

Theodicy on Trial

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*“Though he slay me, I will hope in him;
yet I will argue my ways to his face.”*

(Job 13:15, ESV)

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the growing popularity of the view known as anti-theodicy. Anti-theodicists generally hold that, on various grounds and for various reasons, the theodical enterprise should be abandoned. In this paper, I want to consider a specific kind of anti-theodical argument that I think poses a strong challenge to the theodical enterprise. Anti-theodicists like Kenneth Surin, Terrence Tilley, D. Z. Philips, Nick Trakakis etc have posed versions of this type of argument: the moral consequentialist critique of theodicy. Simply put, this line of argumentation aims to demonstrate that we should abandon the theodical enterprise altogether by claiming that its practice directly and/or indirectly leads to harmful consequences to the individual sufferer and to society. Consequently, anti-theodicists argue that on moral grounds, theodicy ought not be practiced.

In this paper, I argue that theodicists who defend traditional theodicies, what I will term ‘theodicies-of-embrace’, have been unable to provide a sufficiently persuasive response to the problem of ‘horrendous evils’, and therefore, seem to be vulnerable to the moral consequentialist criticisms. In order for the theodical enterprise to provide an adequate response, I will argue that the theodical enterprise needs to broaden its understanding of itself. More particularly, I will argue, this broader understanding must formulate more holistic kinds of theodicies, what I designate as ‘theodicies-of-embrace-protest’. ‘Theodicies-of-embrace-protest’ acknowledge that there is some value in traditional ‘theodicies-of-embrace’ and therefore, resists the call to abandon theodical discourse altogether while at the same time,

proffering a more theologically and practically robust response which, I argue, can be said to take seriously the anti-theodicist's critique.

To do this, in Section 1, I will first reconstruct a version of the anti-theodicist's moral consequentialist critique and demonstrate how 'theodicies-of-embrace' are susceptible to this critique. I consider several responses in defence of the theodical enterprise, including the separation thesis, and argue that these responses do not adequately address the anti-theodicists' concerns. In Section 2, I will argue that, in the light of horrendous evils, there is good reason to think that the theodical enterprise should be broadened. To do so, I briefly survey key texts in the literature of protest-theodicy and develop an account of 'theodicies of embrace-protest'. I argue that we have good reason to think that theodicies-of-embrace and compatible with theodicies-of-protest. To provide an example, I discuss how sceptical theism, a theodical strategy that has been receiving increasing attention in recent years, is able to fulfil the criteria of a theodicy-of-embrace-protest. Further, I demonstrate how sceptical theism is able to satisfy both the theoretical and practical questions that sufferers may have. One upshot of this analysis is that sceptical theism, and more broadly, theodicies-of-embrace-protest, is able to preserve much of the value in traditional theodicies while being able to take seriously the consequentialist critique of the moral anti-theodicist.

1. The Anti-theodicist's moral consequentialist critique

In this section, I want to consider a specific kind of argument from the anti-theodicist. Anti-theodicists reject theodicies. While some anti-theodicists reject theodicies because they think that individual theodicies do not provide any plausible or meaningful solution to the problem of evil; moral anti-theodicists generally think that the theodical enterprise itself is morally questionable. Simply put, the moral anti-theodicist's consequentialist critique of theodicy argues that the enterprise of theodicy should be abandoned on the premise that theodicies result in morally undesirable consequences. In this section, I will reconstruct this argument by first considering the key principle behind this premise. Next, I will consider more specific arguments that attempt to demonstrate how, in actual fact, theodicies do result in morally undesirable consequences. Finally, I will briefly consider some responses that have been given in defence of the theodical enterprise.

1.1. Surin's Principle

Kenneth Surin has clearly articulated the principle that lies behind the critique. In short, the principle states that all philosophical reflection mediates a socio-political praxis. Applying this principle to the subject of philosophical reflection on theodicies, moral anti-theodacists argue that theodicies mediate a socio-political praxis that often increases rather than reduces the pain experienced by the sufferer. Surin writes,

Crucial to our argument is the principal that all philosophical and theological reflection, no matter how theoretical such reflection may be, inevitably mediates a certain social and political praxis. All profoundly significant intellectual visions have a purchase on reality. They thus have the capacity to determine the way(s) in which a certain segment of reality is either to be transformed or else maintained in its existing form. The philosopher and the theologian do not theorize *in vacuo*: it is their responsibility, therefore, continually to ask themselves what particular praxis it is that their work mediates. (Surin 1983, 230).

While Surin is by no means the only one who has made such an observation, his articulation of it is definitely one of, if not, the most influential one in the literature. According to moral anti-theodacists, an important goal in the development of theodicies ought to be the relieving or reducing of pain among sufferers, call this the *practical goal*.¹ This is a direct response to the more traditional conception of theodicies. On the traditional conception of the theodacist's task, the theodacist's primary responsibility is to provide at least, a logical, if not, a plausible, response to both the logical and evidential problem of evil, call this the *theoretical goal*. The attempt to demonstrate that God is logically compatible with the problem of evil is often called a defence. The attempt to compose a plausible narrative that demonstrates that God and evil can co-exist is often called a theodicy. A common criticism of such attempts is that they are too 'detached' from reality and that theodacists need to understand that theodacizing does not occur *in vacuo*. Applying Surin's principle, all formulations of any defences or theodicies mediate a socio-political praxis. If theodicies mediate a praxis that increases rather than decreases the pain the sufferer experiences, the theodicial enterprise ought to be abandoned. Put differently, moral anti-theodacists argue that when the theodacist pursues the

¹ It is worth noting that, while anti-theodacists generally think that theodicies reject the moral status of theodicies and defences, *individual* anti-theodacists may differ in terms how they understand the specific issues in this debate. For instance, they may differ about the *reason* they think some theodicy is morally acceptable or not. Alternatively, some anti-theodacists might be more open to the morality of defences instead of theodicies (after all, defences do not purport to provide an *actual* explanation for an individual's suffering, only a *logically possible* one).

theoretical goal *at the cost of* the practical goal, then the theoretical goal itself should not be pursued. The theoretical goal can only be meaningfully pursued insofar as it is pursued in tandem with the practical goal. According to moral anti-theodacists, however, this is either impossible or improbable. In the following section, I briefly outline several reasons moral anti-theodacists think that the theoretical goal comes at the cost of the practical goal.

