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ARTICLE



## Agatheology and naturalisation of the discourse on evil

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that the existence of horrendous evil calls into question not just the plausibility of the most popular theodicies on offer, notably sceptical theism, but the coherence of any *agatheology*—that is, any theology which identifies God or the ultimate reality with the ultimate *good* (to *agathon* in Greek) or with a maximally good being (*Agatheos*). The article contends that the only way an agatheologist can ‘save the face of God’ after Auschwitz and Kolyma is by endorsing a non-interventionist interpretation of the Divine providence which will amount to naturalisation of the discourse on evil by localising entirely in nature the causes of evil and the possible ways of its prevention. ‘Theodicy of justice as fairness’ is then presented as consistent with such naturalistic account of evils and yet compatible with a *religious* worldview. It justifies the Divine non-intervention by suggesting that it would not be just or fair for God to intervene on *only some* occasions to avert evil, if God is apparently prevented from intervening in *all* such cases (and we can think of good reasons why this is so). Since for *Agatheos* it is metaphysically impossible to do what is unjust or unfair, God never intervenes to avert evil.

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## Introduction

A spectre is haunting our globalising world—the spectre of human irresponsibility. While the rapid technological progress continues to increase human capability to inflict evil on an unimaginable scale, our social, political and religious beliefs and practices appear to remain largely unaffected by the increasingly real possibility of self-destruction of humanity, either in a nuclear conflict or as a result of an environmental destruction of the Planet. This failure of imagination that leads to abdication of responsibility for the future horrendous evils may cost us dearly. Religious believers risk; in addition, falling into the trap of religiously-inspired irresponsibility by refusing to take the facts about horrendous evils of the recent past for what they are and continuing to think about the causes of evil and the possible ways of its prevention in supernatural terms, thus ascribing the ultimate responsibility for what may unfold to someone else than ourselves.

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented eruption of horrendous and gratuitous evil, magnified by the recent technological advances of humanity. Horrendous and gratuitous evil—such as, paradigmatically, the systematic murder

of hundreds of thousands of Jewish children by the Nazis—is horrendous because totally destructive of *all* potential of human self-realisation, and gratuitous because it does not allow to think about *any* overwhelmingly positive side-effects that might be thought to justify its occurrence. Horrendous evils are horrendous in part because they are gratuitous, since to the extent evil may be justified by reference to some positive consequences (such as in cases of self-sacrifice of young soldiers who died defending their country), it may be said that the victims' potentialities for human good have to some degree been realised. Ultimately horrendous evil is horrendous because it threatens to obliterate the very meaning of the human existence of its victims by depriving them of their chance to actualise their creaturely potentialities for human good.

This article focuses on horrendous evil as the challenge to the coherence and plausibility of the traditional religious discourses on evil which aim to demonstrate that religion possesses conceptual resources capable of accommodating this threat of meaninglessness that horrendous evil carries with it. More broadly, the article takes horrendous evil to be a litmus test of coherence and plausibility of any *agatheology*, i.e. any theology which identifies God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality religiously conceived (*theós* or *to theion* in Greek) with the ultimate good (*to agathon* in Greek). Since arguably the fundamental agatheistic religious belief which conceptualises the Absolute as *Agatheos* (i.e. a maximally good being or the ultimate reality conceived as the ultimate good) is actually presupposed in most if not all religious traditions as their doxastic core, the logic of agatheology as theology of a maximally good being is bound to underlie any religious response to horrendous evil. Taking this centrality of the agatheological thinking for any theodicy as the point of departure, this article will argue that the inner logic of agatheology, when faced with the facts about horrendous evils, lends its support to *non-interventionist* vision of the relation of the Absolute to the human world that contains horrendous evils. This will amount to questioning the adequacy of all theodicies or defences of the Divine inaction in the face of horrendous evil which presuppose that at least on occasions God *does* intervene to change the natural course of events *in order to prevent some evils from happening*.<sup>1</sup> Consequently the article contends that the only way an agatheologist can 'save the face of God' after Auschwitz and Kolyma is by accepting that God never intervenes to avert evil and postulating naturalisation of the discourse on evil, which will amount to localising *entirely in nature* (i.e. in human agency and physical causation) both the causes of evil and the possible ways of its prevention, thus leaving us humans fully responsible for avoiding and averting evil.

In order to demonstrate that such a naturalistic account of evils may constitute a part of a *religious* worldview, an example of a theodicy (i.e. a religious answer to the question how the existence of evil may be reconciled with the existence of *Agatheos*) will be put forward that presupposes a non-interventionist understanding of the Divine providence. 'Theodicy of justice as fairness,' as it is termed, justifies the Divine non-intervention by suggesting that it would not be just or fair for God to intervene on *only some* occasions to avert evil, if God is apparently prevented from intervening in *all* such cases, and can think of good theodical reasons why this is so. Since for *Agatheos* as a maximally good being it is metaphysically impossible to do what is unjust or unfair, God never intervenes to avert evil.<sup>2</sup>

To show, further, that such ‘naturalised theodicy’ may be compatible with the mainstream religious thinking of the world religions, theodicy of justice as fairness will be presented as a part of a broader good-centred, pluralistic (and non-antirealist) interpretation of religion–labelled ‘agatheism’– as primarily aspirational and inspirational, rather than explanatory (which makes it immune to falsification by any future science, since it views religion as having different role than explaining facts about the physical universe).

