit. Too much was happening at once,

And God, too, has limits, is not inexhaustible. ~~This is at the core of~~

~~everything I have been saying: God is a divinity possessed of great~~

~~energies, great creativity, great possibility, but that does not mean that God~~

~~is all-powerful.~~

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly

won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms

and see that certain

look
~~where the students are ready to learn, whereas others, when you walk in, are~~

lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is

compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your

heart, you are ~~much~~ harder to reach. How does this not apply to

(improvising)
reincarnation? I am now ~~speculating~~ outrageously, but allow me. Let us

say, the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of

how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there,

and might well deserve to go here or there. In normal situations, they can

make quick decisions. But if the dead person's soul is in disarray, then it can be analogous to you deciding how to give necessary counsel to a person who has come into your room in fearful drugged-up condition. You don't necessarily know where or how they should be assigned to class. I think this carries over to some extent to what I'm talking about.

ML: OK. Next one. The big picture. We've talked about this before, but this is the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Certainly.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out ~~you know, you say a~~

to be positive experiences.
a year later ~~I've heard you do this many times.~~

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how the Holocaust was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with reality. I wrote a book which concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: that God lost to the Devil when He had expected to

win—He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and

~~that that was to be expected~~
immediately. He did not foresee the end. ~~and~~ God, having so much to

create and oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of

His Creations are capable of. So I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His

bold stroke. In chess, for instance, when a really bold move is made and

you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an

exclamation point plus a question mark. I would say God's expectation for

Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. Then, like many

another bold move, it did not turn out right. The Devil won—Jesus was

tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with an answer to the

Devil. He gave us to believe that His Son had died for our sins. What a

deep chord was struck! But to say this was planned in advance—

crucifixion and resurrection—dubious. God may well have been

responding to a crushing defeat with half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events had taken place—which is exactly what we humans do all the time. We call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. It enables us to keep on living. I suppose I even offer the assumption that God is not only like us in many ways but, indeed, He or She also has an ego to protect, that is, a necessary reservoir of ~~the~~ ^{enough} confidence to keep striving.

ML: The next theodicy argues that evil is not the cause, but the consequence of people failing to observe God's will. Universal, reciprocated love would solve most of the problems that lead to the evils in the world.

NM: Well, let me go back to something I said earlier. God is searching for a deeper set of meanings in evil. Conceivably, God may feel that He does

not understand evil all that satisfactorily. Evil has aspects that God's understanding may not penetrate. My repetitive notion is that God, like us, seeks to learn. Maybe at the commencement, whatever form it really took, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, new young deity, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it." *If You can."*

ML: That's a Gnostic idea.

NM: "And if You fail—well, *it's happened to* other young deities *have* failed before you."

All the same, You are an artist, the *best* ~~greatest~~ artist we have available just now

for Your assigned part of the cosmos." Given this scenario, *our young* God soon

discovers that He or She has a great deal to learn about evil. And ~~God~~ *soon* is

~~now~~ fascinated with evil. ~~You could go so far as to say God plays with evil,~~

~~uses it sometimes, but is not fundamentally evil. Is not fundamentally~~

~~sympathetic to evil.~~

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we know—that is, our world itself.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good, just as there are degrees of worth.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear.

But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time, but (rarely—thank God!) on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly cannot say that it is not really evil, merely a lesser degree of good. Maybe Emerson never sniffed an incubus. He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians ~~abuse it.~~

~~They~~ wiggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the philosophical day.

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up. Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us once we were given free will. But, of necessity, the door had to be left open to the Devil. This was a move done, perhaps—on a cosmic

level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the Devil had something like an equal opportunity to influence humans.

I would add that by now it ^{is} a tri-partite war. If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than some species of Astro-turf, then we still do not have free will. We have to be equal as players to God and the Devil. To be free we need the ability to present ourselves as the third creative force in this combat. That opens a new kind of fear for us.

Some might be terrified that we would all go down in disaster. Others supposed that God would finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, would all go to heaven. That was a view held for centuries. Now, it is as if any one of these three forces might triumph. We can even conceive of a universe that manages to survive for a period without God and the Devil—

at least, to a degree. I don't pretend to know how to speculate on this. Let's say it is not inconceivable that man may become more and more powerful in relation to God and the Devil. If They have exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it does become man's world, our humans' world. But that could prove disastrous, absolutely disastrous.

