Antitheodicy and the grading of theodicies by moral offensiveness

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Abstract: Antitheodicy objects to all attempts to solve the problem of evil. Its objections are almost all on moral grounds – it argues that the whole project of theodicy is morally offensive. Trying to excuse God's permission of evil is said to deny the reality of evil, to exhibit gross insensitivity to suffering and to insult the victims of grave evils. Since antitheodicists urge the avoidance of theodicies for moral reasons, it is desirable to evaluate the moral reasons against theodicies in abstraction from the intellectual reasons for and against them. It is argued that the best-known theodicies such as those based on soul-making and free will are guilty of moral faults as alleged. But Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theory, often thought to be the most morally offensive "Panglossian" theodicy, is morally blameless because it excuses God by the absolute impossibility of his choosing any world better than the present one. Theodicy should not be conceived of as a search for greater goods which may excuse God's permitting evils. From the divine point of view, creation is an upfront choice between scenarios – in modern parlance, a Trolley problem rather than a Transplant problem. In cases of forced choice among scenarios, it is morally improper to criticize someone who chooses the best.

Keywords: Theodicy; antitheodicy; best of all possible worlds; Leibniz; free will defense

1. Introduction

Theodicies may be evaluated along different dimensions – philosophical credibility, compatibility with one or another theological position, appeal to divine ineffability or mysteriousness, or moral offensiveness. Here we concentrate on moral offensiveness in abstraction from all other dimensions, as that has often been given as a reason for ruling out certain theories – sometimes as the first line of attack on leading theories – or even for rejecting the idea of theodicy in general. If antitheodicists recommend not reading and considering

theodicies on moral grounds, theodicy will need to defend its moral credentials before turning to any other task.

Moral credibility is in any case a particularly important dimension on which a theodicy must score well, since the point of a theodicy is to exonerate God from moral objections. A theodicy's moral credentials must be sound, before any other aspects of it come into play.

The common practice of mixing objections based on ethical grounds (such as the wrongness of compensation as a justification of evils) with considerations of general plausibility (such as speculations on the unlikeliness of the existence of compensating goods) can only lead to lack of clarity on the logic of theodical defenses. That is another reason for separating moral evaluation of theodicies from all other dimensions of evaluation.

2. Moral objections to theodicy as such

While opponents of theodicy have had many moral objections to the statements of individual theodicists, we are here more concerned with attacks on the whole project of theodicy. Proponents of "moral antitheodicy" "call for the theistic discourse of theodicy to be abandoned, because, they claim, all theodicies involve some form of moral impropriety." (Simpson 2009a)

The first form of impropriety widely alleged is that theodicy downplays or minimizes extreme suffering, by attempting to balance such evils with goods elsewhere. "One might view the enterprise of theodicy to be morally dubious, even offensive," say Kolb and Lehe (2009). "The attempt to justify the ways of God to man, in the context of what we know of the horrors of the twentieth century, can seem to whitewash the problem, to deny the full reality of the evil that has been suffered, to attempt to make it seem to be not so bad."

Theodicy is said also to be grossly insensitive to the sufferers of horrendous evil, whom it treats as pawns in an intellectual game. "After Auschwitz it is obscene to speak of evil and suffering as something to be justified by, or reconciled with, a benevolent cosmological scheme." (Bernstein 2002, 228, similar in Trakakis 2008) It "turns sufferers into the mere means to some alleged overall good." (Pihlström and Kivistö, 7)

Antitheodicism is therefore, some proponents claim, "a condition for the possibility of the moral perspective (or moral seriousness) itself." (Pihlström and Kivistö, 7) A rational approach

to the problem of evil, some say, is corrupting of the self and we should resist it. (Felderhof 2004) [1]

It will be argued that many theodicies do have a serious problem with moral offensiveness, especially those which are "ambitious" in Shearn's sense (2013), that is, which attempt to exhibit some definite reasons for God's permission of evils. But not all versions are in fact morally offensive. We briefly review and agree with the moral objections made to a number of standard theodicies, then argue that Leibnizian best-world theodicy escapes those objections and is morally impeccable.