1.2. The moral anti-theodacist's moral consequentialist arguments

Arguments of this form can be divided into two kinds. Local arguments hold that individual theodicies have resulted in harmful consequences and therefore, these theodicies should be abandoned. Stronger versions of the local argument hold that theodacists have long attempted to come up with theodicies that will reduce suffering, but, until now, all existing theodicies have resulted in harmful consequences; given that it is unlikely that theodacists will be able to propose a theodicy that does not, in fact, add to the pain of the sufferer, it follows that the enterprise of theodacizing should be abandoned.² Global arguments hold that the very attempt at theodacizing itself *necessarily* results in harmful consequences and, therefore, conclude that the enterprise of theodacizing should be abandoned. In this section, I briefly discuss some harmful consequences that anti-theodacists think arise out of theodicies, at the individual and societal levels. While many of these arguments *prima facie* seem to be local arguments, they are often waged with the intention of yielding a global conclusion. I will conclude this section with a global argument of my own, arguing that the enterprise of theodicy, as it is currently conceived, necessarily results in harmful consequences in the context of horrendous evils.

First, some anti-theodacists argue that theodicies result in harmful consequences *to individual sufferers*. Instead of serving the practical goal of comforting the sufferer, theodicies bring greater harm to the sufferer in various ways. Michael Scott has argued that particular theodicies might have morally insensitive implications for individual sufferers. He writes,

“It is one thing to claim that moral evil is justified as the inevitable consequence of human beings being free and responsible; it is quite another to suggest to a person who has been raped that the suffering involved in that experience is in some way balanced out by God’s gift of free will to human beings. The failure of

² Against this, Søvik points out that “One important counter-argument is that because some theodicies are bad, that does not mean that no theodicies should be made, but rather that better theodicies should be made” (Søvik 2008: 479-480).

the practice of theodicy in connecting with the practical realities of evil seems to leave the theodicyist vulnerable to the charge of moral insensitivity.” (Michael Scott 1996: 2).

Robert Mark Simpson has pointed out that “because theodicies understand horrendous evils in terms of a grand scheme of human redemption, they will always run the danger of detracting from the seriousness of the evils that individuals have suffered” (Simpson 2009: 158). Such arguments “allege that a proxy endorsement of horrendous evil is a moral impropriety perpetrated *against* the victims of horrendous evil *by* theodicyists” (Simpson 2009: 158). Relatedly, Samuel Shearn rejects the claim that theodicies are able to reach its practical goal. He writes that “theodicy, by virtue of being detached, is not able to deliver the existential assistance it aimed to provide” and that “Any theoretical ‘help’, in the case of horrendous evils, does not become good news for the sufferer, because it will not comfort. Theodicy, even if it is legitimate as an intellectual enterprise, is self-defeating if it aims to be beneficial to sufferers.” (Shearn 2013: 448-449). Further, Shearn argues that “theodicy trivializes suffering if it reinterprets suffering in a way the sufferer cannot accept” (Shearn 2013: 441). This, Shearn argues, is true, especially of sufferers who have experienced horrendous evils. For them, “theodicies may be distressing” since theodicies would trivialize their suffering; and in so doing, the theodicyist “harms the sufferer of horrendous evils by her unthoughtfulness” (Shearn 2013: 450).

Further, theodicies that claim that suffering is instrumentally good for the individual (for instance, it allows the individual who experiences suffering to grow) would result in “a willingness to suffer, which is called for as a universal Christian attitude. A person is denied the most elementary human right, namely, to defend himself and to say, like Goethe’s wild rose, ‘And I won’t endure it’” (Soelle 1975: 17-18). That is, in viewing suffering as instrumentally good, theodicies might encourage the individual to simply accept and endure her suffering rather than trying to overcome it. Similarly, Robert Mesle has argued, “if your goal is to change things, to reduce the suffering, and to make life better in the future, then saying that suffering is good for us may well be counter-productive” (Mesle 2004: 250).

A second consequence we might consider is that theodicies result in harmful consequences to *societies*. This is a common line of argumentation: that a “potential danger of theodicy is that it will be used to sanction oppressive structures in the status quo” (Mesle 2004: 250). Surin writes that theoretical theodicies provide “a tacit sanction for the evil that exists on our appalling planet” (Surin 1983: 230). Soelle argues that when one acts in line with a theodicy, “one represses all other causes of suffering, particularly the social causes, and doesn’t

deal rationally with the actual causes” (Soelle 1975: 17-18). She concludes, “this purely individualistic view sidesteps reality because it overlooks other people involved in the situation” (Soelle 1975: 18). Further, Sarah Pinnock argues that,

“Theodicy is harmful because it condones evils by ignoring their social dimensions. This moral criticism is not directed toward the authors of theodicy, but toward theodicy as an intellectual product. The academic discourse of theodicy itself has moral force. Theodicy names what is evil in a manner that prioritizes certain areas of reflection, such as God’s nature or human freedom, and neglects others, such as the material analysis of social evils. It must be recognized that academic discussions of God and evil have declarative power that usually goes unrecognized by those who propose theodicies: the power to name and focus on certain types of evil and to silence other memories of suffering.” (Pinnock 2002: 138).