The article is programmatic in nature in that it aims at outlining a piece of a wider research agenda focused on the question: what set of answers is a consequently agatheological approach to the central issues of philosophy of religion likely to yield? For this reason, as well as due to the space constraints, the reader should not expect an exhaustive treatment of the positions which are advocated or criticised in this article.

### **Agatheology: thinking about God through the prism of the good**

The most influential contemporary attempts at exploration of the nature, causes and possible ways of preventing horrendous evils from happening, such as Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, or more recent *Better Angels of Our Nature* by Steven Pinker and *Moral Tribes* by Joshua Greene are marked by a sense of responsibility for the impact that the ways in which human beings *think* about evil has on the ways they *act* in the face of evil. For this reason, they do not limit themselves to searching for rationally plausible explanations of some past cases of horrendous evils. Instead, they approach the issue in ways that might yield useful recommendations how through social changes—including changes of beliefs—one might affect positively the actual dynamics of human interaction in order to reduce the amount of horrendous evil that afflicts millions of human and other sentient beings.

In the light of the above, it might be considered surprising that recent theodicy appears to be to a remarkably small degree marked by the genocidal horrors of the 20th century. Nearly all of it (perhaps with the exception of some radically progressive Jewish religious thought) could as well be conceived in the nineteenth century. However, given that the ‘problem of evil’ has for centuries been considered a litmus test of the intellectual relevance of religious thinking about the existential problems facing humanity, a failure of contemporary theodicy to offer a plausible *religious* account of the recent examples of horrendous evils might further erode the confidence of many in the ability of religious traditions to serve as reliable guides to thinking about good and evil.

Since I will argue that what accounts for the difficulty of traditional theodicies to provide a plausible and responsibility inducing account of the horrendous evils of the recent past is their embeddedness in traditional modes of theological thinking, I will ground my own theodical alternative in ‘theology of the a maximally good being’ (i.e. ‘agatheology’, from Greek ‘*to agathon*’ for ‘the good’ and ‘*theós*’ or ‘*to theion*’ for ‘God’ or ‘the Divine’). Agatheology may be considered methodologically innovative; since its inner logic necessitates that it is construed consequently as a ‘theology from below’. While not denying in principle the possibility of Divine inspiration leading to formulation of religious beliefs or the possibility of mystical experience of the Divine presence that may give rise to religious beliefs, endorsement of agatheology as the most plausible

mode of theological thinking in the face of religious diversity and scientific progress is tantamount to a rejection of the possibility of any 'theology from above' strictly understood. Agatheology presupposes that propositions about God and God's relation to the human world cannot have an ahistorically fixed meaning, closed to interpretation and unable to be affected by the evolution of human thought. Instead, it sees all such propositions as interpreted within a context of an explicit or implicit 'perfect being theology', which, among other things, entails that understanding how a maximally good being is expected to relate to his creatures will depend on *one's current* agathological intuitions concerning what being good in relation to human persons as well as other sentient beings might amount to.

Agatheology takes human beliefs about God and God's relation to the human world to be ultimately products of the human 'agathological imagination' and of the human reflection on the deliverances of agathological imagination. Agathological imagination is this dimension of our faculty of 'practical reason' which is intentionally directed towards the ultimate good and guides our mental activity leading to value judgments by imagining and comparing alternatives as more or less optimal, relative to our sense of the good. When exercised in the realm of religion, agathological imagination guided by the fundamental atheistic belief identifying God or the Absolute with a maximally good being (Agatheos) or the ultimate good, searches for the optimal conceptualisation of the nature of God and God's relation to the human world, thus attempting to approximate the human view of the matter to the 'God's eye view'.

The dependence of our intuitions concerning the evaluation of God's actions directed towards human persons on our intuitions concerning moral evaluation of human agents can be uncontroversially established against the background of the analogical theory of religious language, according to which the perfections we attribute to God, such as goodness or justice, are attributed to God on the basis of our prior attribution of such terms to human persons. The unavoidability of the reliance on our human agathological intuitions in our 'reading God's mind', whether by doing perfect being theology or interpreting the Scriptures, is ultimately a consequence of the fact that the properties that have to be attributed to God when speaking about God's relation to the human world, such as goodness or justice, are irreducibly anthropomorphic. While most religious traditions stress the need for 'purification' of such predicates from their anthropomorphic imperfections, our abilities in this area are limited, because if we move too much in the direction of 'negative theology' by stressing the radical dissimilarities between Divine goodness and justice and human goodness and justice, we risk that so much meaning will get lost that we will be unable to say anything meaningful about God and God's relation to the human world. Still, no other option is available, because while we may feel that we know what we are talking about when we define Divine omniscience and omnipotence as, say, unlimited knowledge and unlimited power, and we can do it without relying on our understanding of human knowledge and the human power in such a way that this understanding will be open to constant revision over time, definitions of Divine goodness as unlimited goodness and Divine justice as unlimited justice will remain vacuous without attending to our *current* conceptions of human goodness, and this need will be even greater with regard to justice, since the meaning of this term will be even more difficult to fix and will be open to greater variations across times and cultures.

