DIALOGUE ON GOOD, EVIL, AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Characters: Gretchen Weirob, Sam Miller, Dave Cohen

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THE FIRST MORNING

MILLER: Hello, Gretchen. I stopped by because I heard that you were under the weather. I brought you a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll from Starbucks.

WEIROB: That was most kind of you, Sam. I've got a terrible case of the flu, and I feel absolutely miserable. I'm sneezing and dripping; every muscle aches; I've got a headache. I know that coffee will help my headache, but I haven't had the willpower to get up and make myself some. Your kindness is most welcome.

MILLER: To be honest, I also thought you might like someone to talk to for a while. But if you have a headache . . .

WEIROB: Oh, no, not at all. Coffee and good conversation will make me forget my misery—better than aspirin, and not as hard on the stomach.

MILLER: I suspected as much. In fact, I suggested to Dave Cohen that he drop by after his class—by then we'd be sure to be in the middle of something interesting.

Gretchen, would it be stretching my kindness beyond what you could endure if I were to offer to say a prayer for your speedy recovery?

WEIROB: I think I'll pass on that, Sam.

MILLER: I know you're not exactly a confirmed believer in God.

WEIROB: It's not just that. Suppose I were. Suppose I believed in your Christian God. Just how do you think a prayer would help? Do you think God doesn't *know* that I have the flu and am miserable? God *must* know that I am miserable, for according to you he knows everything. In fact, not only does he know that I am miserable, but he also knows that you would like to see me get better. So how in the world does a prayer help? You simply would be communicating to God what God already knows, thereby wasting God's time and yours. Not to mention mine.

MILLER: I can see I'm in for a full-scale assault on everything I believe and hold dear. A small price to pay, I guess, if it helps your headache. You're clearly feeling better by the moment, so you may as well continue.

WEIROB: You think that if you pray, God may make me better. Well, God certainly can make me feel better, since he is (supposedly) all-powerful. But then why hasn't he done this already?

MILLER: The true value of prayer would be its effect on us, not any effect on God. It would remind us that however bad you feel, however much you sneeze, however achy your limbs, however much your head hurts, we are in the hands of a loving, beneficent God.

WEIROB: Then please spare me your prayer. You admit that it won't help get rid of my flu. And even if I believed that we were in the hands of a loving, beneficent God, which I thoroughly doubt, I certainly wouldn't want to be reminded of it.

MILLER: Why not?

WEIROB: Because that would mean that a loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God finds it reasonable to let me suffer. Now why would that be so? Any reason I can think of is extremely depressing. Is it that I am so completely small and insignificant that even an omnipotent and omniscient Being doesn't notice? Or that I am so disgusting that it is actually a good thing that I am suffering? Or that I am so confused about what is good and bad that what seems to be a completely gratuitous evil—indeed, a whole series of them, from achy, drizzly head to achy, tired legs—is really a good thing, perhaps something your God is proud of? Maybe he feels about my flu like we feel about a nice sunrise—a beautiful beginning to a perfect day. "Oh, wow," he may be saying, "what a nice way to start the day. We'll have a beautiful sunrise and I'll make that little twit Gretchen Weirob sore and drippy and headachy." I declare, Sam, sometimes it is more than I can bear thinking that you really believe in such a monster.

MILLER: So, is your mind off your headache yet?

WEIROB: Yes, I admit that it is, but no thanks to any prayer of yours. No one can worry about their head for long when philosophy beckons, and what better for a tired, achy philosopher than arguing against a God such as yours. It's like shooting fish in a barrel.

MILLER: Go ahead and shoot your fish. I'll just do my best. Anything to get your mind off your misery.

WEIROB: OK, try hard to overcome your emotional commitment to your religion, and just look at it as a straightforward, logical, philosophical proposition. You believe in a God that is perfect in every way. All-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent. That's what it says in some of the creeds I had to learn as a child, words that are etched in my brain. But how can this be? If your God exists, he knows I have the flu because he knows everything. He can certainly make it the case that I cease to have the flu, or could have prevented me from having the flu in the first place, for he is all-powerful. But I *do* have the flu! What am I to conclude? He must not care. But shouldn't a really benevolent God care about even a wretch like me? Why would he *want* me to suffer? But if he doesn't want me to suffer, why am I suffering? Like I said, shooting fish in a barrel. If I accept your Christian premise, that this world and all that is in it is the creation of a perfect God, all-knowing, all-powerful, and completely benevolent, I must draw the conclusion that I am not suffering. But I am suffering. So I reject the premise. There is no being that meets your definition of God. Perhaps there is no God. Or perhaps there is, but he is ignorant, or weak, or mean.