As Soelle and Pinnock point out, theodicies have a tendency to focus our attention away from social dimensions of evil. In Surin’s words, “The theodacist who formulates a doctrine designed to overlook the radical particularity of human evil is, by implication, mediating a social and political praxis which averts its gaze from all the cruelties that exist in the world” (Surin 1983: 232). Similarly, Terrence Tilley writes, “I have come to see theodicy as a discourse practice which disguises real evils while those evils continue to afflict people. In short, engaging in the discourse practice of theodicy *creates* evil” (Tilley 1991: 3). This would prevent, or at least, reduce the likelihood of efforts to tackle structural problems that exist in society - which could prevent or mitigate the perpetuation of further harm in the future. Toby Betenson adds,

“To understand the world as being composed of only goods and justified evils is to remove gratuitous or unjustified evils from one’s picture of the world. This leaves the theodacist in a tricky situation when one is faced with a potentially ‘evil’ situation that they could prevent. Should they intervene? Why should they, when they know that whatever evil might result, by their action or inaction, will be justified by a morally sufficient reason? This is a route to a kind of Panglossianism, one that, if fully accepted, is likely to weaken one’s resolve to act against the evils of the world.” (Betenson 2016: 61-62).

Further, theodicies might have the unintended consequences of causing individuals, societies, and the church to adopt a kind of apathy towards suffering, and “deaden us to the harsher realities of our world” (Wetzel 1989: 10), thus making us less likely to challenge structures that create or perpetuate suffering (eg. through injustice or inequality).

Consequently, in applying Surin’s principle to the theodical enterprise, anti-theodacists argue that theodicies tend to result in harmful consequences at both the individual and societal level. In so doing, the practical goal is not only not accomplished, indeed, the enterprise becomes counter-productive as, rather than comforting the sufferer, it adds to her pain.

1.3. Responses

In defence of the theodical enterprise, several responses have been proposed. Perhaps the most prominent response by theodicians is to distinguish between the theoretical and practical goals, call this the separation thesis. Alvin Plantinga has famously expressed the separation thesis:

Confronted with evil in his own life or suddenly coming to realize more clearly than before the *extent* and *magnitude* of evil, a believer in God may undergo a crisis of faith. He may be tempted to follow the advice of Job's 'friends'; he may be tempted to 'curse God and die'. Neither a Free Will Defense nor a Free Will Theodicy is designed to be of much help or comfort to one suffering from such a storm in the soul (although in a specific case, of course, one or the other could prove useful). Neither is to be thought of first of all as a means of pastoral counseling. Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose. (Plantinga 1977: 28-29).

Similarly, David O' Connor has argued that "Theoretical theodicy is indeed a response to the actuality of evil in the world... Through and through it is an intellectual response. But it is not, and to my knowledge has never been offered as, a response in the quite different sense of being an address to the victims, of being an attempt to minister to the afflicted, or as a substitute for such a response" (O' Connor 1988: 64). The weakness of this response is that, while it helpfully distinguishes between the practical and the theoretical goals of theodicy, it does not address the anti-theodician's concern that the theoretical goal *comes at the expense of* the practical goal.

Atle Søvik has provided several helpful responses in defence of theodicies. Søvik, for instance, has argued that we must distinguish between "searching for truth and communicating truth" (Søvik 2008: 482). Consequently, he argues, there is nothing wrong with formulating theodicies, or even communicating it in an appropriate context. However, when one communicates a theodicy in the wrong context, it becomes harmful. The fault, however, does not lie with the theodicy, or the theodician who constructed (and communicated) the theodicy, but on the one who (mis)communicates the theodicy. In response, Shearn points out that the "theodical discourse is unlikely to be confined to academia and that it will shape the narratives of religious communities and thus their responses to horrendous evils" (Shearn 2013: 447). Further, even if Søvik is correct, it severely limits and calls for a reconceptualization of the realm and ambit of theodicies.

Additionally, Søvik and Eikrem have argued that theodicies can, in fact, result in positive consequences, i.e. achieving its practical goal. Against Shearn, Søvik and Eikrem think that Shearn's trivialization criteria is too strict: they interpret Shearn as claiming that "a person unacceptably trivializes suffering if she interprets horrendous evils in a way that any sufferer of horrendous evils cannot accept *as true*" (Søvik and Eikrem 2015: 264). That is, is not the criteria that every sufferer must think that a theodicy is an adequate interpretation of her suffering too demanding? Instead, they remind us, there are in fact instances where theodicies might bring comfort to the sufferer. They write, "it may be a comfort to the parents, for instance some time after the child has died, to come upon a general philosophical argument that makes it rational to believe that a perfectly good God exists, and is powerful enough to let them meet their (now happy) child again" (Søvik and Eikrem 2015: 267). There are different ways and instances where theodicies might bring some comfort (Søvik 2008: 481-482, Søvik and Eikrem 2015: 267).

Understanding the separation thesis through Søvik and Eikrem's analysis generates the following insight: we must not forget that the theoretical goal may, at times, *promote* the practical goal. That is, when facing suffering, individual sufferers may have different needs. For some, they may ask whether we have good reason to believe that a good and omnipotent God exists at all; while others may ask, given that such a God exists, how should we understand and/or relate to suffering? Answering the former question is part of the goal of theoretical theodicy, and in doing so, theoretical theodicies meet a real need that some sufferers face. In this way, the theoretical goal may be pursued in support of the practical goal.

Consequently, the argument goes, while there are a large number of (mis)communications of theodicies that might be rightly said to have caused moral harm, it does not follow that the entire enterprise of theodicy should therefore be abandoned. Put differently, given that there are some cases where theodicies might rightly be said to extend comfort (i.e. fulfil its theoretical *and* practical goal), the global argument against theodicies seems to go too far. If, however, it turns out that a large amount of theodicies do in fact cause more harm than help to sufferers, we might wonder whether that be sufficient to justify the call to abandon the theodical enterprise altogether. There seems, perhaps, therefore a sense in which this leaves us with an empirical question: whether theodicies, on the whole, create more harm than good – this seems to be the answer that determines the moral status of the enterprise.