The changes in our understanding of human and Divine goodness and justice will take place within a hermeneutic circle, where new insights into the nature of human goodness and justice will affect the way we conceive of Divine goodness and justice, and vice versa. It seems that the dialectical agathological progress (which may refer to acquiring new agathological insights absent at an earlier stage of human history or to the universalisation of agathological insights which at an earlier stage were applied in a more restricted way) takes place when new agathological insights are gained either at the religious level (as when new insights into the Divine goodness and justice leads someone—e.g. a Hebrew prophet – to advocate a change in the way moral obligations towards other human beings are conceived) or at the moral level (as when new insights into the moral nature of human persons lead someone to advocate a change in the way the moral character of God and the way God relates to human beings is conceived).

One might suggest that this spiral dynamics of the agathological progress is entailed in the Judeo-Christian idea of *Imago Dei*, grounded in the biblical assertion (in three passages of the Book of Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6) that human beings are created in the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of God. Even though God’s transcendence – which calls for the application of the analogy of proportionality in making any assertions about God on the basis of the qualities shared by human beings with God – seriously limits our ability to ‘see God’s face’ in the mirror of our humanity, that is to identify Divine attributes by attending to fundamental human attributes (especially if one believes in some sort of ‘Fall’ or corruption of the human nature after its creation), still it may be argued that enough of the trace of the Divine in humanity is left to make the agatheistic doxastic practice of forming beliefs about God possible and as reliable as any.<sup>3</sup>

### **The current state of theodicy in the light of agatheology**

Since the postulate of naturalisation of the discourse on evil entails a negative assessment of the current state of theodicy, it will be necessary to clarify at least briefly what precisely is wrong with it. I suggest that there are two reasons for disillusionment with the traditional theodicies, and both are related to its alignment with the traditional interventionist view of the Divine providence. It presupposes a vision of a ‘hands-on’ God that is marked by the arbitrariness, unpredictability and, to a point, even a sense of fatalism, which reflect the agathological intuitions of humanity formed in the historical conditions marked by the absence of the egalitarian and individualistic views which today we are increasingly inclined to take for granted.

One important reason for considering the dominant theistic responses to horrendous evil inadequate is that they tend to imply that God is in principle fully in control of the events in the physical universe is that they may encourage attitude of *passivity* in the face of evil experienced by oneself and especially by others. If one believes that nothing happens without God ‘allowing’ it to happen, one is just one step away from believing that what is actually happening must in some sense be approved of by God, and what God approves of is by definition in some sense ‘right’. Throughout most of the recorded history it has been believed, for example, that bodily and mental illnesses are not unfortunate natural malfunctions, but are divinely decreed and/or justly deserved. The wars, plagues, floods, draughts, earthquakes and other natural disasters were considered at least in this sense under God’s sovereign control, that only through

sacrifices and prayers addressed to God one might hope to avert the worse. The present author had a chance to hear first hand testimonies about religiously-inspired passivity in the face of evil during the Holocaust, and not just the passivity of ‘bystanders’, but sometimes also of the ‘victims’. Which points towards a conclusion that theodicy may become positively evil, when it shapes human attitudes towards evil in a way that directly or indirectly contributes to the increase of the amount of evil in the world. Certainly in our Nuclear Age it may border on irresponsibility to teach children that God has a comprehensive providential plan and nothing happens without God’s permission, when it ought to be sufficiently clear that God is unlikely to stop us when we will be about to blow up the Planet or annihilate the human race by irresponsible exploitation of its natural resources. Instead, what is called for at the present stage of history is facing the facts as seen in the light of human reason, accepting that it is not to be expected that God will intervene to prevent horrendous evils from happening, and taking full responsibility for the evil that afflicts human and other sentient beings, whose suffering and depravation only we ourselves can reduce.

Another reason for being dissatisfied *today* with most theodicies which might have been appealing some centuries earlier is that they tend to ignore the basic deontological insight into the indispensable worth of an *individual* that cannot be treated merely as means to someone else’s— be it God’s— ends. It is for this reason why the arguments which point to considerations of Divine respect for human free will (so called ‘free will defense’ developed by Alvin Plantinga, based on Saint Augustine), the possibility of moral development which arguably presupposes the presence of evil (John Hick’s ‘soul-making theodicy’), the desirability of Divine hiddenness (a recent proposal defended by Daniel Howard-Snyder, Paul Moser *et al.*) or and the undesirability of a massively irregular world (Richard Swinburne, Peter van Inwagen),<sup>4</sup> appear inadequate in the face of the horrendous evils of the Holocaust, the Gulag, the Armenian genocide, the Killing Fields or Mao’s Cultural Revolution, although they might jointly be considered plausible candidates to account for God’s refraining from acting to prevent milder forms of evil.