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God.

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal down if you wished to eat meat. Now the beasts are brought to stockyards. Flesh for consumption is slaughtered in disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room to move once they are fattened. The world of nature was once built on the basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding cycle. Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original ~~and doubtless beautiful~~ conception. Today, as one example, the overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed it. In like fashion, the earlier human notion that

excessive evil was compensated for—that if you were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may no longer be operative.

Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It's a deep belief, *indeed so profound* ~~So deep~~ that one cannot necessarily ignore the possibility that it is real.

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account in part for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics has nothing to do with the wheel.

Electronics was one jump by mankind that God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my ^{supposition.} speculation.

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my

arguments make sense if the end is known. *I think it is* ~~It is~~ precisely because the end is

unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only *untethered, even* philosophically outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble.

Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to quick judgment concerning others.

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is

much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does indeed ^{has} have evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the Devil a great deal.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

NM: Probably. But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That could be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in

Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the Devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but also as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

NM: For one thing, by Jehovah trying to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be God was trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide

if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the Devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if we assume that they were building this Church together and worked in collaboration, and with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the Devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours. He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of both God and the Devil?

NM: Of course.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: You bet.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our passage to eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can give is, "Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond

you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater

demands are placed upon faith. Sooner or later, and in so many, faith snaps.

And people leave the Church, leave religion, cease to believe. While "Do

not presume to understand the mind of God" is the most-employed of the

various explanations of evil, it is also, in its final effect, the most

demoralizing.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to attempt to create a viable vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly indisposed to welcome Us.

↓
8 (cc)

INTERVIEW VIII

Theology

ML: Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil,

And
fits ~~this~~ category. *And* there are many. *They are called theodicies*
and I will cite a number of them but there
are so many I will move to the next so soon as you
God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself.

He, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity.

But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate His goodness all the more. It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this enormous desire in God to be glorified? Why is that so acceptable to so many branches of religion? We laugh at people who insist on being

from
your
point
of
view
has
done
your
best
to
refute
the
premise.
NM: Agreed
ML: God's
ultimate

constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes,

Crazy generals and impossible authority, mad kings and greed-bag tycoons.

One of the few things we all seem ^{to agree on} pretty certain of is that excessive vanity,

^{has grown into} once it becomes a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity ^{is hard to comprehend.} ~~must be worse.~~ (Where is the need for it?)

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start posing a few questions. Is God's need to be loved so crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be appreciated? It is precisely when we are worn thin—precisely those times when our courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we are more in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: It is the only justification I can comprehend for God needing so much adoration from us.

ML: Moving to my second point, do you have any interest in the argument that He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who rule His places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to return it? What they're saying—without understanding, because they never follow anything to conclusion—but one of the elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not contemplating the consequences of their thought. For if God does need a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked. Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are developing?

Now, all we have to work with in these theological speculations is what we know from our own experience. People who need love desperately are not often in good shape. If God created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God must also want us to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to God's advantage, I would argue, for us to understand what God's needs might be. Unless, on the other hand, human history has been so vile and so awful, so permeated by the large and little triumphs of ^{the} Devil, that God has a legitimate fear of being destroyed by

mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility. *If it is ~~exorbitant~~ requests for love become even more disgusting.*

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can test humanity and see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational; it can make us better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of ~~detestable~~ *detestable* parents, fathers and mothers of that ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we say, "Now that you've been through this, you're a better person for it." We do that all the time to our children.

NM: On the other hand, there is also large vanity in the assumption that God knows all about evil. Why not try to live with the notion that God is trying to discover what evil is about? What if evil is, at present, more bottomless than good? Isn't that a corollary of the notion that God is not all-powerful? What, after all, is God's relation to evil? Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend evil all that

well, any more than as parents we ~~can~~ ^{we always think to} understand ~~if~~ ^{if} our children are ~~moving~~ ^{sliding} toward evil. Are parents always the first to know?

