

Chapter 2

Pastoral versus Theoretical Theodicy

This chapter has a special focus on the critiques of theoretical approaches to the problem of evil made by those engaged in pastoral care, Christian ministry and mission. The first section deals with many of these critiques and then summarises them in order to reveal three key areas of concern not only for the rest of the chapter but the rest of this book. They are, first, the theoretical distortions and misconceptions about the problem of evil, second, the surprising neglect of human suffering as a lived experience on the part of theoretical theodicians and, third, the immorality of the theoretical approach to theodicy.

This will lead us to the second section of this chapter, which explores some contemporary developments in the distinctions and debates between theoretical and pastoral theodicians. Although Dorothy Sölle's masterful work *Suffering* is nearly half a century old it provides one of the definitive works in modern approaches to the problem of evil. Sölle's writing and John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* give useful critiques of the nature and structure of traditional theodicies and so remain relevant to our enquiry here. We will also explore the arguments of others, such as Kenneth Surin, who make a clear distinction between theoretical and pastoral theodicy and thus accelerate the debates between the two types of theodicy.

In the final section of this chapter we will consider various pastoral approaches to the problem of evil by examining key themes in the theologies of Sarah Pinnock, Wendy Farley, John Swinton and Jürgen Moltmann and uncover some surprising similarities in their arguments.

Critiques of Theoretical Approaches to the Problem of Evil

Traditional Theoretical Theodicy

The very word ‘theodicy’ is complex and asked to do so much theological ‘heavy lifting’ that it often wilts under the weight it is asked to carry. Tragically, undergraduates, those in ordination training and sometimes whole congregations are told that the ‘theodic problem’ resolves to two simple but unanswerable conundrums: ‘If God is so loving and entirely good, how come evil and suffering exist?’ and ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ From the start we are told that they admit of no possible answer and everyone must just learn to live with the problem and carry on. This is as simplistic and narrow as it is dangerous. For theodicy is nothing less than the effort to comprehend the occurrence of evil within a much larger theological context and framework which forces us to reconsider everything we believe about God, the world, individual autonomy and the nature of justice. Theodicy deals with the really big questions of who we are, why we are and what we do. They cannot be passed over lightly so that we can carry on doing something else more enjoyable and less complex. Both in the lecture hall and pulpit there is a fear of asking these questions because by their very nature they are radical, going to the very core of human existence itself.

If we must have a cut-down, bite-sized version of the problem of evil we can briefly define theodicy as the defence of God and ourselves in the face of those things, both internal and external, which are inimical to human flourishing and healthy relationships with God and the world.

The term ‘theodicy’ first appeared as technical argot in the early eighteenth century in the writings of the philosopher G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716)¹ and especially in his book *Theodicy*. As a philosopher Leibniz regarded the problem of evil as being primarily an abstract question in the philosophy of religion, rather than a theological or practical one. For Leibniz the task of the theodic problem was to create a semi-legal case which would place all blame away from God for the existence of evil beyond the doubt of reason. This case was intended to justify the

1. The edition of Leibniz’s *Theodicy* used here is the translation by E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1951).

ways of God to man,² representing through complicated analysis why God could not possibly be responsible for the evil and suffering we see around us and personally experience. This left the obvious question open and unanswered, ‘If not God, what or whom?’ and so leaves the lived experience of suffering largely untouched.

John Hick emphasised that this was not enough and that theodicy *must* tackle the pain and suffering experienced by so many every day. If it cannot or will not do that it is neither Christian nor biblical. He wrote: ‘An implicit theodicy is at work in the Bible, at least in the sense of an effective reconciliation of profound faith in God with a deep involvement in the realities of sin and suffering’,³ and defined theodicy as ‘an attempt to reconcile the unlimited goodness of an all-powerful God with the reality of Evil’.⁴ From this definition Hick emphasised that the ultimate goodness of God should be consistent with the reality and experience of evil.⁵

Nick Trakakis has recently attempted to create a *via media* between Leibniz and Hick in this way: ‘theodicy aims to vindicate the justice or goodness of God in the face of evil found in the world, and this it attempts to do by offering a reasonable explanation as to why God allows evil to abound in his creation’.⁶

Traditional, theoretical theodicy has always had to wrestle with the logical dilemma:

- God is good and loving
- God is omnipotent
- Yet Evil exists

and seeks to affirm divine love and omnipotence in the face of evil. This wrestling match undertaken by philosophers and philosophical theologians tries to ‘prove’ the compatibility between God and Evil. Their so-called ‘proofs’, like the historic ‘proofs for the existence of God’,

2. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book 1, lines 25-26. *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: OUP, 1961).

3. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York and Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), P. 243.

4. John Hick, ‘The Problem of Evil’, in Paul Edwards (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Vol. 3, p. 736.

5. Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 9.