The central problem for such theodicies or ‘defences’ of the Divine inaction in the face of horrendous evil is that they imply that ultimately the only good reason God may have for such inaction is some greater good— a good that on balance outweighs *greatly* the evil that God ‘allows’ to come to fruition. But if so, then the really hard question arises: *whose* greater good might have God had in view when refraining from intervention to prevent such horrendous evils from happening? Did God refrain from stopping Hitler, Stalin, Mao or Pol-Pot out of respect for *their* freedom? Or who precisely has benefited from God’s hiddenness when the Holocaust was taking place? Or whose spiritual maturation in ‘the valley of soul-making’ has been effected by millions of victims of Stalin’s Gulag— the victims who are even rarely talked about today in their own land? Or what kind of massive irregularity in the physical universe would have resulted from God’s intervention to prevent such an ocean of suffering and destruction of human potential for good by removing discreetly few individuals from the stage of the world?

It is not too difficult to keep proliferating questions like this and they will all point towards the following dilemma: if God could act but refrained from acting in order to ensure that some very great good could be realised, then either the good in question was



primarily the good of the victims themselves, or it was some greater good of someone else than the victims—perhaps the greatest good of the greatest number of other people than the victims. Both options seem hideous. The latter would entail some kind of ‘Divine utilitarianism’ which would imply that God *uses* some of his creatures by ‘allowing’ that they are sacrificed on the altar of some greater good (more positive *overall* outcome) that is known *only* to God (since it is far from obvious that a greater good of the greater number was indeed served in Auschwitz and Kolyma—a greater good which could not be achieved *without* these horrors taking place).<sup>5</sup>

However, going for the first horn of the dilemma and suggesting that perhaps after all a greater good *of the victims* has been realised thanks to God’s refraining from intervention to prevent horrendous evils from happening would amount to acceptance of an unbearably paternalistic image of God. One might doubt whether the victims of the Holocaust would approve of such vision of God doing cost-benefit analysis and expecting the victims to trust God’s judgement while they are perishing in the hands of as banally evil people as Adolf Eichmann.

And yet, precisely such attitude of confidence in God’s infinite wisdom and justice is recommended by the recently formulated defence of Divine justice in the form of ‘sceptical theism’ which also presupposes the traditional interventionist understanding of the Divine providence, with every creature being directly cared for and ‘provided’ by God who to this goal has an arsenal of miracles at his disposal.

Sceptical theism preserves all the negative features of these traditional theodicies which risk reinforcing in believers an attitude of passivity in the face of evil. If anything, sceptical theism excels in providing a believer with potential reasons for excusing oneself from taking responsibility for the evils of this world, since unlike the older theodicies (including the two dominant biblical theodicies: the prophetic theodicy of legitimate Divine punishment and the apocalyptic theodicy of the inter-testamental writings and of the New Testament) it does not attempt to suggest any specific reasons God might have for allowing evil.

A sceptical theist will reject agatheology as grounded in recognition that we have no choice but to rely on our human agathological intuitions concerning what is good and just when trying to establish what Divine goodness or Divine justice might entail in order to form an idea what might be expected of perfectly good and perfectly just God. Instead, a sceptical theist will argue that our ability to intuit what human goodness may entail has no bearing on our ability to discern God’s reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance, including in the instances of the occurrence of horrendous evils. A sceptical theist holds that if there is a God, then God is a being that knows much more than we humans do about the relevant facts, and hence it would not be surprising at all if God has reasons for doing or allowing something that we cannot grasp, and moreover God has no obligation to share with us his reasons.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that this objection to agatheology can be dismissed on at least two grounds. Firstly, most of the biblical authors do not seem to see a problem in using human agathological intuitions to understand God’s view of good and evil, justice and injustice. The biblical *locus classicus* which highlights the unavoidability of such an approach is Abraham’s reaction to God’s announcement that he is about to destroy Sodom to punish its sinful inhabitants. The exchange between Abraham and God may be considered one of the philosophically most memorable fragments of the Hebrew Bible,



since in it Abraham apparently points towards the same conclusion as does Socrates in *Euthyphro*, namely that our human understanding of good and evil must *precede* any apprehension of God's moral character.

The text in the *Book of Genesis* 18:23–25 reads as follows: “Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is *just*?”.<sup>7</sup> Thus we see that Abraham takes it for granted that his agathological intuition regarding such an obvious matter as killing innocent inhabitants of Sodom cannot differ from God's view of the matter. Killing innocent inhabitants of Sodom just cannot be ‘right’ and ‘the Judge of the earth’— by which Abraham clearly means: ‘a God that is perfectly just’— is unable to do what is not right. So sceptical theism is clearly foreign to Abraham, otherwise in this situation he would have to refrain from making any comments about any course of action God could take, because he would have to assume that even if his agathological intuition would tell him that certain courses of action are clearly morally wrong, he should always be sceptical about his ability to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in *any* particular instance.

The second ground of my refutation of the potential sceptical theist's criticism of agatheology, and thus by extension of the theodicy of justice as fairness, is that a sceptical theist presupposes a model of the Divine-human *relationship* which from the point of view of our modern agathological imagination appears to be morally unacceptable. Sceptical theism implies not only that we should not expect to be able to identify God's reasons for refraining from intervention to prevent evil from happening, but also that ultimately we cannot know for sure what is God's moral assessment of *any* given situation. Therefore a sceptical theist will recommend that we take God to be justified in permitting *any* evil to happen, since such evil (a) may be a part of God's exceedingly complex—and hence *beyond our grasp*—overall providential design of things that best forward the chance of salvation for all involved, and/or (b) such evil may have in a long run good enough consequences to justify it—again consequences totally *beyond our grasp*, although not beyond the grasp of God.