3. Illusion and compensation theories

Though not a leading strand of classical philosophical approaches to the problem of evil, dismissal of evil as an "illusion" has been an element in the thinking of certain religious traditions such as strands of Buddhism and Christian Science. That certainly does "deny the full reality of the evil that has been suffered," and does so explicitly. So it is an offense to the victims of evil, in the same way as anyone's telling the victims of trauma that it did not really happen, that they have just imagined it. Or again it has the moral harshness and obtuseness of "positive thinking" or giving "Snap out of it" as psychiatric advice.

The Augustinian theory that evil is a "privation of good" has sometimes been seen as an illusion theory aimed at excusing God's permission of evil. It is not clear that that is what the theory means – it seems more aimed at showing that something is really evil only if it affects something that is itself good – but if it were taken as a theodicy, it would suffer from the same moral objections as a genuine illusion theory.

Somewhat less clear morally are theories that may be said to distract attention from the reality of evil, not by actually denying it, but by positing an overall balance of good, for example by compensating victims of evils in a paradisal afterlife.

There is nothing offensive in actually positing eternal rewards. There is some potential for offense in using them to balance present sufferings, since that can seem to downplay the reality of evils that are to be seen as minor in the "big picture" (examples in Simpson 2009a). But compensation has not been a major element in the leading theodicies. Although Hick says "No

[1] A more minor debate as to whether theodicy may have harmful consequences such as making us less concerned about evil (Søvik 2008; Simpson 2009b) will not be considered here.

theodicy without eschatology" (Hick 2007), he does not mean that the afterlife carries the main burden of theodicy. So we do not pursue the matter further.

4. Obstacle course or soul-making theodicies

Also suspected of not taking seriously the reality of evil are "obstacle course" defenses which see evils as having a purpose in developing virtues such as courage and forbearance in those who suffer them or in those who could help the sufferers. If the evils in the world were sufficiently mild, that might be a reasonable position, since undoubtedly some mild evils sometimes do act as training in certain virtues. To speak of horrendous evils in the same tone is to risk denying how bad the reality of them is. Ronald Knox's satire is just in exposing the shallowness of that strategy:

> There is no progress in Humanity, without the surmounting of obstacles; thus, we are all now agree'd that *Satan*, far from meaning any harm to our Race when he brought Sin into the World, was most excellently dispos'd towards us, and desir'd nothing better than that we, having some good stout Sins to overcome, should attain an eventful and exciting sort of Virtue, instead of languishing for ever in that state of respectable Innocence, which is so little creditable to the Angels, who alone practise it. (Knox 1954, 32–3).

Certain recent theodicists have found themselves uncomfortably close to that caricature. Richard Dawkins claims that in a television debate with Richard Swinburne, "Swinburne at one point attempted to justify the Holocaust on the grounds that it gave the Jews a wonderful opportunity to be courageous and noble." The other participant in the debate, the atheist Peter Atkins, growled "May you rot in hell." (Dawkins 2006, 89) While Swinburne in his published work is less clearly committed to that position, there is an inherent moral problem in anything approaching that. As D.Z. Phillips puts it, "to ask of what use are the screams of the innocent, as Swinburne's defense would have us do, is to embark on a speculation we should not even contemplate." (Phillips 1977; Trakakis 2008)

Obstacle theories face a trilemma: either God has purposely allowed grave evils to remain in creation (which is heartless on his part and so morally offensive); or he cannot overcome them (hence is less than omnipotent, as considered below); or there exists no better world on which he could confer being (as in Leibniz's theory, discussed below).

Shearn (2013) argues that any "ambitious" theodicy that attempts to explain horrendous evils by balancing them against goods in some "bigger picture" – such as soul-making or free will theodicies – will tend to trivialize evil in the sense of downplaying, or hiding in the background, the reality of suffering: "If the theodicist's attention is drawn away from the horrific experiences of evil towards 'an overwhelming tide of "positive experience" that can be guaranteed to swallow up any and all specific negative experiences' (Williams 1996), then the horrendous evils could be said to be reinterpreted in a way the sufferer cannot accept."