In another sense, however, this response seems to be missing the mark. Many arguments put forth by anti-theodacists concern sufferers of horrendous evils. For many anti-theodacists, horrendous evils refer to those instantiations of suffering whereby the sufferer can find no good reason for their suffering, this basket of suffering is sometimes also referred to as being gratuitous, useless and meaningless. In such a scenario, however, anti-theodacists think that *no* sufferer will find *any* theodicy acceptable, and any and every attempt at communicating a theodicy to a sufferer of horrendous evil adds to their suffering.

Against this, Leow Theng Huat points out that the view that “those who suffer seek only alleviation of their pain or an understanding of their immediate situation, and not answers to the larger question of why evil exists... represents a reductionist and even patronising view of the sufferer because it assumes that he is so overcome by his circumstances that he becomes totally absorbed into his own suffering and is unable to contemplate and seek answers to larger questions” (Leow 2011, 181-182 fn. 9). Combine this with the premises that some sufferers of horrendous evils do seek answers to the theoretical and meaning question (Adams 1999, 187-188), and that theodicies do in fact bring comfort to some sufferers (eg. Søvik and Eikrem 2015: 267), this response then poses an important challenge to the anti-theodacist’s concern with ‘gratuitous’ evils. At this point, we might argue that the conflict between the theodacist and the anti-theodacist requires (a) an independent defence that gratuitous evils do exist and (b) the empirical question, of whether (b1) some sufferers of horrendous evils do, in fact, find theodicies helpful or (b2) whether theodicies (and perhaps, this should be applied to the moral critique as well) has resulted in more harm than help for sufferers. At this juncture, we might minimally and, I think, reasonably, admit of a weaker conclusion from the critique: that there exists some circumstances and contexts whereby theodicies hurt rather than help the sufferer. In addition to this, I want to raise an argument that I think captures the sentiment expressed here by anti-theodacists.

All attempts at formulating a theodicy, as it is traditionally conceived, is an attempt, as Milton put it, to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ or to provide a ‘defence’ of God. Whether one attempts to show that it is logically possible for God and evil to exist, or to construct a plausible narrative of how an all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God can co-exist with evil, one is, in a sense, attempting to defend or justify God. The way that most theodicies attempt to do so is to posit that there is some greater good which is only obtainable if suffering is present in the world. Andrew Gleeson therefore describes theodicies as ‘instrumental’ since “they treat evils as logically unavoidable conditions of ‘greater goods’ which outweigh them

and justify God's creating a world with such evils" (Gleeson 2015: 1). Nick Trakakis elaborates, "To say that suffering has a teleology is to say that suffering has some (God-given) point or purpose, and for theodacists the ultimate purpose of suffering must be moral in nature (though some theodacists countenance non-moral – e.g., aesthetic – ends) and must be worth the devastation it leaves in its wake" (Trakakis 2008: 171). Often, the greater good includes variants of goods such as free will or character development, broadly construed. If this is true, it follows that while theodacies argue that suffering in itself is generally bad, suffering would still be instrumentally good. Applying Surin's principle, would it not therefore follow that if theodacies posit that suffering is instrumentally good, it would mediate a praxis that 'embraces' suffering? I use 'embrace' in a generic sense, to include a range of responses such as resignation, acceptance, appreciation, welcome etc. Any theory, however, that mediates a praxis of embrace towards horrendous evils seems to be, to say the least, morally questionable – and this sentiment, I think, is one that is shared by anti-theodacists and theodacists alike, e.g., any call to 'embrace' one's experience of the Holocaust seems quite wrong. Consequently, there seems to be something seriously wanting in any attempt to theodacise in the face of horrendous evils. Additionally, if I am right about this, the separation principle will not be enough to save the theodacal enterprise since theodacies either help or hurt the sufferer. The theoretical inappropriateness of theodacies cannot be dismissed simply as being a *separate* problem. There is no separation between the theoretical and the practical if the theoretical mediates a particular praxis.³

In this section, I have briefly considered the moral consequentialist critique of the anti-theodacist. Having demonstrated that the dialogue between the theodacists and the anti-theodacists has given us good reason to think that there are circumstances and contexts where traditional theodacies cannot help, but might even hurt the sufferer; and having argued that any attempt to formulate a theodacy in the face of horrendous evils would unacceptably and perhaps inappropriately mediate a praxis of embracing suffering, I propose a rethinking of the notion of theodacies.

³ There have been many attempts to demonstrate that the theoretical and practical distinction is not as clear as it is often made out to be in the literature, e.g., Leow 2011: 180-181 and Culp 2015).

2. A Theodicy of Embrace-Protest

2.1. The task of theodicy

Why should theodicies be construed as a defence of God? In one sense, as many have pointed out, the phrase was coined by Leibniz for this very purpose and have been used thusly since. To clarify my proposal, I want to distinguish between the task of ‘defending’ and ‘understanding’. If the task of theodicy is to defend God (in the context of suffering), the theodicist’s mandate would be to find reasons that justifies the actions of God. On the other hand, if the task of theodicy is to understand God (in the context of suffering), it would seem to follow that there exists a possibly where the theodicist might not conclude that God was justified in his actions. To use a metaphor that has been used by many such as Immanuel Kant and by Elie Wiesel, the enterprise of theodicy is similar to putting ‘God on trial’. If we understand theodicy as a defence of God, then it will follow that the theodicist takes up the role of the defendant: “The author of a theodicy agrees, therefore, that this juridical process be instituted before the tribunal of reason; he further consents to represent the accused side as advocate through the formal refutation of all the plaintiff’s complaints” (Kant 1996: 24). On the other hand, if we view theodicy as an attempt to understand the ways of God, then, like Wiesel’s play, the theodical discourse requires more than a defendant, it also requires the voice of a plaintiff, an advocate, witnesses and a jury (Wiesel 1979). For the theodicist who thinks that when God is put on trial, the verdict will be ‘not guilty’, there is no consequent need to distinguish ‘defending’ from ‘understanding’ since, on his view, if we were to truly ‘understand’ God, it would be as though we were ‘defending’ Him. The difference, however, is important for those who do not think that theodicies effectively get God off the hook – in the case of horrendous evils, some would argue, God might be found guilty.