MILLER: Gretchen, you must know that this argument—the so-called problem of evil—is at least as ancient as Augustine. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions* that it was only when he figured out how a world created by a Christian God could contain evil that he converted to Christianity.

WEIROB: Converted from what?

MILLER: He had been a Manichaean—Manichaeans believe that there are two ultimate principles controlling the world, good and evil. Our world is their battleground. According to the Manichaeans, the evil parts of the world are not due to God, that is, the good force. They are due to the other force, evil, or the dark force.

WEIROB: That sounds pretty reasonable. Would you be satisfied if I became religious, but became a Manichaean rather than a Christian? From the way you describe Manichaeism, maybe I could take the *Star Wars* movies as my sacred text.

MILLER: No, Gretchen, I would not.

WEIROB: I've long admired Augustine—he's the author of my favorite prayer.

MILLER: Your favorite prayer? I'm surprised that you know anything about Augustine. But I'm absolutely flabbergasted that you have a favorite prayer. How does it go?

WEIROB: "Lord, give me chastity . . . but not yet!"

MILLER: Oh, Gretchen!

WEIROB: You must admit that it is a prayer, and it is from Augustine.

MILLER: Yes, I guess so. It's a request directed at God, and Augustine definitely said it—he planned to become a member of a community where celibacy was expected of serious Christians. His plea had a serious point, which you presumably missed—that even when he was intellectually convinced that Christianity was the true religion, he still needed God's grace to complete the conversion.

WEIROB: That's all very interesting, Sam, but frankly, when you mention the word *grace* I feel my headache coming back. I take it that you think Augustine's intellectual conversion resulted from a real insight about the problem of evil. Tell me about that.

MILLER: Yes, I think he showed that your argument—that an all-perfect God can't exist because there is evil—is as full of holes as a piece of Swiss cheese.

WEIROB: That will take some convincing. I know that the problem must be old, for Augustine lived a millennium and a half ago. Age doesn't make the argument bad, nor does the fact that a saint thought it was. In fact, the problem of evil is like a bottle of fine wine. It gets *better* with age. It has made Christians like Augustine and you squirm for centuries. So much the better for it. So where are these holes?

MILLER: You don't expect me to convince you of the existence of a Christian God, do you? I wouldn't take that on.

WEIROB: No, just convince me that that Christian God you believe in—all-perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent—could possibly exist, even given as unimportant a bit of suffering as my flu. Do that, and I'll let you say a prayer for me.

MILLER: That's a challenge worth taking on.

The main point to be made really is just a logical one, that a thing can be better for having a part or an aspect that, considered out of context, is of little value, or even ugly. For example, a novel as a whole can be more interesting because it has a dull chapter—if that dull chapter is necessary for setting up the situations that make the rest of the novel intricate and interesting. A painting can be more beautiful for having a patch of color that is, in itself, quite ugly and unattractive. And so forth. So a world can contain a little evil in it, or even a lot, but this may, in the grand scheme of things, just be a necessary part of the world, something that contributes to the goodness of it, that makes it better than it would be otherwise. That seems clear enough to me. But somehow I doubt that you are ready for my prayer.

WEIROB: Not quite yet, if you don't mind. Frankly, I don't feel like an ugly patch of color in a great painting, or a dull chapter in a good novel, or a discordant note in a great symphony—that's one you didn't mention, by the way. I don't think my suffering with this damn flu compares with those examples at all. I'm not here to be heard or witnessed by someone else, am I? I'm not part of a play or a novel or a painting.

I can see that someone might paint a picture of me that would be, if not exactly ugly, not much to look at on its own. And I can see that such a picture might enhance the overall aesthetic value of a larger picture of which it was a part. Perhaps there is a picture of a number of quite different-looking people and the overall effect is quite stunning, reminding us of the diversity of human nature—or something like that—in a way that none of the pictures by themselves could have done. It might be that the big painting would be a reasonable thing to hang on a wall, even though none of its parts—the individual portraits—would be worth hanging as separate paintings. Perhaps a quite beautiful or moving picture might include a part that depicted me sneezing and sniffling. Who knows? But that seems quite irrelevant to the

question at hand. I'm not a picture of a sniveling, dripping, suffering human; I *am* a sniveling, dripping, suffering human.