What is most offensive in obstacle course defenses is the gratuitousness of the grave evil which God leaves in the world. In discussions of evils, it has been widely agreed that the existence of major gratuitous evils is incompatible with standard theism (give or take some minor possibilities of an abstract nature: survey in Kraay 2016). If he had no choice, that would be different.

5. Free will defenses

The free will defense holds that God permits evils, both moral and natural, for the sake of the greater good of humans' having free choices. Much of the discussion has involved the trading of speculations as to whether God could have achieved this end with less evil than we observe, which is relevant to the intellectual standing of the defense but not relevant to the moral evaluation being undertaken here.

The moral evaluation of a free will defense depends on whether it does or does not admit gratuitous evils, that is, evils that God could have avoided without making the world worse overall. It is not immediately clear which of these options a free will defense is committed to. As David Lewis says, "A hypothesis that God allows evil for the sake of some good might work if there was a logical, not merely a causal, connection between allowing the evil and gaining the good. Therefore Christians have often gone in for free-will theodicy." (Lewis 1993; agreed in Swinburne 1996, 97) So a free will defense typically posits a necessary connection between some evils and the good of free will, but does not initially say how tight the connection is – for example whether all evils, even natural ones, are supposed to be necessary for the existence of free agents.

If a free will defense does admit gratuitous evils, the situation is similar to obstacle theories. Free will requires the existence of some evils, but if God has allowed ones that do not need to exist, it is heartless on his part and so morally offensive.

If not – that is, if it is claimed that free will requires the existence of evils, none of the actual evils are gratuitous, and the world is better overall with free will and with the actual evils than with neither – then the free will defense is essentially a form of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theory. For it claims that as a matter of necessity, removing the evils will make the world worse. It just adds to Leibniz's more abstract theory the claim that we can identify exactly how removing the evils of the world would make it worse (namely, by removing free will). It is thus the same in moral respects as Leibniz's theory, which is evaluated below.

6. Weakening "God is good"

One approach to the problem of evil, commonly found in the more fundamentalist religions, aims to drive apart "good" as said of God and good as we know it in the ordinary course of human affairs. We should not, it is said, "judge God" (by our limited human standards). To require of God goodness in a sense that humans with our fallen intellects comprehend would, it is suggested, be an attempt to constrain him by inapplicable human concepts. That may be felt to let God off the hook morally if his productions fail to meet human standards of goodness.

The strategy also appeals to those at the other end of the religious spectrum, who eschew the allegedly anthropomorphic God of popular religion in favour of the more abstract "God of the philosophers" or more esoteric options. F.H. Bradley's Absolute Idealism was one version, very far from any view of God as personal. Bradley writes, "The trouble has come from the idea that the Absolute is a moral person. If you start from that basis, then the relation of evil to the Absolute presents at once an irreducible dilemma." (Bradley 1930, 74, discussed in Phillips 2004, 4) A less extreme example but one more typical of recent thought is R.F. Holland, who denies that God can be part of a "moral community":

> It makes sense for *us* to have or fail to have moral reasons for our doings or refrainings because as human beings we are members of a moral community. We have been born and brought up in a shared form of life … But God is not a member of a moral community or of any community … To credit the one true God with having a moral reason for doing anything is to conceive Him … as a one among many … subjectable to moral judgement … (Holland 1980, 237–8, discussed in Phillips 2004, 148–9)

But surely any such attempt to water down or elide God's goodness is offensive to both humanity and God. It is offensive to humans in expecting them to repose faith in a God to

whom ethical qualities (such as truthfulness) might not apply. It is offensive to God as denying him the quality of being best. The exercise has the incoherence of those who think they praise God by declaring him to be "beyond being".

When it comes to suffering, in particular, attributing to God a different ethical attitude to (what we call) goodness will not help in dealing with the problem of evil. If the difference between our and God's understanding of the evil of suffering is to be sufficient to do work in explaining (away) evil, it will need to be a substantial difference. And the more the difference between our and God's moral understanding of suffering, the more God appears as a moral monster – perhaps, as some have pictured him, one who weights aesthetic over moral values. That is not a theodicy, in the sense of explaining why God is just despite appearances, but instead an admission that God is not just. Atheism might be preferable, since at least there would be no God to fight with exhaustingly.