Why might this be important for the argument we have been developing? If theodicy is understood in the broader sense of ‘understanding’ rather than ‘defending’, the anti-theodicist might argue that in cases of horrendous evils, we would not be able to ‘defend’ God. In those cases, we would need to either argue that He is guilty or that we cannot understand His ways. Both of these conclusions, however, in the light of Surin’s principle, will yield different kinds of praxis. Such conclusions would mediate a praxis not of embrace but of protest – I use protest in a generic sense, to include a range of responses such as lamentation, resentment, resistance, overcoming etc. While I don’t think this broader construal of theodicy is able to fully address

the concerns of the moral anti-theodicians, I do think that it is a step towards taking their concerns (that I share) seriously. Tilley expresses this line of concern succinctly:

“the usual practice of academic theodicy has marginalized, homogenized, supplanted, ‘purified’, and ultimately silenced those expressing grief, cursing God, consoling the sorrowful, and trying practically to understand and counteract evil events, evil actions, and evil practices” (Tilley 1991: 3).

The heart of the critique is that, in asking the individual sufferer to accept a theodicy which she cannot, the theodicyist is asking the sufferer to embrace her suffering rather than providing her the resources (or giving her the space) to protest (i.e. grief, be silent, lament, resist etc), which anti-theodicians deem as a more appropriate response to horrendous evils. This is the same for the consequentialist argument in the context of societies as well – while the task of ‘defending’ God might result in societies averting its gaze from evil, the task of ‘understanding’ God, in mediating a praxis of protest, might open up the possibility of resistance against social structures that perpetuate suffering. At the same time, the broader construal of ‘understanding’ still includes ‘defending’, and therefore, it preserves the sentiment expressed by Søvik and Eikrem that some theodicies still result in positive consequences for some sufferers. To further develop this broader construal of theodicies, I will first provide a brief survey of some instances of what I designate as theodicies-of-protest, followed by a more systematic account of theodicies-of-embrace-protest.⁴

2.2. A brief survey of theodicies of protest

‘Theodicies-of-protests’ simply put, are theodicies which mediate a praxis of protest. In this section, I will briefly touch on several key texts crucial in constructing a theodicy-of-protest.⁵

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*

⁴ The literature available is vast and I cannot, in this paper, do justice to the literature. Instead, I pick out several texts which, I think, provide perspectives of aspects of what I think a protest theodicy would look like.

⁵ The history of developments at something like a protest theology is vast and I do not have time or space to explore it here. More recently, important resources can be found in Jewish and Post-Holocaust Theological Literature (eg. Blumenthal 2003) and interpretations of ‘lament’ or ‘protest’ themes in theological and philosophical literature (eg. including interpretations of (Kant 1996)).

Ivan, from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, has often been presented as the paradigmatic anti-theodicy (eg. Surin 1983: 236-240, Trakakis 2008: 175-183, Shearn 2013: 452-454). With very clear and visible language, Ivan provides examples of instantiations of evils in the world, focusing on the pain of children. Ivan explains:

Listen to me: I took children only so as to make it more obvious. About all the other human tears that have soaked the whole earth through, from crust to core, I don't say a word, I've purposely narrowed down my theme. I am a bedbug, and I confess in all humility that I can understand nothing of why it's all arranged as it is. (Dostoevsky 1992: 243-244).

He goes on:

Listen: if everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it? It's quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering. (Dostoevsky 1992: 244).

Ivan emphasizes that the suffering and death of children is unjustified - since children are innocent - and irredeemable - since they are dead. What is his response to the theological problem? He announces:

I don't want harmony, for the love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. And it is my duty, if only as an honest man, to return it as far ahead of time as possible. Which is what I am doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket. (Dostoevsky 1992: 245).

On Ivan's worldview, what seems obviously like unjust and irredeemable suffering, what we might call horrendous evils, are not worth the price of other goods, such as freedom. He rejects the claim that the 'greater good' for which suffering is allowed is really worth it (Shearn 2013: 452-453). Interestingly, however, instead of rejecting God, he affirms his belief in God and engages in a praxis that involves a protest against the ways of God.

Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*

Elie Wiesel has written extensively on issues surrounding responses to suffering in general and the Holocaust in particular. Wiesel's play *The Trial of God* was set after a pogrom and during the holiday of Purim. Berish, an innkeeper who had suffered greatly, and watched his family

suffer during the pogrom, chooses to act as a prosecutor, after proposing to put God on trial. He thus begins his accusations:

I – Berish, Jewish innkeeper at Shamgorod – accuse Him of hostility, cruelty and indifference. Either He dislikes His chosen people or He doesn't care about them – period! But then, why has He chosen us – why not someone else, for a change? Either He knows what's happening to us, or He doesn't wish to know! In both cases He is... He is... guilty! (Wiesel 1979: 125).

Berish's response is not to abandon God. In fact, the presupposition of the trial is based on God's existence and God's providence. Toward the end of the play, Berish shouts his final protest:

I lived as a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I shall die – and it is as a Jew that, with my last breath, I shall shout my protest to God! And because the end is near, I shall shout louder! Because the end is near, I'll tell Him that He's more guilty than ever! (Wiesel 1979: 156).