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our comprehension of the world around us a little more. Do you reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are reduced if not destroyed. Suffering can maim more spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering through small stages, shifts in one's uglier habits. If, for example, ~~if~~ you want to become a better man or woman, that might require not indulging greed.

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a level so intense that one had to wonder whether one could go on. Was existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense. Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true that a number ~~who~~ ^{do} pass through such storms of the soul ~~can~~ ^{and} come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, ~~and~~ ^(ideally) have much to offer. But most are hobbled, ~~and~~ ^{most} have lost too much.

ML: Let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world, but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer concerning the way and the means by which he will become wealthy. He has nothing but his hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but our need for future promises. *Are we looking for good?* ~~That is intrinsic to salesmanship.~~ "You won't know what true happiness is until you buy this wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold it to you."

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my lights, theological misdirection rears up right at the ~~start~~. *commencement of the thesis.* Anyone who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals who have come ~~down~~ through evolution (and/or Intelligent Design) has to assume that God may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw, is going to be the best of its species." Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better

pig. Then, man came into it and began in his turn to alter the animals. And often, improve them. (As we see every year on TV at the American Kennel Club.) Yet, the moment you accept a darker notion of existence—that is, live with the assumption there are hazards and perils added by the Devil, then God's effort becomes a contest where no one, human or divine, ^{themselves} necessarily knows which side may win. ^{Many might be ready to commit} One must commit oneself to such a contest ^{or be certain to fail} In contrast, look at how ^{our minds} your sense of challenge, ^{happening to illuminate them all} is reduced if it is all being done for God's greater glory. All we have to do is ^{remain} keep patient and pass through our suffering, ^{become} Because at the end, a happy ending is guaranteed No! I much prefer the Greek ^{of the Greeks} assumption that tragedy lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way are we entitled to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all of us, and we need only keep our minds clean and, most preferably, theologically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of Maya. Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say: what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or it's unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural disaster, are really not so. It could all be

part of God's scheme. Eastern thought—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—take this stance. They do not engage the problem of evil.

You are mistaken, they would claim, if you think it is really there.

NM: This argument could survive ^{into} ~~until~~ the 20th century ~~came along~~. I think

~~Then,~~ the Holocaust shattered it. Shattered it force majeure. A useful notion—

~~Force majeure~~. It says that ^{The} ~~these~~ particular facts are so strong ^{were so strong} that they dictated the need for a different approach, dictate the first way, and maybe the only way, you can approach the

problem.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, the atom bomb. The mystery ~~and~~ ^(the outrage of excessive) human suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. In

consequence, the notion that evil is illusion ^{grows} ~~becomes~~ offensive. Of course,

Maya assumes that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is

illusion—wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all

Maya. But I must say I find that almost as offensive. ^{disagreeable.} It suggests that we are ^{at our maximum and} ~~at best~~ no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture.

Indeed, the notion that all life is illusion is ^{comparing to the ethos of} ~~not a bad way for~~ the upper

classes of India ^{They can} ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~salve~~ their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous

poverty around them. ^{It's all illusion they can tell} ~~But that's another discussion,~~ ^{themselves happily and most conveniently,}

If you believe in karma as I do, believe not only in rebirth, but in subtle divine judgment (hopefully it is subtle) concerning the manner in

which you will be reborn, another part of me remains sardonic and expects that God may have His or Her ^{occasional / opening} bureaucratic problems ^{the mechanics of} with reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm ^a or flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive this ^{so a} unforgivably crude presentation of celestial mechanics, but it must serve for the moment. When reincarnation is flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they are abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft of awareness at the moment of their death—^{there to die managed} they can possess ^{enter reincarnation} no sense of why they now must die—then they ^{any} have less preparation within themselves ^{with} as ~~they enter reincarnation~~. The most sensitive ^{may} part of their mortal anticipations ^{have} has been lopped off. It is worth repeating. I would argue that a sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that comes to one after a modicum of thought and fear and resolve and expectation. I believe there is a difference ^{then} then, and, it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many human entrances into death. I also believe there may have been confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare ^{for the angels} for the angels. Reincarnation was flooded with near to nameless dead.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

NM: I believe it's analogous, but not identical.

