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## Moral antitheodicy: prospects and problems

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Abstract: Proponents of the view which I call 'moral antitheodicy' call for the theistic discourse practice of theodicy to be abandoned, because, they contend, all theodicies involve some form of moral impropriety. Three arguments in support of this position are examined: the argument from insensitivity, the argument from detachment, and the argument from harmful consequences. After discussing the merits of each argument individually, I attempt to show that they all must presuppose what they are intended to establish, namely, that the set of premises advanced in any given theodicy will be untenable. I conclude by discussing what uses there might be for the moral critique of theodicy, if it cannot be used to ground a global rejection of theodical practice.

### Introduction

In arguments concerning evil and theism, it is usually said that an omnipotent and perfectly good being (like the God of orthodox theism) would not permit any instance of evil unless there was a countervailing good reason for it to do so, like the attainment of a greater good or the prevention of a worse evil.<sup>1</sup> But this premise generates a problem for orthodox theism, since our world contains many evils that do not seem to serve any good purpose, i.e. that appear to be *gratuitous*. According to evidential arguments from

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term 'evil' is being used in a broad, technical sense, to refer to any type of event, action, intention or state of affairs that is somehow negative, harmful or intrinsically bad.

evil against theism, such as those espoused by William Rowe, the evils in our world which seem gratuitous should be regarded as decisive evidence against God's existence.<sup>2</sup>

There are various argumentative approaches available to the theist looking for a response to Rowe's view. For instance, the theist might grant that certain evils in our world constitute evidence against God's existence, but argue that there is other evidence in favour of theism such that it is rationally preferable to atheism. Alternatively, the theist might argue that our epistemic limitations as human subjects restrict our ability to make reliable judgements about the good purposes that might (for all we know) be served by the seemingly gratuitous evils we observe. Many philosophical theists, however, hold that such replies are inadequate, and think that if one is to defend the reasonableness of theistic belief vis-à-vis the facts of evil, one must appeal to a *theodicy*, i.e. a plausible explanation as to why a perfectly good God might permit the evils in our world, especially those which appear to be pointless.<sup>3</sup> Such explanations nearly always call upon some account of putative greater goods (e.g. free-will, soul-making) whose attainment could be taken to justify God's permission of evil.

In this paper I will examine a group of arguments which oppose the view held by many contemporary theistic philosophers, that theodicy represents an appropriate and notionally viable response to the evidential problem of evil. The arguments I will be discussing have two identifying characteristics. Firstly, they reject theodicy on the basis of moral considerations, seeking to show that one *ought not* to engage in the practice of theodicy.<sup>4</sup> This view is summed up in one writer's claim that there is "a question mark over the moral propriety of the discussion within theodicies such that any believer should hesitate ever to embark on it".<sup>5</sup> The second key feature of the arguments I am considering is that their objections to theodicy are global rather than local in scope. So, rather than just trying to show that one particular theodicy or one type of theodicy fails, these arguments purport to show that all theodicies – those that have been devised and espoused thus far *and* any others which may yet be devised – are

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rowe (1988).

<sup>3</sup> The theodicist does not deny that there are evils in our world which appear to be pointless, but rather engages in what Swinburne (1995, p.75) calls "the enterprise of showing that appearances are misleading".

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, when I refer to 'the practice of theodicy', I am referring to a range of activities, including (but not limited to) devising a new theodicy, endorsing an existing theodicy, defending an existing theodicy against objections, describing theodicies in an uncritical way (e.g. in a textbook on the philosophy of religion), adopting principles of theodicy in one's own reflections on evil, and counselling others to accept theodical explanations for evil. All of these activities may be considered, in a broad sense, part of the enterprise of theodicy, and hence all may be subject to the objections of moral antitheodicy.

<sup>5</sup> Felderhof (2004), pp. 403-04.

inadequate. Arguments with these two identifying characteristics can be loosely classified together under the banner of *moral antitheodicy*.