Arguments that theodicy incorporates an anthropomorphic view of God and is offensive to God on that account (e.g. Trakakis 2010) also fail to bear on the claims of theodicy. Theodicy is not a theory about the nature of God. It is an exercise in abstract task analysis – it asks whether there exists as a matter of logic any position which could allow for the compatibility of actual evil and the goodness and omnipotence of a creator God. Whether God is an anthropomorphic "super-duper superman" (Andrew Gleeson, quoted in Trakakis 2010) or transcendent or non-human-like does not affect the logic of the problem.

Nevertheless there is one respect in which God's moral situation differs from ours, in a way that is important for theodicy. Love is central to our moral position, but we can love only a few individuals and must treat others, though fairly, in a less partial way. God cannot love partially like that. He has all people to think about, and it may be that his love for one must be balanced against his love and respect for others. We understand human moral situations like that. A general with a son at the front may be criticized for a defect in normal human sympathy if he exposes his son to the same dangers as other soldiers, but probably not by those soldiers themselves.

So is God, according to theodicists, "tender-hearted" and "part of our moral community", or "tough-minded" and by our standards heartless? That contrast does not apply to a being who loves everyone. Forrest (2010) describes "a tender-hearted preference, characteristic of loving parents. The tender-hearted agent favors the beloved individual over the collective; does not risk too much for the long term; does not risk the well-being of others." God, however loving, cannot do that because while human love is confined to the few, divine love is not and therefore has to take everyone into account fairly. There is no need to think of God, as Forrest suggests,

as a tough-minded utilitarian, to "concede that God the Creator is a moral monster by human standards", very unlike a loving heavenly father. He can be a loving father, but one with many children to think about.

7. Weakening "God is omnipotent"

A natural way to preserve God's moral blamelessness is to weaken in some way the thesis that he is omnipotent. An example is Griffin's "process theodicy" which regards the world as having inherent powers that are not granted to it by God's will and cannot be overridden by a "coercive" omnipotence, though God does possess a lesser "persuasive" omnipotence (Griffin 2004). Plainly that limits God's power to remove horrendous evils.

Weakenings of "God is omniscient" have played a role in some theodicies, though usually a subordinate one. Future contingents especially have been a target – is there really any fact of the matter as to what a person X who would have existed if Y had done Z would do in circumstance W? And if so, could God know it, whether certainly or as an inductive prediction?

From the purely moral point of view, weakenings of omnipotence do excuse God. To the extent that God is unable to know of or suppress evils, to that extent he cannot be blamed for them. But to the same extent, he departs from traditional conceptions of the divine and is less worth worshipping, praying to, or indeed bothering about at all. Since it appears that one would have to weaken omnipotence to a considerable degree to make much impact on solving the problem of evil, this route to excusing God moves away from theodicy as normally understood, whose task is exactly to explain the conflict between divine omnipotence and the existence of evil.

8. Leibniz's best of all possible worlds

Leibniz's theory is that God has created the best of all possible worlds. All the evil we normally believe in is admitted to be real and to be as bad as we think. It exists because it is impossible there should be less. Leibnizian theodicy thus weakens none of the triad "God is good"; "God is omnipotent"; "Evil exists". It holds instead that those three statements are true in the actual world, because it is, contrary to initial appearances, the best (in the ordinary sense of "best") that omnipotence is capable of.

No doubt some clarification is needed of what "best" means – for example, if the universe contains free beings other than God, he may be able to create not the absolutely best possible universe but only the best given those creatures' free decisions. As Leibniz puts it, "God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and the rest." (Leibniz, par. 9) Those subtleties need not be addressed here since they do not directly affect the moral standing of the divine creative act. We are considering, and evaluating morally, the theory according to which an omnipotent God does the best that it is possible for him to do, whatever that might be.