ML: So every time this has happened, like at the battle of Stalingrad, all of those...

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, ^{aware that} prepared

^{you may} ~~to~~ die. What was ~~most~~ diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were ~~most~~ careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive showers. Courtesy of the camp. ^{be so grateful to} So, ~~please~~ undress. Those prisoners who were most obsessed with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers.

A minute later, they were dying with fire in their lungs, and screaming,

"You lied, you cheated me." I am arguing that for a thousand people to die in a large room ^{over one hideous instant} ~~at a given moment~~ of betrayal is different ~~dying in a rage,~~

^{to feel} ~~feeling~~ that God or ^{someone} ~~someone or something~~ on high betrayed them.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a large chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous

problems to the powers of reincarnation than the gassings of the Holocaust.

I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying. I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? Certainly the laws concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that set of proportions. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is equal to assuming that He or She never suffers even a passing despair before huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every event? Or is in command of every energy for every occasion? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every oncoming situation was delineated in advance.

Handly 50% History because of the ongoing actions of God and Devil is not often open to prediction. Before the future

ML: So, what happened to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this speculation. I would say most of those who desired reincarnation did receive it, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This flows from

of history even divinity is take pause.

derive from

(the argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to heaven or hell is to encounter some angelic witty presence who decides how you are going to be reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present, that is as close as

you will get to heaven or hell, ^{or, then the} knowledge that you will have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when the Creator is not functioning at His or Her best but is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too despairing, too exhausted, then the choices ^{are} ~~that we~~ made for reincarnation can be ^{deemed} gross—there's not enough of God to go around. It is a way of saying the Holocaust deadened God's wit. Too much was happening at once. ~~And~~ ^{I will repeat once more,} God, too, has limits, is not inexhaustible.

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms and see that certain students are ready to learn, whereas others look lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your heart, you are harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now improvising outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, ^{that} the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there, and might well deserve to go ^{to this rebirth or to that} ~~here or there~~. In normal situations, they can make quick decisions.

But if the dead person's soul is in disarray, then it can be analogous to you deciding how to give necessary counsel to a ^{student} person (who has come into your room in fearful drugged-up condition. You don't necessarily know ^{where they} ~~where or~~ ^{a given} ~~how~~ they should be assigned to ^{can carry} ~~class~~. I think this ~~carries over to some~~ ~~extent~~ to what I'm talking about.

ML: ~~OK~~. Next one. The big picture, ~~We've talked about this before, but~~ ~~this~~ is the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Certainly.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out a year later to be positive experiences.

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how the Holocaust was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with reality. ^{cosmic or earthly} I wrote

In "The Gospel According to the Son I" a book which concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: ~~that~~ God lost to the Devil, ^{worse} ~~when~~ He had expected to win. He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and immediately. He did not foresee the end. ~~That was to be expected.~~ God, having so much to create and oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of His ^{particular} ~~creations~~ ^{is} ~~are~~ capable of. So I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke. ^{I would add that in} In chess, for instance, when a really bold ^{the player is} move is made and you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would say God's expectation for Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. ^{as expected.}

Then, like many another bold move, it did not turn out ~~right~~. The Devil won—Jesus was tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with an answer to the Devil. He gave us to believe that His Son ^{actually} ~~had~~ died for our sins. What a ^{human} ~~deep~~ chord was struck! But to ^{suggest that} ~~say~~ this was planned in advance—crucifixion and resurrection—dubious. God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with ^{claims of} half a victory. That makes more sense

to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events *ensued* ~~had taken place~~—which is exactly what ~~we~~ humans do all the time. We call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. ~~It enables us to keep on~~ *living*. I suppose I even offer the assumption that God is not only like us in many ways but, indeed, He or She also has an ego to protect, that is, a necessary reservoir of confidence ^{vital} enough to keep striving.

ML: The next theodicy argues that evil is not the cause, but the consequence of people failing to observe God's will. Universal, reciprocated love would solve most of the problems that lead to the evils in the world.