Much like Ivan, Berish does not conclude, through his suffering, that God does not exist. While Ivan asserts his belief in God, Berish's protest presupposes it. Like Ivan, Berish engages in a praxis that involves a clear protest against God. In his introduction to the *Trial of God*, Robert McAfee Brown writes,

One night the teacher took Wiesel back to his own barracks, and there, with the young boy as the only witness, three great Jewish scholars - masters of Talmud, Halakhah, and Jewish jurisprudence - put God on trial, creating, in that eerie place, 'a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty'. The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an "infinity of silence," the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said "It's time for evening prayers," and the members of the tribunal recited Maariv, the evening service. (Wiesel 2013, vii).

Old Testament Literature

Katongole's *Born from Lament* represents a growing theological literature on 'protest' as a response to suffering.⁶ The genre of lamentation is one that pervades the Bible and is a response exemplified by many biblical models, including Job, the psalmists and the prophets. Katongole argues that "in the midst of suffering, hope takes the form of arguing and wrestling with God" (Katongole 2017: xvi). He helpfully explains, "in the moment of crisis, because they believed

⁶ See also resources such as (Gillingham 2015) and (Harper and Barker 2017).

that God can, should – and indeed, would – do something to save them, they complained, mourned, wept, chanted dirges, and cursed. They praised God, but they also assailed the ears of God, protesting God’s continued silence and pressing God for deliverance” (Katongole 2017: 104).

Katongole discusses protest in relation to specific instances of suffering in Africa. Part of his argument, however, is that lament is an appropriate and valuable response to suffering, and that lament is, in our terms, able to mediate a praxis of change. He argues that “far from passively acquiescing to suffering, lament is an active engagement with the world of suffering. Far from distracting us from practical engagement, the practice of lament deepens and intensifies engagement with the world of suffering. Lament invites us into deeper political engagement, while at the same time reframing and reconstituting the very nature and meaning of politics” (Katongole 2017: 261).

Miroslav Volf’s ‘I protest, therefore I believe’

In a short article entitled ‘I protest, therefore I believe’, Volf argues that the act of protesting against God presupposes belief in God. He explains,

“The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place, with no devastating mishaps, is tied to the belief that the world *ought* to be constituted in a certain way. And that belief... is itself tied to the notion of a creator. And that brings us to God. It is God who makes possible our protest that there is evil in the world. And it is God against whom we protest. God is both the ground of the protest and the target” (Volf 2005: 39).

There seems to be an interesting sense in which Volf’s argument has an affinity with Katongole’s. In both cases, it is faith in God and one’s expectation of what the world should therefore be like, that motivates one’s protest. In the same way that the theodicy might argue that faith produces embrace, we might argue that faith also produces protest. It is the disjunction between the expectation caused by one’s faith and one’s perception of reality that sets the ground for one’s protest.

John Roth’s ‘Protest Theodicy’

John Roth has provided one of the most developed accounts of a protest theodicy. He relies heavily on Jewish voices in the development of his protesting theodicy. According to Roth,

“The Jewish voices belong to a dissenting spirit that quarrels with God over *his* use of power. That confrontation is rooted not so much in rejection of God but rather in recognition that such defiance is crucial in struggles against despair. Jewish insight, ancient and contemporary, calls for men and women – particularly Christians – to consider a theodicy of protest.” (Roth 1981: 8).

Roth “affirms the existence of an omnipotent God” (Roth 1981: 16). However, he rejects the claim that God is all-loving. For Roth, history, or rather, events in history demonstrate a recurring theme that forces him to resist the conclusion that God is all-loving, namely, “too much has been lost” (Roth 1981: 8). Both God and men are responsible for the evils of the world and God’s omnipotence means that he is without excuse. Because of this, Roth acknowledges that his theodicy “must reckon with despair” (Roth 1981: 15). More particularly, despair over two aspects of hope: “hope that history is evolving toward a Kingdom of God on earth” and “hope that there will be any future good ‘so great as to render acceptable, in retrospect, the whole human experience, with all its wickedness and suffering as well as all its sanctity and happiness’” (Roth 1981: 15). However, all is not hopeless. In this, Roth turns to the omnipotence of God. The omnipotence of God, in addition to his promises, leads to dissenting moods among his people:

“God’s promises call for protests. And yet the same realities that make one dissent against the promises can also be the facts that impel us to struggle toward them – unless, of course, we are willing to let suffering rage with impunity or to resign ourselves to death as the end-in-itself.” (Roth 1981: 17).

Roth then turns to the book of Job as an example of a protesting response. Concerning Job’s alleged repentance, for instance, Roth relies heavily on Wiesel and explains:

“Elie Wiesel suggests, however, that Job’s humility was no simple resignation. Wiesel reads it instead as resistance and rebellion masked in hasty abdication. Ultimately God cannot be defeated, which is both our hope and our despair, but in confessing – when God, with greater reason to do so, did not – Job ‘continued to interrogate God.’ A protesting theodicy takes heart from that reading, not least because it implies that Job did not give up.” (Roth 1981: 18).

The human response then ought to protest against the waste that we see in the world, in the context of an omnipotent God. Yet, the individual is motivated as well to “reduce evil’s waste” (Roth 1981: 20). After admitting, however, that this theodicy is an imperfect one, he explains that it “originate[s] in felt needs,” namely, “a sense that human affairs are far worse than any good reason can justify or than our powers alone can alter; and, second, a yearning that refuses to settle for despair that the first feeling generates” (Roth 1981: 20). Finally, Roth explains that his theodicy has two main strands: a dissenting attitude towards God and a response of reducing the waste in the world around us (Roth 1981: 22).