MILLER: Perhaps there are better examples. Think of the times we go fishing. Surely it is some form of mild suffering to get out of bed before dawn on a chilly Nebraska spring morning when one might sleep in. But the days as a whole, the days that start out with those unpleasant experiences, are some of the most enjoyable days one can imagine. The point has nothing to do really with pictures or novels or symphonies. Given any kind of whole—a whole picture, a whole ball game, a whole day, a whole life, a whole world—parts that wouldn't be very good were they to exist in isolation contribute to the whole in such a way that the whole is better with these parts than without them.

WEIROB: Ball game? That's a new one.

MILLER: For example, an error in an early inning—a bit of imperfect playing—may be just the lucky break that inspires a weak team and produces a thrilling game—to the participants, not only the spectators.

WEIROB: I get the idea. I'm really not sure what to say. I wonder what a baseball game would be like if all the players were perfect—if perfect pitchers and fielders were up against perfect batters and runners—well, it's really hard to say, isn't it? It seems as if perfect pitchers could strike out anyone, and perfect batters could hit anything.

MILLER: I think we'd better go back to the fishing example.

WEIROB: OK. The point there was that what one can call a fine day, perhaps even a "perfect" day in a loose sense, can contain a part that isn't that much fun, that might even qualify as a bit of suffering. And the blend of misery and pleasure doesn't have to do with the effect on some outsider who watches and appreciates this combination at work—as in the cases of the novel and the picture. It is the participants whose own lives are better in virtue of their own misery who matter—that's your point.

MILLER: Yes. And of course there are lots of examples of hard work and sacrifice at any stage in a person's life being the condition of great success, comfort, and satisfaction at another stage. Think of the sacrifices that medical students make, and the satisfactions that come later, after they become practicing physicians.

WEIROB: You mean charging outrageous fees and playing golf on Wednesday afternoons?

MILLER: You can jest, Gretchen, but the point is a logical one. Take any whole, a whole day, a whole year, a whole life. Just because some creatures some of the time feel some discomfort, or even suffer, does not mean that the whole day, or the whole life, may not be a fine one, and that the discomfort or suffering may not have been necessary for the quality of the day or the life as a whole. But what goes for a day or a life, goes for the world as a whole. Just as we have a plan for spending a fine day fishing that has, as a necessary part, a little suffering early in the morning, so God may have a plan for the world that requires suffering. It still may be a fine world, a much better world than it would have been without the suffering.

WEIROB: Please excuse me for not being convinced.

Let's start with the fishing example. Of course I can see that we can have a fine day, what we would call a perfect day, that contains some pain and discomfort. It's a pain to get up as early as one has to, if one is going to catch the fish in a cooperative mood. No day of fishing goes by—for me, at least—without at least once hooking my own finger while trying to bait the hook. Still, such days are perfect days.

But what do we mean by that? We mean that they are among the nicest days we expect to have. Days that are as perfect as we imagine that days can ever be. But not really perfect. When I say as perfect as a day can be, I mean as perfect as a day can be, given the way the world works. Given that it's hard to get up in the morning, given that fish are more likely to bite in the morning than in the afternoon, given that I'm clumsy and fishhooks are sharp—given all of that, sure, such a day is as fine a day as one can imagine, or ranks right up there at any rate.

But where did all of those givens come from? Who is responsible for the fact that it's hard to get up in the morning? We can imagine a world in which everyone hops out of bed fresh as a daisy and happy that it is morning. Some people I know claim that they are like that. I don't believe them, but it's at least possible that there should be such people, and even that I should be one of them. Indeed, why can't everyone be that way?

And even if some deep necessity requires that some or all of us hate to get out of bed, who is responsible for the fact that fish like to bite in the morning? Couldn't they have easily preferred mid-afternoon, so we could sleep in and still have a good day fishing?

And why does a fish's mouth have to be so hard to penetrate that a fishhook sharp enough

to do its job poses a constant threat to an oaf like me?