NM: Well, let me go back to something I said earlier. God is searching for a deeper set of meanings in evil. Conceivably, God may feel that He does not understand evil all that satisfactorily. Evil has aspects that God's understanding may not penetrate. My repetitive notion is that God, like us, seeks to learn. Maybe at the commencement, whatever form it ~~really~~ took, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, new *and most youth ful* ~~young~~ deity, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it. If ~~you~~ can."

ML: That's a Gnostic idea.

NM: "And if You fail—well, it's happened to other ~~young~~ deities. All the same, You are an artist, the best artist we have available just now for Your

assigned part of the cosmos." Given this scenario, our young God soon discovers that He or She has a great deal to learn about evil. And is soon fascinated with evil.

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, ^{at the least} I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we know—our world.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good, just as there are degrees of worth.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear.

But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time, but (rarely—thank God!) on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly cannot say that it is not really evil, merely a lesser degree of good. Maybe Emerson never ^{felt} sniffed an incubus ^{on his chest.} He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians wriggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the philosophical day.

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up. Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us ^{provided} ~~once~~ we were given free will. But, of necessity, the door had to be left open to the Devil. This was a move done, perhaps—on a cosmic level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the Devil had something like an equal opportunity to influence humans.

I would add that by now it is a tri-partite war. If it is only a contest ^{some species} ~~the field on which it all takes place~~ between God and the Devil, and we are no more than ~~some species~~ of Astro-

^{has to} ~~then~~ we still do not have free will. We have to be equal as players to

God and the Devil. That ^{we could} ~~opens~~ a new kind of fear for us. ^{in consequence} ~~Some might be~~ terrified that we would all go down in disaster. ^{The usual supposition,} ~~Others supposed that God~~

^{however, it took Calvin} ~~would finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, would all go to~~

heaven, ^{will} ~~That was~~ a view held for centuries. ^{no longer, however, I would say} Now, it is as if any one of

these three forces ^{can} ~~might~~ triumph. ^{Many will now even} We can even conceive of a universe that

~~manages to survive for a period without God and the Devil~~ ^{at least, to a}

degree. I don't pretend to know how to speculate on this. Let's say it is not inconceivable that man may become more and more powerful in relation to God and the Devil. If They have exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it does become man's world, our humans' world. ^{and woman's} But that ~~could prove disastrous, absolutely disastrous.~~

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so

large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God. *I, naturally, see that as absolutely disastrous. If I have been ready*

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal down if you wished to eat meat. Now the beasts are brought to stockyards. Flesh for consumption is slaughtered in disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room to move once they are fattened. The world of nature ^(lived) was once built on the basis that nearly everything

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contributed to the feeding ^{chain.} ~~cycle.~~ Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original conception. Today, as one example, the overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed ^{much} ~~it~~. In like fashion, the earlier human notion that excessive evil was compensated for—that if you were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may no longer be operative. Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It is a deep belief, indeed so profound that one cannot necessarily ignore the possibility that it is real.

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all

over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account in part for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics has nothing to do with the wheel.

Electronics was one jump by mankind that God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my supposition.

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes

no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my arguments make sense if the end is known. I think it is precisely because the end is unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only philosophically untethered, even outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble. Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to

quick judgment concerning others, *even as we cling to a partial optimism in which we only half-believe.*

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your

supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does indeed has evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the Devil a great deal.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

who knows?
NM: ~~Probably~~. But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That ~~could~~ ^{might} be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the Devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but also as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

for one thing
NM: ~~For one thing~~, by Jehovah trying to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It ~~that~~ ^{that always} may be God was trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide

if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the Devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if we assume that they were building this Church together and worked in collaboration, and with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the Devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours. He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of both God and the Devil?

NM: Of course.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: You bet.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our ^{ticket} passage to

eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can give is, "Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater *spiritual loans are borrowed from faith* demands are placed upon faith. Sooner or later, and in so many, faith snaps. *And* people leave the Church, leave religion, cease to believe. While "Do not presume to understand the mind of God" is the most-employed of the various explanations of evil, it is also, in its final effect, the most demoralizing.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to attempt to create a viable vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly indisposed to welcome Us.