6. Nick Trakakis, ‘The Evidential Problem of Evil’, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (31 March 2005): <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/#H4>.

describe the God of the Philosophers not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, worthy of worship and discipleship. So, as Tyron Inbody has maintained: 'In the strict sense of the term, theodicy is primarily a logical problem, a problem of how to hold apparently contradictory propositions simultaneously without contradiction.'⁷

Thus it can be said that theoretical theodicy is essentially defensive. Theoretical theodicists defend Christian belief against arguments which are contradictory and downright implausible in the face of evil. The fact that it 'usually responds to attacks pertaining to evil that are raised against religious belief by the atheologian or religious sceptic has led many to perceive theodicy as an exclusively defensive activity'.⁸

Although Stoeber admits that this 'defensive activity' is an important aspect of any effective theodicy, he regards it as negative and attempts to counter it by arguing for more positive or affirmative aspects. This begins in his understanding and definition of theodicy as 'the vindication of the beneficent care of God in the context of the existence of evil'.⁹ It is on the basis of this more affirmative aspect, the beneficence of God, that he suggests that:

An effective theodicy will involve the reconciliation of the divine attributes and evil – what can be understood in its defensive aspects. But it will also include evidence illustrating the active beneficence of the Divine, while at the same time maintaining the negative reality of evil and the obligations of social morality.¹⁰

In responding to the reality of evil, theoretical theodicists have proposed and explored a number of themes, some of which will be considered below, such as:

- Free Will
- Aesthetics
- Punishment and Retribution
- Teleology

7. Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 20.

8. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 9.

9. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 11.

10. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 14.

- Eschatology
- Mystery
- Process Theodicy.¹¹

It is crucial to understand each of these themes in theoretical theodicy if we are to properly evaluate the critiques raised against them by pastoral theodicians which will be examined in more detail later.

Free Will

On this view human suffering and the daily experience of evil are said to arise, at least in part, from the freely chosen actions of people where freedom is treated as the highest good that justifies the negative effects of evil actions. This Free Will Defence is often relied upon as a response to moral evil which, in turn, is said to arise from an abuse or misuse of human free will. Those supporting the Free Will Defence, such as Alvin Plantinga,¹² claim that the vast majority of pain and suffering is caused by human beings who freely choose to act against the will of God, insofar as and in the degree to which this can ever be fully known. Accordingly, 'Where sin is understood as the experience of the free choice of human beings this free will defence is perhaps the most significant theodical theme.'¹³

Punishment and Retribution

The Free Will Defence is often associated with the theme of punishment because punishment and retribution are deemed to be appropriate and proper responses to the abuse and misuse of human freedom. Punishment has enjoyed a long and unhappy history among all three of the Abrahamic faiths in which suffering is connected to the retributive justice of a wrathful God directed towards our sin and guilt. In Christianity this theme focusses on both individual sin and the concept of so-called 'original sin', which arises from a commonplace, though

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11. This arises in Process Theology after Whitehead and Hartshorne. David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: On Postmodernism, Morality, Pluralism, Eschatology and Demonic Evil* (Anoka, MN Process Century Press, 2017).
 12. Ciro De Florio and Aldo Frigerio, 'God, Evil and Alvin Plantinga on the Free Will Defence': www.core.ac.uk/downloads/pdf/153326499.pdf (last accessed 21 April 2021).
 13. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 15.

flawed, interpretation of the myth of Adam and Eve.¹⁴ As a result of their mutiny against the commands of God Adam and Eve are degraded and with them every human being ever since. The stain of the depravity of their actions has been, apparently, passed from one generation to the next through the act of sexual intercourse. Historically, at any rate, the taint of original sin has been said to be literally contained in male semen and through ejaculation and conception is, as it were, genetically transmitted, like a tendency to blonde hair or brown eyes!

In response to this primary misdeed, natural evil – the evils attendant on the environment, tornados, volcanic explosions and so on – is introduced into the world. Moral evil is directly caused by individual sin and so (naturally!) God’s righteous and just punishment must punish moral evil. As we will see when we come to the critiques raised against this view by pastoral theodocists, this idea of punishment/retribution creates a Catch-22 situation: evil and suffering are considered to be either the consequence of sin or a divine retribution for sin – or quite possibly both.¹⁵

Those supporting this view argue that punishment is not simply ‘an expression of anger or vengeance of God’ but ‘an act of requital demanded by a good and just God to balance out or set right a past wrong. It is a matter of justice.’¹⁶

Aesthetics

The aesthetic response to the problem of evil takes a ‘God’s eye’ view of the matter and affirms that from God’s perspective the universe is entirely good. It claims that the good of the whole is always greater than the sum of evil in the individual parts and that this makes a positive contribution to an overarching aesthetic ideal. That is, as Herman has argued, the beauty of the ideal justifies the negativity found in the negative parts.¹⁷ On this view, all evil and suffering of whatsoever kind are both necessary and sufficient to maintain an aesthetic cosmic harmony and this is true even when we consider atrocities and traumas.¹⁸ Evil then is not really a problem at all. It exists simply as a function of our narrow and limited human perspective. This is astonishing in its audaciousness, for who can

14. See my forthcoming *Julian of Norwich and the Doctrine of Salvation*.

15. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 15.