The importance of this recourse to human cognitive limitations vis-à-vis God's mind and Divine intentions regarding humanity that is central to sceptical theism cannot be overemphasised, since it had an earlier incarnation in the form of the late Medieval nominalism which created a sense of total unpredictability of God and a fearful mindset that after the traumatic experience of the Black Death inspired a turn away from the Medieval theocentrism and gave rise the ever-growing tendency— amplified later by Descartes and Locke— to make the ‘self’ the only firm cognitive ground which to stand and rely primarily on human reason and the human moral intuitions. It seems to me more than a coincidence that while sceptical theism appears to be an intellectual descendent of this late Medieval way of thinking, agatheology is an expression of the anthropocentric turn of the Modern era.<sup>8</sup>

## Theodicy of justice as fairness

In contrast to sceptical theism, agatheology recommends that we allow ourselves to be guided by our modern agathological intuitions and therefore are suspicious of any such theological claims as that of sceptical theism about our inherent inability to intuit Divine intentions regarding God's attitude towards the human world, since they entail models of the Divine-human relationship that are clearly opposed to our contemporary conceptions of the indispensable dignity and equal worth of every person.

Agatheology lends its support to theodicy of justice as fairness because it shows that—in addition to empirical evidence—we have theological reasons for thinking that God *never* intervenes to change the natural course of life of human and other sentient beings to prevent evils from happening. This is because our agathological imagination—which shapes our sense of what is good—informed by our contemporary insights in the nature of human *justice* suggests that doing so in only relatively few cases, when God is apparently prevented from doing so in all cases—even all cases of horrendous of evil—would not be just or fair, and for Agatheos as a perfectly good being it is metaphysically not possible to do what is not just or fair.

God as a maximally good being (Agatheos) may be infinitely greater in every respect than human beings, but when it comes to giving meaning to the Divine attributes of goodness and justice, God cannot fail to be *at least* as good and as just as our human agathological intuitions concerning moral ideals expect him to be. Elsewhere I proposed that to determine, whether these agathological intuitions regarding what God's goodness and God's justice might entail are actually universally or widely shared, we might rely on Rawlsian-type 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment which he utilised to establish the basis for his theory of justice as fairness (hence my own 'theodicy of justice as fairness').<sup>9</sup>

I suggest that within the context of a thought experiment set up along the lines of the Rawlsian 'original position', in which all individuals involved would be ignorant of their *actual* position (vis-à-vis their experiences of being victims of evils and their beliefs about evil being on some occasions prevented by God from affecting their lives), their moral intuition would lead the vast majority of the participants of such an experiment to choose as morally more plausible such a view of the Divine providence which entails that God *never* intervenes to change the natural course of events to prevent evils from happening, rather than a view on which God intervenes on rare occasions to change the natural course of life of relatively few individuals and in a way that from a human point of view cannot be perceived differently than either an expression of arbitrary and baseless favouritism. In doing so the participants of our thought experiment would favour theodicy of justice as fairness over theodicies which entail that God *sometimes* does intervene to prevent evils from happening and which claim that we have no reason to expect that God should make sure that we grasp the reasons God has to act in the world in such a selective way.

Perhaps the most central element of an optimal model of the Divine-human relationship that is likely to be selected behind the 'veil of ignorance'—if the experiment would be done today, as opposed to five or twenty centuries ago—would be God's respect for metaphysical uniqueness or indispensability of every individual human person, and such a model of the Divine-human relationship allows God to be neither an ethical

consequentialist who would be free to calculate in a utilitarian fashion what kind of individual sacrifices God's overall providential design of things calls for and justifies, nor a paternalistic care-taker who in violation of human autonomy will be—without a possibility of communication of his intentions and reasons—taking care of the realisation of the good of his creatures (thus leaving no space for human beings to determine even to a small degree what *their own* good actually consists in).

Agatheology posits that having ascribed to every person an absolute value, God is no longer free to dispose of them as pawns in some kind of Divine chess game which will perhaps have a happy end. God cannot *use* any of his creatures as means to some end, even if this end would be bringing into existence the best of all possible worlds (which, alas, must be a world in which each creature is always a goal in itself and never merely a means). Therefore God cannot consent to the annihilation of one man to save a nation (unless he chooses freely to sacrifice himself in which case he will be exercising his autonomy and will remain an aim for himself). A perfectly good God cannot be concerned only with achieving certain goals (even if these goals are all about bringing about what is good for creatures). *How* these goals are achieved is equally important, because surely treating the creatures in the right kind of way must itself be one of the main goals of creation, given the moral character of God as Agatheos—a maximally good being.