Moral antitheodicy addresses concerns about the practice of theodicy that are as old as philosophical theodicy itself.<sup>6</sup> This paper, however, will focus on the work of recent moral antitheodicyists such as D.Z. Phillips, Terrence Tilley, Robert Mesle, Kenneth Surin, and John Roth. In my discussion I will not focus too heavily on the arguments of any one of these writers; instead, I will try to provide a general overview of the moral antitheodical position using examples from each of these individuals' work. Where examples of theodical views are required in the discussion, I will mostly cite the work of John Hick and Stephen Davis.<sup>7</sup> The paper will begin with an analysis of the structure of arguments from moral antitheodicy, in which I will suggest two ways that the charge of moral impropriety might be used to substantiate an imperative to abandon theodical practice. Following this, I will examine three sub-arguments that have been offered to support the claim that there is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy: the argument from insensitivity, the argument from detachment, and the argument from harmful consequences. Having considered the prospects of each argument in turn, I will go on to explain why these arguments from moral antitheodicy must presuppose what they purport to establish, namely, that the propositions given in any theodicy we know of, or in any that may yet be devised, are untenable.<sup>8</sup> I will conclude the paper by discussing what uses there might be for the moral critique of theodicy, if it cannot be used to ground a global rejection of theodical practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Precursors to the arguments espoused by moral antitheodicyists exist in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759); a caustic satire of Leibniz's theodicy, and also in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880, p. 321), where in a famous passage, the atheist Ivan asks his brother Alyosha to "imagine that you yourself are erecting the edifice of human fortune with the goal of... making people happy... but that in order to do it it would be necessary and unavoidable to torture to death only one tiny little creature... would you agree to be the architect on those conditions?" Alyosha, grasping his brother's repulsion, replies "No, I would not agree".

<sup>7</sup> Hick (2007) has recently responded to some of the arguments brought against his theodicy by Phillips, including some of Phillips's moral arguments. Hick's response, however, is primarily concerned with the viability of his soul-making theodicy, rather than the viability of the theodicies *per se*.

<sup>8</sup> One type of global argument against theodicy which is related to (but in my view distinct from) moral antitheodicy, is the argument that theodical explanations for evil predicate a moral framework that is incoherent and incompatible with our moral intuitions about the suffering of others (see for example Phillips 2004, pp. 56-58). To clarify, then, I do intend my critique of moral antitheodicy to carry any weight against this or any other antitheodical arguments that attempt to demonstrate fatal *conceptual* flaws in theodical responses to the problem from evil. Also, while I have drawn a distinction here between two different types of argument, conceptual critiques of theodicy in the literature are often advanced in concert with arguments from moral antitheodicy, without any such distinctions being drawn. One of the main reasons for analysing and evaluating moral

## The call to abandon theodical practice

Proponents of moral antitheodicy do not only make general claims about the moral content of theodicies, they also urge theists to take the practical step of abandoning theodicy as a form of discourse practice. Therefore, before we look at the arguments used to support the claim that there is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy, we should ask how the call to abandon theodical practice might proceed on the supposition that there *is* an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy. That is, if the central premise of moral antitheodicy is granted, how might the critic go on to argue that the practice of theodicy should be abandoned?

Perhaps the most straightforward way to argue here would be to appeal to a general principle regarding the ethics of discourse practice. So, starting with moral antitheodicy's key premise, the argument could be given as follows:

- P1. There is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy (key premise of moral antitheodicy)
- P2. One ought not to engage in a discourse practice that constitutes or leads to some form of moral impropriety (putative ethical principle)
  
- C. One ought not to engage in the discourse practice of theodicy (from P1 and P2)

The problem with this argument is that P2's status as a general ethical principle is rather contentious. Contra P2, there may be unusual situations in which it is permissible to engage in morally dubious discourse practice. Also, we might think that an injunction against improper discourse like P2 should be sensitive to degrees of moral impropriety in a discourse practice. But if we qualify P2 for this purpose, we raise a number of problematic questions, e.g. how much moral impropriety in a discourse practice should be tolerated? What *forms* of moral impropriety entail the proscription of a discourse practice? How can the

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antitheodicy, therefore, is the need to disambiguate the various global arguments against theodicy that have been offered, and thus gain a clearer understanding of which of these argument (if any) present the most serious challenges to the theodical enterprise.

degree of moral impropriety in theodicy (or in any discourse practice) be quantified? If the call to abandon theodical practice depends upon the provision of general answers to such questions, its prospects might seem rather meagre.