2.3. An account of a theodicy of embrace-protest

Thus far, I have argued that theodicies-of-embrace are vulnerable to the moral anti-theodicyist's consequentialist critique, especially in the face of horrendous evils. In short, given that theodicies-of-embrace recommend a praxis of embracing suffering, they tend to worsen suffering for an individual and society, especially in the context of horrendous evils. On the other hand, I have noted that the consequentialist argument cuts both ways: it would also mean that there is *some* value to such theodicies since theodicies-of-embrace might actually comfort sufferers who have experienced non-horrendous evils; I have also suggested that they may meet the need of some sufferers by answering intellectual questions they may struggle with. For sufferers facing horrendous evils, I have proposed that theodicies-of-protest are generally more useful since they mediate a praxis of protest that seems to be more appropriate. In the sense that theodicies-of-protest do, in fact, provide a legitimate response to the problem of suffering and do tell us something about the relationship between God and evil, they should be regarded as part of the theodical enterprise as well – insofar as we are willing to broaden our notion of the theodical enterprise.

The theodical conception I am developing, however, goes beyond the recognition that there is value in both theodicies-of-embrace and theodicies-of-protest. Instead, I argue that a holistic theodicy, the kind of theodicy that we should aim at, is one that is able to mediate a praxis of both embrace and protest. As a preliminary, a simple reason might be suggested for this: if one of the goals of constructing theodicies is not only to comfort sufferers but also to provide sufferers resources to respond to the suffering in their lives, and if both embrace and protest are legitimate responses required by different sufferers at different times in different situations, it follows that the kind of theodical goal that we must aim at is one that is able to mediate a praxis of both embrace and protest. In this section, I first provide a *prima facie* reason for why we may think that theodicies-of-embrace and theodicies-of-protest are compatible. After which, I will provide an example of a kind of theodicy that, I think, fits this bill. There are, presumably, other ways to construct theodicies-of-embrace-protest, but I provide only one example in this paper. Additionally, I will argue that this theodicy also fulfils both the theoretical and practical goals discussed earlier.

First, an argument for the compatibility of protest and embrace theodicies: it seems to me that a good reason to think that theodicies should be able to mediate a praxis of both embrace

and protest is due to the complexity of the embrace-protest relationship. After all, both embrace and protest are results of one's faith. While it is often taken for granted that faith results in embrace, many have argued that the act of protest stems from a lack of faith. Hick, for instance, writes "because we are spiritually weak, because our faith is a wavering rather than a steady state, the note of protest and accusation remains a natural, indeed an inevitable, ingredient of our being" (Hick 1981, 29). Against this view, Ivan Karamazov and Berish demonstrate instances where faith and protest are both strong. Their acts of protest did not demonstrate a lack of faith. We might even go further and argue that their acts of protest stemmed from their faith. As Katongole and Volf have argued, faith creates an *expectation* of the kind of world we should be living in, and it is therefore the pre-requisite of any protest. In fact, it is precisely *because* one has faith that one protests. This is true not only at the individual level but at the societal one as well. Bonhoeffer has argued that it is one's faith, or Christian attitude, that leads one to recognise that there are circumstances where the appropriate response to suffering is to take care of "victims of the state's actions" (i.e. embrace) and other circumstances where the appropriate response "is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself" (i.e. protest) (Bonhoeffer 2013: 374). In the light of this, it seems that in the face of suffering, one's faith might lead one to respond in embrace and/or protest. Often, however, both instantiate in the experience of one's response. The paradigmatic character is that of Job. Particular accounts and testimonies of sufferers often describe their response as a process that combines or conflates between embrace and protest. In responding to suffering, Job first embraced, and then he protested, and then he embraced again. Even in his protest, Job was commended.

Seeing the response as a process (that combines or conflates between embrace and protest) also demonstrates how praxis itself can have positive therapeutic effects on individuals. Additionally, this approach redefines both the role of the theodacist and the experience of the sufferer. The role of the theodacist is not therefore to interpret another's suffering on her behalf. Instead, the theodacist provides the resources available for sufferers to tap on in times of need. In this way, the experience of the sufferer is also redefined. This approach emphasizes the subjectivity and autonomy of the sufferer as she possesses the freedom to take reference from the range of theodicies (both theoretical and practical) available to her that she thinks best represents her experience and that she might find comfort in. As she deals with different stages of confronting her suffering, she thus has the resources both to embrace and protest, according to her need. In this way, the experience of both embracing suffering and protesting suffering is

radically transformed as they are no longer seen as opposite responses, but different ones, and even related ones, appropriate for different sufferers, at different stages of their suffering.

Thus far, I have argued that theodicies-of-embrace and theodicies-of-protest are not incompatible. This provides a theoretical framework for formulating or narrating ‘holistic’ theodicies (i.e. theodicies-of-embrace-protest). In what remains, I provide an illustration of a kind of theodicy that, I think, fits this bill.⁷

In recent years, sceptical theism has been receiving increasing attention.⁸ It seems to me that we have good reason to think that sceptical theism is able to provide the resources to mediate a praxis of both protest and embrace.