Another thing from the list of postulates of a sceptical theist that God—which would act in accordance with our optimal model of the Divine-human relationship selected 'behind the veil of ignorance'—could not do is withholding *permanently* the possibility of human beings—who willy-nilly participate in a cosmic drama of history in which the stage is set up by God—acquiring knowledge about God's reasons for doing or not doing things as he does. What I mean by this is that God cannot do (or refrain from doing) things that affect human beings for reasons that of their nature could not be communicated to those affected. A perfectly good God cannot have any other reason for intervening or not intervening in particular way in the human world than the good of those affected. One can find in some religious traditions metaphorical images of the Divine purposes—like Divine dance or Divine play—which do not presuppose such anthropocentric understanding of Divine action, but it is hard to think of a plausible theistic understanding of Divine action that is not creature-centred. Thus the goods that God has to have in mind are 'goods for us'. God cannot 'use' his creatures to achieve goods that are good only for God, because that would amount to treating us as means to an end. But if the reasons for God acting or refraining from acting are goods for us and God takes us seriously and respects our autonomy, then he can do things that affect us only for reasons which he can, at least in principle, communicate to *us*. The only acceptable (on our agatheistic model of the Divine-human relationship) qualifications to that rule (that God shares his reasons with those affected by his actions or his refraining from action) would be the ones having to do with protecting freedom of human will, since in the case of finite beings, as we are, knowledge of certain facts might sometimes restrict our freedom, and for this reason our limited knowledge or lack of knowledge may sometimes be a condition *sine qua non* of our freedom and autonomy.

## Agatheism and the non-interventionist interpretation of the divine providence

At this point one might ask: given that human history is apparently full of horrendous evils, why to think the fact God's sense of justice prevents God from intervening in *any* instances to change the natural course of events to prevent evils from happening is good news? There are two answers to this question. Firstly, theodicy of justice as fairness implies a vision of relationship between God and the human world that is consistent with our experience of the world, both common sense experience and that informed by deliverances of science, and that is surely a good thing. Moreover, and importantly, theodicy of justice as fairness does not carry with it a danger of imbuing religious believers with the spirit of irresponsibility in thinking about the challenges facing the world in the Nuclear Age and passivity in the face of horrendous evils that happen also as we speak. Theodicy of justice as fairness is not evil.

Secondly, a non-interventionist interpretation of the Divine providence leaves a lot of space for religious beliefs, religious attitudes and religious practices (and interpreted in a not non-realist manner!) which may imply a vision of human life and the Divine-human relationship which is by no means less exalted and less attractive than the vision entailed by the theodicies I have challenged.

For one, the relationship between God and human beings inhabiting the world in which God, due to considerations of justice as fairness, does not intervene to prevent evil from happening may be defined as a relationship of covenant, to use a biblical term. By this I mean a relationship in which despite the metaphysical gulf between God and the creatures, God treats creatures as *partners* to a maximal possible degree. In fact, the metaphysical difference between God as the infinite being and creatures as finite beings is the *only* source of qualifications of this relation that prevents one from speaking about God and creatures as *equal partners*. I suggest that the world presupposed in the theodicy of justice as fairness is more of a world in which God and creatures are partners—as opposed to other types of relationships formed in less egalitarian and democratic contexts, such as king and subjects, master and slaves, lord and servants, or father and children—and for this reason it is a world morally more agreeable than the world presupposed in some other theodicies. If one presupposes that this covenantal relationship is established by God the Creator as a free gift of love, and as such can be thought of as a bridge above the metaphysical gulf defined by the metaphysical difference between God as the necessary being and creatures as contingent beings. The in turn justifies thinking about Divine-human relationship in collaborative terms. God puts much greater responsibility for the world in the hands of humanity and this is an expression of God's seriousness about the status of the Divine-human relationship as a covenant of partners. The exalted status of human beings as God's partners and the future perspective of the communion with God calls for creating conditions that facilitate our significant growth in maturity. Hence, we have reason to think that God responds to this need of ours by giving us *full* responsibility for the earthly fate of humanity and for the shape of the world we inhabit. Therefore we have reasons to be sceptical about theodicies which portray God as, on one hand, pulling all the strings and taking care of even trivial matters, but, on the other hand, refraining from acting when millions of innocent people are being slaughtered, or, on one hand, supposedly

having detailed plan regarding everything that happens, but, on the other hand, concerned with leaving space for actions of such free human beings as Hitler or Stalin. Such portrayals of God's relation to the human world lack the simplicity and plausibility which is needed to convince us 'behind the veil of ignorance' where we are choosing among our agathological intuitions concerning the way in which a perfectly good God should relate to the human world.

More generally, agatheism as an interpretation of religion that presupposes a non-interventionist understanding of the Divine providence, and thus provides a theological framework for theodicy of justice as fairness, allows to retain a notion of the Divine providence, because it leaves space for the possibility of religious experience understood as the experience of the 'presence of God' (along the lines envisaged in Alston's epistemology of religion which—*pace* Alston—I propose to interpret in a pluralistic fashion<sup>10</sup>). Agatheism accepts the possibility of certain kind of religious experiences, since religious experience is consistent with the aspiration and inspirational character of religion as portrayed by agatheism. Given the nature of the relationship between God and his creatures as grounded in agatheology as a theology of perfectly good being, one may expect that God will be interested in making his loving presence to be experienced by his creatures (in ways that are appropriate, given the metaphysical and epistemic constraints involved in finite beings experiencing the presence of the Absolute). As to the meaning of the Divine providence on this picture of the Divine-human relationship, it would have to be primarily some kind of 'providence from within', which would amount to God guiding, inspiring, and strengthening us, as we take full responsibility for our life. So understood, the Divine providence would itself be continuous with religious experience, and none of them presuppose God's direct intervention in the natural course of lives of his creatures. This was, of course, about so-called 'particular' providence, that is pertaining to individuals. When it comes to the so-called 'general providence', according to which God is continuously upholding the existence and natural order of the Universe and sustaining all human and other sentient beings in existence, the theodicy of justice as fairness does not call for any significant revision of the traditional view of this aspect of the Divine providence.