There is, however, another way for proponents of moral antitheodicy to argue for the abandonment of theodicy, without them needing to propose any universal guidelines for discourse practice. In this case, the call to abandon theodicy would appeal to considerations of coherency in the belief and practice of orthodox theists. This alternative argument could be given as follows

- P1. There is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy (key premise of moral antitheodicy)
  - P3. Theodicy, as a form of discourse practice, is aimed at the defence of orthodox theism (by definition)
  - P4. One ought not to engage in a discourse practice that is aimed at the defence of theism, if that discourse practice constitutes or leads to some form of moral impropriety (principle of theistic apologetics)
- C. One ought not to engage in the discourse practice of theodicy (from P1, P3 and P4)

The principle of theistic apologetics that is employed in this argument (P4) may be open to dispute, but it seems reasonable to suppose that theists would want to reject the idea that one could defend the existence of a perfectly good God in a way that was morally improper or ‘sinful’. Therefore, to the extent that this argument is based on a principle of theistic apologetics that theodicians (and theists in general) will be inclined to accept, the legitimacy of its conclusion – that one ought not to engage in the practice of theodicy – depends on whether or not the key premise of moral antitheodicy (P1) can be defended.

### **Clarifying the task of moral antitheodicy**

In trying to determine whether or not the key premise of moral antitheodicy is defensible, we need a clear grasp of that premise, and in particular its global ambit. To say there is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy is to say that all the theodicies that have been devised thus far and any

others which may yet be devised are morally tainted. Alternatively, it is to say that one can never participate in the discourse practice of theodicy without being guilty of some moral impropriety. But these kinds of generalisations may appear to discount the degree of variation that exists in the content of different theodicies. Where some theodicies posit evil as a natural counterpart to good, others attempt to justify God's permission of evil by emphasising the potential character benefits of pain and suffering for human beings, while others appeal to goods of human freedom, arguing that these can only exist in a world like ours, replete with its various evils. Further diversity can be found in the claims that different theodicies make about the afterlife. And things become even more complicated when we consider that theodicies which are yet to be devised may differ in ways unforeseen from the theodicies that we are familiar with. Given the broad range of possible claims in a theodicy, then, the only viable way to advance a global moral critique is to identify the unifying features of theodical discourse, and to locate ethical objections within this framework.

Which unifying features of theodical discourse are the relevant ones to this end? Theodicy's tacit approval of relatively minor evils like sore muscles, bad decisions, day-to-day hardship and the like is generally not the concern of moral antitheodicy. To the extent that evils like these can indirectly bring about appreciable goods, many of us would consent to their existence in our world in some sense. Theodicy's view of *horrendous* evil, by contrast, is more contentious. For when we consider the worst goings-on in our world (child abuse, genocide, sexual violence, and so on) it seems that theodicy offers a *proxy endorsement* for these evils.<sup>9</sup> This is because theodicies, by definition, claim that God has a good, justifiable reason for permitting the evils we see in our world. This does not necessarily mean that a theodocist must claim there is a higher good that every instance of evil advances; he is not committed to the dubious notion, say, that every time an act of violence is perpetrated, some good outcome will result. For example, when Hick defends his widely-discussed 'soul-making theodicy', he is at pains to express his disgust at the horrors of the Holocaust:

These events were utterly evil, wicked, devilish and, so far as the human mind can reach, unforgivable; they are wrongs that can never be righted, horrors which will disfigure the universe to the end of time, and in relation to which no condemnation can be strong enough, no revulsion adequate.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Horrendous evils have been defined by Marilyn Adams as "evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole". Adams (1989), p. 299.

<sup>10</sup> Hick (1978), p. 361.

But even though the theodicy can condemn particular instances of evil, he is committed to saying that all the evil and suffering in our world is in accordance with God's policies for governing our world, and that these policies are ones of which we should approve. In espousing a theodicy, therefore, the theodicy must (at a minimum) endorse the putative good reasons God has for allowing the occurrence of horrendous evil in our world, and in this way every theodicy will inevitably incorporate a proxy endorsement of horrendous evil.<sup>11</sup>

### **Three arguments for moral antitheodicy's key premise**

While the impropriety of directly endorsing horrendous evil is not usually a disputed matter, the propriety or otherwise of a *proxy* endorsement for horrendous evil is the subject of considerable disagreement amongst theodicy and their opponents. For our purposes here, the arguments given to explain why the proxy endorsement of horrendous evil should be seen as a moral impropriety can be grouped under three headings: the argument from insensitivity, the argument from detachment, and the argument from harmful consequences. Although these arguments represent three different explanatory approaches that one might take in trying to demonstrate the moral impropriety of theodicy's attitude towards horrendous evil, they can each be thought of as complementary to the others, rather than as competing alternatives.