First, consider that sceptical theism possesses the potential to mediate a praxis of protest. Sceptical theism represents a response to, particularly, the evidential problem of evil. Sceptical theists generally hold that if God exists, it would be unsurprising, even expected, for there to be suffering in the world, the reasons of which are beyond our ken. Unlike critics of sceptical theism such as Piper (2007) and Sehon (2009), I do not think that this view would lead to some form of moral aporia or global scepticism.⁹ On the contrary, it seems to me that, if sceptical theism is true, it is precisely our lack of understanding of the reasons for suffering that will motivate a response of protest. On an individual level, it is precisely because one does not understand the reason behind her suffering that leads her to lament, complaint, resent, argue or protest against God. This lack of understanding or knowledge is what creates a disjunction between one’s expectations of what one thinks the world should be like and the observations she makes of the real world – and, as Volf and Katongole have pointed out, it is precisely this disjunction that motivates protest. Interestingly, John Hick has argued that “protest is an acknowledgement of the sheer mystery which surrounds us, in the face of which we both

⁷ Besides sceptical theism, various other theodicies may be constructed that might fit this bill (Søvik 2008, 479-480). But it is also worth considering whether there may be resources in other existing theoretical theodicies that may achieve this goal. For instance, while some theodicies may argue that suffering itself is necessary to produce a greater good (and therefore endorse a praxis of embrace), there are other theodicies that hold that suffering is not necessary. For instance, some version of the free will defence may argue that, in order for God to create humans with ‘free will’, he must allow for the possibility (though not necessity) that humans will make decisions that may result in suffering. For such theodicies, suffering is an unnecessary and unwanted by-product of creation, and therefore, ought to be protested against. In this way, some theoretical theodicies may mediate a praxis of protest (against actual evils), insofar as, in their narrative, suffering can be understood as an unnecessary and unwanted by-product of creation.

⁸ For a helpful introduction to some recent developments, see for instance (McBrayer 2010, Dougherty and McBrayer 2014, McBrayer 2017, Hendricks 2020a, Hendricks 2020b, Oliveira 2020, Hendricks 2021)

⁹ See also responses such as (Bergmann 2001, McBrayer 2012, Hendricks 2020a and Hendricks 2021).

believe and doubt, both praise and protest. The two go together, for the other side of protest is belief: in accusing God one implicitly affirms his presence” (Hick 1981, 29).

If this is correct, however, we would argue that theodicies (or theories) posited by sceptical theists would be an example of the kind of theodicy that would generate a praxis of protest. Put differently, theodicies which acknowledge that there might be God-justifying reasons, even if we cannot possibly comprehend some, or even any, good in horrendous evils, would yield a response of protest: “as far as I can tell, I cannot understand why You allowed this!” There is much similarity between the logic of this response, and the structure of the protest argument we find in the character of Job.

Relatedly, consider that sceptical theism also provides the resources to mediate a praxis of embrace. While sceptical theism acknowledges that we may not comprehend some of God’s reasons for allowing suffering (resulting in protest), it also affirms that *God* may have God-justifying reasons for allowing suffering. This latter affirmation thus results in a praxis of embrace. In this way, in the face of suffering (even horrendous evil), sceptical theism promotes a praxis of both protest and embrace, and thus achieves the practical goals of theodicies.

In addition to meeting the practical goals of theodicies, sceptical theism also has the resources to meet the theoretical goals. That is, it purports to provide an answer to theoretical questions sufferers may have, such as, whether sufferers are rationally justified to continue believing that an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God exists. More specifically, some sufferers might want to know whether she would remain rational in believing in God in the face of the evidential argument from evil.¹⁰ Roughly, we may formulate the evidential argument from evil as follows:

- (1) For some actual evils E we know of, we cannot think of any morally justifying reason for permitting them.
- (2) Therefore, probably, there are not any morally justifying reasons for permitting them.
- (3) If God exists, he would not permit E if there were no morally justifying reason for permitting them.

¹⁰ While many sufferers may be asking practical questions, some may also be asking theoretical ones – be it about the existence of God, rationality of their belief, or an explanation. Søvik explains this well, “When people suffer and say things like: ‘Why did this happen?’, or ‘Where was God?’, it can be difficult to know whether they are asking a theoretical question in need of a theoretical answer, or are expressing sorrow and complaint in need of comfort... But maybe the person in sorrow did ask a theoretical question, because she had some existential problems concerning whether she could still believe in God. In some cases of sorrow a theoretical answer is what is needed, and it may have the good consequences of bringing comfort and hope. It is a matter of practical wisdom to find out what is asked for and what is needed” (Søvik 2011, 481-482).

(4) Therefore, probably, God does not exist.¹¹

The general strategy that many sceptical theists adopt is to block the inference from premise (1) to (2), and consequently, advises the sufferer that, even in the face of evils for which we cannot think of morally justifying reason (i.e. horrendous evils), she remains rationally justified in her belief in God.

In this way, sceptical theism fits the bill for the kind of holistic theodicy that we are aiming at. Whether sufferers face practical questions and are looking for resources to either embrace or protest; and/or sufferers struggle with theoretical questions such as whether they may remain rationally justified in believing in the existence of God, sceptical theism has the resources to meet their needs.¹²

I hope, in this way, to have provided an illustration of a holistic theodicy. Holistic theodicies approach the ‘problem of evil’ by recognising it as ‘problems’ of evil – which answer a host of different questions.¹³ It is holistic as it attempts to provide resources to answer both the theoretical and practical questions.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I have argued that a broader and more holistic understanding of theodicy allows us to conceive of the way theodicies can mediate a praxis of embrace and protest. While in some circumstances, embrace or protest might be more adequate, a more holistic theodicy provides the resources to understand suffering as a process of embrace-protest. Does this conception of the theodical enterprise effectively satisfy the moral anti-theodicy concerns? I would like to think that it at least provides a way that theodicies can help sufferers of horrendous evils without recommending that sufferers respond in a way that seems entirely inappropriate. While more work needs to be done concerning the compatibility of theodicies-of-embrace and theodicies-of-protest, both kinds of theodicies seem to ‘help’ different sufferers at different points in their lives facing different kinds of suffering. There is no clear reason why

¹¹ Here, I follow Hendrick’s formulation (Hendricks 2020a, 44).

¹² Ooi (forthcoming) has argued that sceptical theism provides the theist a defeater belief against apparent counter-evidence, and thus allows her to remain rationally justified in being a theistic evidentialist.

¹³ See a helpful discussion in (Van Inwagen 2003, 4-5).

these theodicies cannot be made compatible if it is able to provide more holistic resources to sufferers.

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