Of course *my* answer to all of these questions is, "Well, that's just the breaks. No one decided all of this. It just worked out that way." But your answer is that God designed and created and thus bears responsibility for the whole thing.

Given this, how can you use the fishing analogy? It is designed to jolly me into believing in a "necessary evil"—something that is unpleasant or involves suffering, and so seems to be an evil, but turns out to be necessary for a greater good. But this analogy does no such thing. It is just an example of the very same thing I'm complaining about. I see no good reason a perfect being would want me to have the flu. And I see no good reason why a perfect being would want me to have to jerk myself out of bed with an unpleasant alarm in order to have a nice day fishing with a friend. The one evil does not explain the other; they both reinforce the same conclusion. No perfect God would have designed the world like this.

MILLER: You really know how to suffer, Gretchen. I can't believe you really expect my faith in God to be shaken by the fact that you have to get out of bed earlier than you would like to, to go fishing, or that when you are careless you prick your fingers with the fishhooks.

WEIROB: Keep in mind who has the burden of proof here. I don't have to talk you out of anything, nor do I want to. Believe what you want. You have to get me to believe, however, that your beliefs are consistent. I think you admit that I am suffering with this flu, however insignificant I may be in the grand scheme of things, and however inconsequential the flu may be in the great range of things people suffer. Yet you also think

the world was created by a perfect God. I claim that those beliefs are inconsistent. The burden of proof is on you to show that they are not.

MILLER: But I think I have already done that. If the world consisted of only your suffering, and nothing else, it would certainly be a very poor world. And perhaps you even think of the world that way when you are not careful to keep your self-absorption in check. But the world does not consist of just you and your suffering. You and your suffering are part of a very big world, big spatially and in time, and perhaps in other dimensions we cannot fathom.

And it is consistent, I claim, that the events in this complex world are interconnected and interdependent in such a way that the world that contains them is a very wonderful place, and better because of your suffering than it would be without it.

WEIROB: But your analogy doesn't really show that. You tell me to think of a day when I went fishing and had a good day, even though the first part of it was unpleasant. I admit the day as a whole was good and well worth getting out of bed. But that isn't the point. Wouldn't the world have been better *without* my suffering? My suffering, my discomfort on rising early, detracted rather than added to the value of the day.

Similarly, I admit that this world, taken as a whole, including my suffering, may be a peachy keen world, just a humdinger of a world, a world any reasonably perfect deity might be proud of. But it seems to me that it would be obviously better if my suffering were removed. Everything good could be left behind. It might not make much difference to the world, but it seems like the world would definitely be a little bit better, and no worse. I don't see how the

good parts of the world depend in any way on my suffering.

MILLER: No, that's not right. You suffer, as you say—I would say you are somewhat uncomfortable—whenever you get up at a reasonable hour. If the day had been without suffering, it would have been a day when you didn't get up early. But if you hadn't gotten up early, we would not have gone fishing together, because I left before dawn. Or you would have gone on your own, gotten to the river late, and returned home empty-handed. It would not have been much fun. If we subtract the suffering from the day, we subtract the early rising, and the successful fishing, and pretty much everything that made the day worthwhile. So your suffering did make the day better.

We can see, then, how the fineness of our fishing day did depend on your "suffering." Now how exactly the goodness of the world depends on your having the flu, I can't say. I can't trace the story as I did with our fishing day. But that's OK. I don't have to. I am simply trying to sort out the logic of the situation—that's all our little bet calls on me to do—even if the details are beyond my understanding.

WEIROB: But that returns us to the points I raised before. Granted, if we hold the dependencies fixed, my discomfort, as you refer to it, was a necessary condition of our successful fishing trip. But why should I hold the dependencies fixed? Aren't they due to your all-powerful God? To repeat the point, God could have made a world in which I loved to get out of bed—in which everyone did. Or he could have made a world in which the fish enjoyed sleeping until noon.

MILLER: I think I see your point. By the dependencies, you mean how one fact leads to another, the "if . . . then" statements, the general principles.

WEIROB: Yes, like "Normal people don't enjoy jumping out of bed at dawn" and "People who come into contact with such and such a microbe will turn into sniveling, dripping, headachy miserable wretches."

MILLER: The same principle applies. There is no inconsistency in supposing that a perfect God designed the world to work according to those principles, because having it work that way is necessary for some greater good.