16. Inbody, *The Transforming God*, p. 59.

17. Arthur Herman, *The Problem of Evil in Indian Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsides, 1976), p. 114.

18. Inbody, *The Transforming God*, p. 42.

claim to know what an aesthetic cosmic harmony might look like, let alone know what this might mean from a divine perspective? As such this approach to theodicy is internally and fatally flawed.

Teleology

This solution suggests that a future good is justified by present evil¹⁹ and in this way directly relates to the philosophical and theological concept of teleology: the doctrine of design or purpose in the material world. Teleology attempts an explanation of phenomena in terms of the purpose they serve rather than the cause by which they arise. In terms of the phenomenon of evil, human beings are in need of growth and improvement. Suffering and evil are necessary spurs to both because they help us develop morally and spiritually. Obstacles and struggles provoke us to greater resilience. Resilience as a quality or virtue is, according to Justine Allain-Chapman,²⁰ relevant in any theodicy because it is concerned with living and loving well ‘through all the changing scenes of life’.²¹ Stoeber argues that in teleological terms evil is ‘considered a necessary component in the movement or transformation of present circumstances to some future, better, state of affairs’.²²

The teleological approach to theodicy points out that God *allows* evil for our maturing and perfecting. As such it is pedagogic, teaching us what it is to be human at all.

Of all the recent supporters of the teleological approach to theodicy, John Hick (d. 2012) is the most well known. His theodicy is a ‘soul-making’, because he believed that God’s purpose in creation is a positive shifting of all human beings away from our ego-centric self-centredness towards an openness to and consciousness of the ways of God. He rejected the idea of a *historical* ‘Fall’ from a prelapsarian state of grace, pristine moral goodness and innocence into ‘original sin’, preferring instead the notion of a *necessary* ‘Fall’ in which human beings move from a place of moral ignorance and innocence to moral and spiritual

19. Herman, *Problem of Evil*, p. 116.

20. Cathy Ross and Humphrey Sutton (eds.), *Bearing Witness in Hope: Christian Engagement in Challenging Times* (London: SCM Press, 2021). Allain-Chapman’s contribution to this volume was reprinted in *Transforming Ministry*, Vol. 121, issue 2 (Summer 2021), pp. 29-32.

21. ‘Through all the changing scenes of life / in trouble and in joy / the praises of my God shall still / my heart and tongue employ.’ Tate & Brady’s New Version 1696 and 1698.

22. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics*, p. 12.

maturity. Far from being the original disaster which is so often preached and taught, the 'Fall' is beneficial precisely because of that maturity, though Hick falls short of saying with Matthew Fox that the 'Fall' is, in fact, the original blessing.²³ Hick prefers to think of moral evil as the foreseeable outcome of the exercise of human freedom. In our original creation human beings were spiritually and morally immature but through many and various lived experiences, many of them really tough and life-threatening, we gradually develop a Christ-like character and conduct lived in freedom (Col. 1:28-29).²⁴ Given Hick's concept of divine love and God's omnipotent power, the evils of this world are 'justified because they will result in the fulfilment of the purpose of God in the eschaton. God will use all that happens within this environment to bring all creatures to the full vision and love of God.'²⁵

This quotation leads us to a brief overview of the next theme.

Eschatology

Here evil is limited to a finite time in human history, our own and that of the world. It will end in those events which bring our individual lives and the life of the world to a close. Furthermore, the apparently irreconcilable conflict between the existence of evil and an all-powerful, all-loving God will be explained by God himself. He will, it seems, justify it as the ultimate manifestation of his loving care for us and all creatures. He will explain how, even though we neither felt nor saw it at the time, God was in fact carrying us through all the evil and suffering we encountered in his loving arms. In the meantime, we must just put up with it and try to understand that, despite all evidence to the contrary, evil and suffering will, in the end, lead us to an ever closer relationship with God which will last for eternity. As we will see when we consider the critiques of pastoral theodiscists, this is not very satisfactory, promising jam tomorrow or rather an opiate to dull our sense of our suffering today. Even so, Hick argued that 'This after life redemption is understood not as a compensation for evil and suffering, but rather as a ... bringing to fruition the spiritual perfection of human being.'²⁶

23. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-Six Themes and Two Questions* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1983).

24. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 219-35.

25. Inbody, *The Transforming God*, p. 62.

26. Barry L. Whitney, *What are they Saying about God and Evil* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), p.26.