Leibniz's theory may or may not be likely, given the evidence of the world as it is. Many have thought it easy to imagine a better world and have taken imaginability as a reliable guide to possibility. (self-ref) The issue here is solely its moral standing.

Leibniz's theodicy has often been felt to share the offensiveness of illusion and obstacle course defenses, indeed, to exemplify them to an extreme degree. Since the rhetorically effective caricature of it by Voltaire in *Candide*, Leibnizian theodicy has often been thoughtlessly accused of a Panglossian optimism, as if it claims the world is rosy once everything is taken into account, and we understand how marvellously noses are designed for supporting spectacles and the like. That cannot be right and Leibniz does not say anything like that. To say that the actual world with all that is wrong with it is the best that could be done is as much pessimistic (indeed tragic) as optimistic. "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what must the others be like?" asks Voltaire (ch. 6). Indeed. The Leibnizian theory does not assert anything about the overall goodness of the world except that it exceeds some bar that makes its creation better than nothing (and perhaps not even that, as will be discussed in section 10).

The Leibnizian theory is thought to share the offensiveness of obstacle course theories presumably because, like them, Leibniz believes in some kind of tradeoffs between evils. His is a bump-in-the-carpet theory of the overall distribution of evil: push an evil down here and it pops up worse over there. So it can seem to picture God as carefully and offensively choosing horrendous evils for some in order to let others off.

That cannot be right either, because choosing the absolutely best world one can create is necessarily morally unimpeachable. If any other world had been chosen, God would be open to criticism as permitting more evil than the minimum.

There is something wrong with describing a choice of the best scenario as permitting evils for the sake of a greater good. What exactly is wrong with it has become clear in recent years through reflection on the Trolley problem.

9. Trolleys, transplants and Sophie's choices

The distinction between Trolley cases and Transplant cases has become well-known (Thomson 1976). In the Trolley case, a driver of a runaway trolley can allow his trolley to kill five people on one track, or divert it onto another track where one person will be killed. In the Transplant case, a surgeon can allow five healthy patients to die, or kill one healthy person whose organs will allow him to save the other five. The problem is to explain the difference, in such way as to ground the intuition of most people that the driver would do right in diverting the trolley but the surgeon would do wrong in killing the patients for their organs.

It is not easy to do that, which is why the cases have generated so much discussion. Bur for present purposes, where we wish to understand whether the divine creative act is better compared to a Trolley or a Transplant problem, we need to note only one fairly uncontroversial aspect of the Trolley problem. That is that the forced choice between scenarios faced by the trolley driver plays some exculpatory role.

It is possible to criticise one action of his or the other. What we do not say to the driver – and it would be offensive to say it – is, "Whatever you do, you were wrong because you killed someone in order to save others." Nor do we say that the "driverdicy" project of excusing the driver is unfeeling and morally offensive on the ground that it attempts to excuse the unthinkable, namely his deliberately allowing one person to die for the sake of a greater good. Forced choice is like that. One of two scenarios must be chosen up-front.

It is unfair to describe the trolley driver as "doing evil that good may come of it" – overall, the driver prevented evil rather than perpetrated it. The description "allowing evil for the sake of a greater good" is strictly speaking true of his action, but it is still an unsympathetic view of his moral dilemma. It is not that he allowed some evil, and out of that a good arose. "Preventing a greater evil by settling for a lesser one" would be more apt.

If you choose what is reasonably considered the best option of those available to you, it is morally offensive for bystanders to abuse you (for your lack of feeling, or for doing evil so that good may come of it). Especially bystanders who do not face such a choice themselves. It is similar with the decisions facing World War II strategists as to what sacrifices needed to be made to protect the secret of the decryption of German Ultra intelligence. While it is a myth that Churchill allowed Coventry to be bombed to protect the secret, that is the kind of real decision that is forced on strategists. Or suppose I design a freeway to replace a winding road and the freeway is safer. I should not be said to sacrifice those who die on my road to save those greater number who would have died on the old road. If I contemplate attending the

funeral of the first person to die on my freeway, my conscience will be clear if I have to explain myself.