WEIROB: Aren't those merely words? Can you really imagine what God might have had in mind that made my sniveling and sneezing and headaches necessary? It's very hard for me to imagine anything great and wonderful he couldn't have managed without my misery.

MILLER: But now you are making your imagination the test of God's existence. Why should we take what you can imagine—you, a finite, imperfect, middle-aged, drippy, sneezy, headachy, basically grouchy philosopher—to be a test of what might be the case?

Let me remind you of our deal. I don't have to explain to you what plan God has in mind, of which your rather insignificant drips and sneezes form a necessary part. I don't need to have a clue as to what it might be. I just have to show that it is consistent, logically consistent, not self-contradictory, for a perfect God to have created a world with some suffering. That I claim to have done, by showing that there is no contradiction in a perfect whole having parts that, considered by themselves, are quite imperfect.

Shall we pray?

WEIROB: Look, Sam, you are interspersing your philosophical arguments with some ad hominem attacks on me, as if I really believed that my sniveling and dripping were the worst thing God has ever done. But I certainly do not. I've just been trying to be polite to you and to your God, on the off chance that he or she exists.

But let me take my gloves off. My misery, though quite real and as far as I can see completely unnecessary and pointless, is small potatoes next to the things that have happened in this world that your supposedly all-perfect God has created. Just in our own century, there have been two world wars, countless smaller wars, mass murders, and so forth. Millions of people killed, soldiers ripped to pieces dying painful deaths, innocent children burned from napalm. There was the Holocaust, the systematic extermination of millions of Jews and others by the Nazis during World War II. There have been other genocides—and they don't all happen somewhere else, either. Columbus, Cortés, Pizarro—these great discoverers wiped out the Arawaks, the Aztecs, the Incas. Our nice little town and college on the prairie exist only because of the largely successful attempt to eliminate the Native Americans who dwelled here. And diseases much worse than the flu plague us—cancer, for example, which strikes so many people in the prime of their lives, often causes painful deaths and leaves grieving families. Will you just say glibly to these people that God must have a plan? It's all for the best? That their suffering, or that of their children or parents, is a necessary part of some plan of an

all-perfect God? Is that what you say to grieving families on your pastoral visits?

MILLER: Yes, Gretchen, I do say that, or words to that effect. But I don't say it glibly. I say it quite humbly. And I don't say it because I think it will eliminate their grief. I say it because it leaves open the possibility that their loss might have some meaning.

And you know what, Gretchen? Most people don't feel the way you do. Most people are comforted by the idea of a design—even if it is completely unknown to us and impossible for us to imagine—that gives meaning to their suffering and loss. We know that for many, even in concentration camps, the conviction that, after all, their experience must somehow have some meaning, must fit into God's plan, was comforting, something to cling to.

So all of this evil, all of this suffering—to many of those who actually endure it—does not seem to be a knockdown refutation of the idea of a perfect God. I'm sure there are many like you who can't accept that a perfect God would find it necessary to inflict misery on them. But there are many others who accept their limitations, don't expect to understand what God has in mind, are grateful to know that a God who does have a plan exists. So, yes, I tell people who have suffered and are suffering just what you find so ridiculous. But most people don't find it ridiculous.

WEIROB: That was a passionate speech, Sam, and I guess it was in response to a tone of anger in mine.

I certainly admit that the phenomenon you have just described, the experience of seemingly pointless suffering driving people toward some faith in God, rather than, as I would think reasonable, away from it, is quite real. And not

only real, but perhaps close to the heart of the religious impulse. So it might seem to be a paradox to argue that the very things that drive people to religion—suffering and evil—are in fact inconsistent with some of the religions to which they are driven—that is, the religions that believe in an all-perfect God.

It may *seem* like a paradox, but clearly no paradox exists.

MILLER: No, I suppose not. Your view, then, is this: the existence of suffering is inconsistent with the existence of the all-perfect God of orthodox Christianity, even though suffering, as much as anything, has led people to embrace Christianity. It is logically consistent, but it seems like a strange view.

WEIROB: I think I called your religion monstrous a minute ago, so I can't complain if you call my view strange.

But I see Dave coming up the walk. Let's break for lunch and see if we feel like continuing our discussion later.

MILLER: Are you ready for me to pray for you?

WEIROB: Not quite yet.