To shift the course of this discussion, there are some remarks I want to add. I have been thinking about this for a long time. Part of the interest I've had in theology, not my fundamental interest, but still vital, has always been political. In other words, what kind of political system would God like? And I'm not sure God is certain. In different times, God may have been partial to Monarchy, to Communism, and certainly was interested in Democracy, in Capitalism. These systems are not without comparison to the designs of His animals. Which ones work best? I think a great deal was put into Communism at one point. However, I also have this notion that the Devil is at war with God, so, even as Communism ended badly, democracy could end badly. It's why I speak of an existential God.

You may ask: Where is the positive element in all this? What might give us a sense of beauty, religious awe, or even a feeling that I might want to be near to God? What do people like me believe? What are our positive intimations of God? Well, I do believe there are elements of compassion in our world, elements of goodness. I might even believe that love may be more of a life-giving force than hate. The majority of us are working, after all, to create a world where there is reasonable equity. What political form

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could that world take? If we start with the brilliant arguments of writers as great as Nietzsche, we argue that it is wrong to pay great attention to the weak, the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mediocre, the inferior. They are, Nietzsche argues, a huge drag upon existence. They are filled with hatred. They wish to destroy all that is noble or aristocratic, beautiful or fine. It is a sustainable argument—Nietzsche is probably the most interesting and powerful conservative who ever wrote. Yet, as an argument, it only goes so far before it falls short, even crashes. And for a very simple reason. It is that the aristocracy was corrupt, the oligarchs of capitalism are corrupt. Conservatism is as filthy in its practices as its opponents. If the poor are malodorous, so are the rich. And the rich have advantages that the poor do not have.

On the other hand, Socialism has never worked. Why? Because it refuses to live with the notion that God exists and is part of the human balance. So a built-in difficulty intrudes on what was conceived as an equitable system. It is that the majority of leaders who come to power under socialism do not believe in the existence of God and are soon engaged in a hegemony of the ego. My feeling, then, is that to advocate socialism with no existential sense of religion as a foundation, is to make a profound error. The beauty of Christ—what Christ was saying to all of us—is that the poor

There
are
Christian
Socialists

Lin.
Jennings
Bayer,
Donofrio
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etc

have as much reason to exist as the wealthy. I don't want to oversimplify Nietzsche's argument, but finally he did feel that Christ was not only speaking to the unwashed but arousing a great rage in them, and this rage would yet destroy all that was noble in civilization. I would argue that unless we have a profound understanding of the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor, and the passion of the poor to become more than they are at present, we are looking to bypass the horrors of society. So I say that socialism without belief in an existential God cannot work well, whereas socialism with belief in a God who wants much of what we want can open life and society for us. If that is workable, if a socialist society should ever exist with a belief in an existential God, I think we might begin to find some of the real beginnings of human equity. Let me say, since I have a great distrust of large organizations and obsessive government power, that I also think small business must be a viable part of any state socialism. Let the largest organizations be socialist rather than corporate. Because the corporations cannot be trusted. The corporation is—I've called it the Big Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past, it has very little interest in its previous history; it has very little interest in its future.

ML: It does have an interest in its future.

NM: Things are done without looking to the long future. For example, outsourcing is an immediate way of making profits. They have to show a profit every year, just like the psychopath has to feel that he and his ego are larger today than yesterday. Otherwise, they will go into a depression. By contrast, under existential socialism, it would be natural to have an interest in the past and the future. The idea: You don't look for huge profits, but for the well-being of all, the ongoing enrichment of the culture of all. To keep such socialism alive, small business has to be encouraged, and the notion of community, of neighborhood. Behind it all would be the idea that we might even be working with God. Not working to obey Him, to praise Him, to slave for His vanity, but on the contrary, to live with the idea that God shares desires with us, that we are at last working together, yes, finally, after centuries and millennia of hatred of god, beseechments of God, intense if mindless prayer, valleys and promontories of ritual, attempts to take God by force, attempts to do without God, attempts to glorify Him at the expense of all reason, there might be at last an agreeable sense that, yes, we are working with God, and God is working with us, and we don't understand God altogether and God doesn't understand us altogether, but we even might have a certain regard for each other. If you have a society built on the religious notion that God needs us as much as we need God, that does offer

a little more promise than the ongoing notion of corporate capitalism that greed is good, and the free market has to be our only Valhalla.

Missing?