Particular decisions can be criticized. But it is not right to criticize simply the whole idea of making planning decisions by comparing the outcomes of scenarios. The alternative is to abdicate responsibility to achieve the best, or least worst, outcome, among the choices one faces.

According to the Leibnizian view, God creates the universe upfront (or possibly continuously, if he has to recalculate to deal with the free decisions of other beings). So he is in the moral position of a Trolley problem: among the scenarios facing him, he must choose the best one. If he does choose the best – as the Leibnizian claims – then it is not appropriate to criticize him morally.

Antitheodicists, on the other hand, have chosen to represent the divine creative act as a Transplant problem rather than a Trolley problem. They write in such terms as "God's allowing a child's torture *in order* not to interfere with the torturer's free will;" "According to the soul-making theodicy … God permits suffering such as Dominick's in order to allow humans in general to develop such virtues as compassion, forbearance, and courage" (Maitzen 2019); "A hypothesis that God allows evil for the sake of some good" (Lewis 1993); "A theodicist … attempts to explain God's permission of various evils, and this is achieved by ascribing to God some reason for allowing the evils to take place." (Trakakis 2008); "any bad choices made by [humans], no matter what their consequences, are justified by the greater good of the free will that makes it possible for us to have choices at all" (Phillips 2004, 177); "to engage in the practice of constructing theodicies is to speak of the horrendous sufferings of the world as something that can be 'absorbed', compensated or outweighed by some greater good" (Betenson 2016). That language suggests, even if it does not strictly require, seeing the divine creative act as a Transplant case – as if God cuts up his "patients", the worst sufferers in the actual world, in order to benefit other people or for the sake of some other greater good.

It is true that some of the ways of speaking of soul-making and free will theodicists were susceptible of that interpretation. It is not applicable to theodicies that insist on seeing the divine creative act as an upfront choice between possible scenarios, of which God has chosen the best. In that case, as in the Trolley case, any moral criticism is inappropriate because any other decision would have been worse.

Thus a Leibnizian, or any scenario-choice theodicist, avoids complaints of moral offensiveness through being utilitarian, as if some people are sacrificed for the "greater good" of others. While that is an understandable reaction by those who draw the short straw, it betrays

a lack of understanding of what choice between difficult scenarios is like, from the perspective of the moral agent forced to make them. If a general faced with a choice of strategies all involving casualties chooses the one with the least number of casualties, the natural grudges of the "expendables" can coexist with an appreciation – even their appreciation – that the general could not have done morally better, since any other decision would have had the same problem (but worse). To describe the best choice of a spectrum of choices, all involving evils, as "doing evil that good may come of it" would fail to appreciate the nature of choice at the design phase.

Just one of the antitheodical discussions showed some awareness of this point. It was D.Z. Phillips' mention of the possibility that creation might be seen as a "Sophie's Choice", that is, a choice between possibilities all of which contain grave evils. In William Styron's story and the 1982 movie, Sophie, a prisoner in Auschwitz, is faced with a forced choice of saving one of her two children, or neither. Rather than losing both, she chooses the son instead of the daughter. No-one abuses Sophie for the choice she was forced to make. Indeed, it is offensive to do so.

According to Christian theory, God's choice is like Sophie's – literally so, since God has to sacrifice his son to save his other "children", alternatives being for some unnamed reason not possible (Matt 26:39).

D.Z. Phillips in his attacks on theodicy considers this comparison. He writes:

> If God shares a common moral community with Sophie and ourselves, what should we say of his allowing the Holocaust to happen? Is God to be the object of pity? Is creation a moral tragedy in which God is necessarily involved in evil? And what of God's view of what he has done? Does the Holocaust stay with him? Does he think that it can be excused in the light of the greater good that made it necessary, or does he recognize he has something to answer for?

Those are good questions. Phillips' immediately following conclusion is:

> It will be obvious that within these moral parameters, there is no logical space for talk of God's perfect goodness. (Phillips 2004, 43)

That is certainly not obvious. If God has chosen the best, his perfect goodness is unimpugned. Perfect goodness just is choosing the best. Of course he has something to answer for. Nevertheless, if all other possible choices of his are worse, his perfect goodness absolutely requires him to choose the best. And having chosen the best there is, no more can be asked of him, for the same reason that no more can be asked of Sophie.