Moreover, regarding the worry that this 'hands-off' kind of God will be kept insufficiently busy, if he will not be expected to intervene in human affairs to prevent evils from happening, precisely because theodicy of justice as fairness faces reality as it is without trying to present it in brighter colours, it postulates that God will in due time have to redeem all gratuitous evils in order to make the ultimate fulfilment of the human potential of the victims of evils possible. Agatheology postulates the existence of such possibility beyond death, because the teleological nature of our axiological consciousness which points towards the ultimate good that is normally unreachable in the mundane reality calls for positing a trans-mundane Agatheos, so that through the proper alignment with Agatheos we might hope for maximal realisation of our creaturely potentialities for good.

Ultimately, in order to appreciate the advantages of theodicy of justice as fairness and to see that it may be consistent with theism, one has to perceive it as a part of a larger picture, namely an interpretation of religion—termed 'agatheism'—as primarily aspirational and inspirational, rather than explanatory. Agatheism identifies God or the divine reality (*theós* or *to theion* in Greek) with the ultimate good (*to agathon* in Greek)

as the ultimate end of all human pursuits and posits that maximal realisation of human potentialities for good (*agatheia*) is possible only in proper alignment with the ultimate reality so conceived (*Agatheos*).<sup>11</sup> Agatheism is a ‘thinner’ concept than ‘theism’, capturing the agathological core of a broad range of religious concepts of the Absolute, but it is meant to be consistent with Western classical theism, as well as with non-Western (esp. Asian) theisms, as well as with at least some if not all non-theistic religious traditions.

While theodicy of justice as fairness postulates that God *never* intervenes in the natural course of events evils to prevent evils from happening, agatheism provides answers to the question what is left for a non-interventionist God to do. On agatheism, the function of the non-interventionist God is aspirational (as the ultimate good God is the ultimate end of all human pursuits and guarantor of the chances of maximal human fulfillment to which humans *aspire*) and inspirational (as the ultimate good God *inspires* human beings to self-transcendence by entering a path of metanoetic transformation in the spirit of *imitatio Dei*).<sup>12</sup>

On agatheism God does not explain the facts about events in the world, such as facts about horrendous evils, because they are fully explainable in naturalistic terms and therefore can be reflected upon together by all human beings irrespectively of their worldview, thus hopefully facilitating a constructive global ethical dialogue about ways of limiting the amounts of horrendous evil in the world. What according to agatheism is *not* explainable fully in naturalistic terms is the good. Since our directedness towards the good appears to be the fundamental phenomenologically given ‘fact’ about our axiological consciousness, it requires postulation of a *telos* without which the irreducibly teleological character of our axiological consciousness would be unexplainable making impossible analysis of human agency by reference to agents’ reasons. The ultimate good is thus postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness. Naturalistic conceptualisations of the ultimate good are possible, but being religious amounts to taking seriously the agathological disappointment that is shared by all that the present human condition and the mundane context of human life are painfully sub-optimal, while our axiological consciousness which shapes our evaluative perception appears to be—of no choice of ours—pointing always towards ever-greater good to be realised before we will feel satisfied. Religious believers find themselves powerfully attracted to the vision of a trans-mundane ultimate good that allows to make sense of this tragic ill-fit between our unquenchable first for the good and the circumstances of our limited human existence.

An additional strength of theodicy of justice is that agatheism is centrally a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion as it theorises that the fundamental agatheistic belief is presupposed by all or nearly all post-axial religious traditions and explains the fact of religious diversity by reference to unavoidably plural, diverse and revisable deliverances of agathological imagination as its source. Thus by being interpreted against the background of agatheism, theodicy of justice as fairness takes on a pluralistic character and becomes neutral on various comprehensive theistic belief systems. The picture that emerges is as follows: the facts about evil can be interpreted in naturalistic terms—in the light of natural and human sciences—and thus with a hope of reaching common ground providing basis for solidaristic action to prevent horrendous evils from happening, but different religious traditions will envisage in different—sometimes very different—ways



God or the ultimate reality will be supposed to fulfill the aspirational and inspirational function vis-à-vis us humans.

No doubt agatheology as theology of a maximally good being could be conceived in more traditional ways, but by ascribing to agathological imagination the central role as *locus theologicus* (i.e. a source of human intuitions regarding the nature of God and God's relation to the world) one is able to account more adequately for the central role of the *changing* and therefore necessarily *diverse* agathological intuitions that inform our understanding of the claims about the attributes of God, which in turn are involved in our assertions about the way God might relate to and act in the human world plagued with evil. Since I take agatheology to be in principle compatible with theism, indeed as accounting more realistically for the way individual religious believers actually form and hold their beliefs, and for the way religious traditions *evolve* in their religious doxastic commitments, I suggest that theodicy of justice as fairness—being grounded in agatheology—is also consistent with Western classical theism. To the extent it differs from the dominant theological approaches considered to be authoritative in the context of some theistic religious traditions, theodicy of justice as fairness can be defended as arguably representing a more promising approach to thinking about God *today*, in the face of religious diversity and deliverances of empirical sciences.