10. Dostoevskian choice and the empty world

Finally, it could be argued, as in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that despite all the above, theodicy is morally offensive because it is immediately obvious that the empty world (empty of anything but God) is better than the actual world and hence God ought to have chosen it. A strength of Dostoevsky's presentation is that he does see it in terms of upfront choice between scenarios: "Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end … but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature … would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?' … 'No, I wouldn't consent.'" (Dostoevsky Bk 5 ch. 4)

That is indeed a powerful argument, but there are two considerations that call it into doubt. Firstly, it is not known that the empty world is possible. We easily think so, because it is easy to imagine – nothing easier – but the proposition that the empty world is possible is all the same the kind of proposition that is "beyond our ken" and on which a certain skepticism about our powers of modal knowledge is indicated. It was denied by the Neoplatonists, who held that God necessarily "overflowed" into creation. (Pseudo-Dionysius 4.10, 13.1) If we take seriously Leibniz's thought (Leibniz, par. 10) "you must judge it [the world] with me *ab effectu* [from the outcome], since God has chosen this world as it is," (that is, God is perfect so what he has created is the best) then the empty world is ruled out along with other non-actual worlds, because it is either not possible or not best. There may be intellectual objections to that on the grounds of plausibility, but they are not moral objections.

Secondly, we may be less sure on reflection that we would make the choice Dostoevsky suggests, if we were put to the test. Suppose we were given the choice of pushing a button so that, not only were we never born, but the whole world were never born. Would we be sure about pressing it? It would certainly be tempting, as we considered the evil we would prevent. But a review of what would be lost might be enough to cause hesitation.

A similar hesitation about the benefits of non-existence has been evident in the cautious reaction to Benatar's thesis that it is better not to have been born and that we have an obligation to provide future (potential) generations with that benefit: "Although it is obviously too late to prevent our own existence, it is not too late to prevent the existence of future possible people." (Benatar 2006, vii) With respect to future generations, we find ourselves in the moral position of God in creating the whole universe. Most philosophers have reacted to Benatar's thesis as an interesting idea, but there has been no rush to enthusiastically accept or act on it. Even in

philosophical circles, it is unlikely that the birth of a healthy newborn baby will be considered as normally a cause for mourning. That is, while it is almost philosophical orthodoxy to congratulate oneself on one's sympathy for world suffering when agreeing with Dostoevsky, when philosophers are reminded that they have the opportunity to partially put into effect the Dostoevskian choice, they stay their hands.

It is not the final judgement that is significant. Benatar's position is arguable and not obviously wrong. What is significant is the hesitation. To hesitate in the face of that decision is to start weighing scenarios morally in the way that Leibniz suggests God does, and that antitheodicists criticize as necessarily immoral in principle.

11.What can be said to victims?

"After the Holocaust, no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children." Rabbi Greenberg's statement (1977, 23) is much-quoted. That is just if it is taken by all sides in the debate as a warning and call for reflection. It may be dangerous if used as a stick to beat one's opponents.

Presumably it is intended to mean that statements (of theodicy or antitheodicy) ought to be credible in the first instance to victims, rather than to the conscience of the persons making the statements. There is indeed a genuine danger that theodicy may trivialize suffering by reinterpreting it "in a way the sufferer cannot accept" (Shearn 2013) but that claim should not be made without asking the victims or considering what perspectives might be acceptable if thought up by the sufferers themselves. Purporting to speak on behalf of victims, without asking them, threatens to be a morally dubious exercise. Victims themselves, if they have the chance, say many different things, often in accordance with their pre-existing views.

Trying to rule out all theodicies as offensive risks being an exercise in moral vanity and shallow indignation. To condemn theodicists as unfeeling and detached, of taking a bureaucratic approach to evil in the style of Adolf Eichmann, may be sustainable, if that is the truth about theodicists. Perhaps it is true of some. But to denounce all theodicies, saying they "betray the evils that people have suffered, and, in that way, sin against them" (Phillips 2004, xi) does put one at certain moral risks of self-deception. Van Inwagen (2005) is surely uncharitable to write of antitheodicy, "Moral scorn is the most pleasant kind of scorn to deploy against those who disagree with you because a display of self-righteousness—moral

posturing—is a pleasant action whatever the circumstances, and it's nice to have an excuse for it." But antitheodicists have not always shown themselves cognizant of the dangers.

It is not for anyone, theodicist or antitheodicist, to impose their views on sufferers. The theodicist would be heartless to put it to sufferers that their suffering would look small if they could only see the "big picture". Equally the antitheodicist would be cruel to tell the sufferer that there could not possibly be any point, payoff or compensation for his suffering. But one can consider what has the potential to be consoling to some degree for the sufferer, if he thought of it himself. Indeed, the theodicist knows full well that his theory is very likely to have to survive (or may fail to survive) the test of his own terminal cancer – suffering is not just about other people.

The message of antitheodicists to sufferers does not always become clear through their vigorous condemnation of those on the other side. Rarely are they as explicit as Pihlström and Kivistö (2016, 4) who offer to "lead him or her [the sufferer] to see the meaninglessness of (all) suffering and to view theodicies as insincere or even morally scandalous." Is that helpful, or standing in solidarity with the victims? David Hume's opponent James Beattie queried whether Hume's sunny rationalism was any help to those in extreme suffering:

> In the solitary scenes of life, there is many an honest and tender heart pining with incurable anguish, pierced with the sharpest sting of disappointment, bereft of friends, chilled with poverty, racked with disease, scourged by the oppressor; whom nothing but trust in Providence, and the hope of future retribution, could preserve from the agonies of despair. And do they [the Enlightened], with sacrilegious hands, attempt to violate this last refuge of the miserable, and to rob them of the only comfort that had survived the ravages of misfortune, malice and tyranny? (Beattie 1771, 527)

Yes, they do. Antitheodicy is tough-minded when it addresses sufferers and keen to tell them harsh truths. Conversely, if one's aim were to alleviate suffering, one might argue that the illusion of theodicy would be merciful even if completely false.

True, the moral failings of antitheodicy do not show that theodicy itself is morally in the clear. But they do indicate at least a calmer atmosphere and less righteous indignation in discussing the moral credentials of all theories in the field. A degree of the intellectual detachment sometimes regarded as heartless might allow the terrain to become clearer.

The reasons why some kinds of theodicy can be expressed to sufferers and have a prospect of being agreed to by them can be appreciated by comparisons with human affairs. It is a matter of common knowledge that some people spontaneously find theodical thinking to some degree

consolatory. When a coroner recommends changes as a result of a child's accidental death, the parents often say "We hope that what happened will prevent such a tragedy happening again." (mentioned in Forrest 2010) Relatives of casualties in war often wish to believe that "they did not die in vain". In those cases, there is no suggestion that overall it was better that those people died. Nevertheless, to take some comfort from positive outcomes of a tragedy is a natural human response, and one it is hard to condemn as either immoral or irrational.

The comparison of God's moral situation to that of a general with many people to think about is again useful. A battlefield casualty will be angry if he is sacrificed in the interests of a general's stupid or self-aggrandizing plan, when "someone had blundered". The general could have and should have done better, and because he did not do so the casualty's life is wasted. But if the victim knows that the general chose the best plan after careful consideration of the alternatives, and that there was no malice or incompetence in his being assigned to a dangerous sector of the front since someone had to be, he can reasonably take some consolation from the necessity of his sacrifice.

The necessity of the sacrifice, its unavoidablity or non-gratuitousness, is essential to finding consolation for it. It is theodicies that hold that God could not have done better – either because he is not omnipotent or because as in Leibniz's theory even omnipotence could not have done better – that provide consolation. According to those theories, God and we are allies in the struggle against suffering. Our suffering has meaning through its essential role in avoiding worse outcomes.

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