## Notes

1. This italicised qualification is of major importance, since the agatheological argument from horrendous evil in favour of non-interventionist interpretation of the Divine providence advanced in this article is strictly limited to the cases of the possible Divine intervention in the natural course of events *in order to protect individual creatures by preventing particular evils from happening*. Thus, for example, the argument of the article does not extend to the cases of the potential Divine intervention in the physical universe, *if* that would be a necessary condition of the possibility of a mystical experience of the Divine presence or a condition of the possibility of Divine inspiration leading individuals to forming inspired thoughts about God and God's relation to the world. Moreover, the agatheological argument from horrendous evil has no bearing whatsoever on the question of 'general providence' (God's sustaining the universe in being, etc.), since the argument relies on the consideration of potential unfairness of a preferential treatment by God of some individuals *vis-à-vis* other individuals, while 'general providence' by definition puts all creatures in exactly the same position *vis-à-vis* God.
2. The idea of 'theodicy of justice as fairness' was presented for the first time in somewhat different context in: Salamon, "Theodicy of Justice as Fairness," 249–78.
3. Agatheology brings into consideration a kind of non-empirical rationality that could be termed 'agatheistic rationality', because it presupposes that certain beliefs—namely all value-laden beliefs—may be held as rational in virtue of the *goodness* of the state of affairs to which they pertain (goodness which cannot be said to be confirmable empirically, because it cannot be confirmed objectively, without reference to values or preferences of the belief-holders). Accordingly, the doxastic structure of an agatheistic religious belief system that is grounded in axiology can be metaphorically envisaged as a ladder, but with descending, not ascending order of justificatory dependence, and the ladder hangs, as it were, from the 'ceiling' of the belief in God being maximally good and being the ultimate good. On this picture, religious beliefs of increasing particularity will draw their justification from the higher-level beliefs, being perceived as more or less rational against the background of *antecedent probability* of something being the case, given that we have accepted that the higher-level belief as true. Thus, for example, we may speak about antecedent probability of Divine self-revelation or of



mystical experience of God's presence relative to the higher-level belief in maximal goodness of God, which will play the role of the justificatory basis of particular beliefs grounded in one's experience which one considers to be an instance of Divine revelation or of mystical perception of the Divine presence. Hence, particular religious experience constitutes a *ground* of a belief formed on its basis, but both subjective certainty regarding the veridicality of the beliefs grounded in such experience and inter-subjective justification of such beliefs are dependent on the antecedent probability of the higher-level beliefs, and without holding these higher-level beliefs a religious experience could not be even recognised as such *by the subject* of the experience.

4. I refer here to the most significant recent contributions to the debate about the problem of evil: Plantinga's free will defence (cf. e.g. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*); Hick's 'soul making' theodicy (cf. e.g. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*); van Inwagen's proposal to think about the natural evil as resulting from the necessary regularities of the physical world governed by laws of nature (cf. e.g. van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*); arguments for necessity of Divine hiddenness put forward by various authors (cf. e.g. Howard-Snyder, and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*; also: McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*).
5. An objection to theodicies which imply that God might *use* his creatures to achieve some very great good has been expressed by William Hasker, himself a philosophical apologist of a theistic point of view, who finds such fault in Alvin Plantinga's '*felix culpa*' theodicy'. Plantinga's 'supralapsarian' theodicy sees human sinfulness and the resulting evil as the necessary condition of actualisation of the best possible world that is feasible, namely the world that contains divine incarnation and atonement. (Cf. Hasker, *Triumph of God over Evil*, 167–9.
6. Cf. e.g. Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 374–402; Alston, "Inductive Argument from Evil," 29–67; Durston, "Consequential Complexity of History," 65–80; and Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments," 73–93.
7. Quoted from *The Bible*. New Revised Standard Version, Harper Collins, 1989.
8. For an in-depth treatment of the importance of the 'nominalist controversy' for the formation of the modern Western mindset, see: Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*.
9. Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.
10. Cf. Salamon, "Light Out of Plenitude," 141–75.
11. Agatheism as a pluralistic interpretation of religion is discussed at length in: Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism," 197–245; and also: Salmon, "In Defence of Agatheism," 115–38.
12. The potential of this covenantal relationship of partners is sometimes conceived in very exalted terms, worthy of an agatheologian. For example, some of the mainstream Eastern Orthodox thinkers, such as Vladimir Lossky, Georges Florovsky, or John Zizoulas, elaborating on Ancient Christian patristic ideas, came up with a portrayal of the Divine-human relationship that couldn't be more exalted. They see the Divine-human relationship as possessing a potential for infinite fulfilment—which they appropriately call deification (*theosis*)—and a most intimate participation in the Divine life (*koinonia*). It is worth noting that these ideas do *not* necessarily presuppose a belief that God intervenes in the natural course of events to prevent evils from happening.

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