#### *(1) The argument from insensitivity*

Arguments in this category allege that a proxy endorsement of horrendous evil is a moral impropriety perpetrated *against* the victims of horrendous evil by theodicy. On this objection, theodicy does wrong to those people in our world who endure horrendous evils by adopting an insensitive attitude towards

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<sup>11</sup> I am assuming here an orthodox conception of God's omnipotence, according to which God could, if he chose, prevent any or all of the evils in our world, either by (a) creating no world at all, or (b) creating a world very different to our world, or (c) frequently intervening in a world like our own. Process theists like David Ray Griffin reject this orthodox analysis of divine omnipotence, and thus they deny the claim that it is better that the evils in our world, taken all together, have been permitted rather than prevented. Griffin believes it would have been better if God had prevented all the evils in our world, but that no being (not even a maximally powerful being like God) could achieve such a thing. See Griffin (2004).

their suffering. Phillips, for example, says that theodicies “betray the evils that people have suffered, and, in that way, sin against them”.<sup>12</sup> James Wetzel makes a similar point in his critique of Hick’s soul-making theodicy. According to Wetzel, Hick’s adamant condemnation of the Holocaust is undermined by his theodicy’s suggestion that the horrific events of that historical episode will ultimately be overcome and “made to serve God’s good purposes”.<sup>13</sup> This way of thinking about evil, Wetzel argues, trivializes the events of the Holocaust and undermines Hick’s contempt for them.<sup>14</sup> In general terms, 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 people have suffered. As Wetzel puts it, theodicy cannot avoid “trivializing human tragedy at the very moment it attempts to go beyond it”.<sup>15</sup>

Another way in which theodicies might be considered insensitive is in their appeal to post-mortem redemption for those individuals in our world who endure horrendous evils. On the surface this appeal seems reasonable enough; theodicians must surely allow that those who suffer terribly in this life as a result of God’s policies will enjoy some relief in the next. But to claim that horrendous evils endured now may one day be assuaged or diminished in their influence, is – one might argue – to derogate the grief and misery they cause in this life. Phillips and Roth both raise this objection in their critiques of Davis’s free-will theodicy. In his account, Davis relates an anecdote about how he outgrew the embarrassment of a high-school fashion *faux pas*, which he then uses to illustrate his view about how people who suffer terribly in this life may one day be able to move on from their earthly anguish.<sup>16</sup> But according to Roth, this comparison very nearly denies the reality of horrendous evil, since it suggests that the even the most awful cases of abuse and anguish will one day matter no more than distant memories of adolescent angst.<sup>17</sup> Phillips, in a similar vein, says that in his use of this analogy, Davis “fails to take the Holocaust seriously”.<sup>18</sup> Theodicians may reply that the problem here for Davis is merely his use of a poorly-chosen example. But even if a more scrupulous analogy was employed, the essence of Davis’s view, that the horrors of this world will one day dissipate, is a difficult claim for theodicians to avoid given their proxy endorsement of horrendous evil. Roth’s incredulity towards this view about the afterlife in

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<sup>12</sup> Phillips (2004), p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> Hick (1978), p. 361.

<sup>14</sup> Wetzel (1989), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Davis (2001), pp. 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> Roth (2001a), p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips (2004), p. 39.



theodicy – and its insensitivity towards human suffering – is reflected in his mordant summary of Hick’s theodicy.

Waste will waste away. Evil will be transcended... forgotten so that neither God nor humanity is in any way permanently soiled. There will be pie in the sky by and by – a whole one, not just a slice. This theodicy is nice. Its plausibility, however, must be judged in terms of how nice life seems to be. Hick finds it nice enough to justify calling God’s love good and limitless. The sheer amount and intensity of evil’s waste make me demur.”<sup>19</sup>

## *(2) The argument from detachment*

Where the argument from insensitivity was based on what one might loosely describe as Kantian concerns about respect for persons, the argument from detachment predicates a broadly virtue-ethical framework in its objection to theodicy. The central claim in this type of argument is that theodicy’s proxy endorsement of horrendous evil necessitates a vicious form of emotional detachment or hard-heartedness with regards to the suffering of others, the impropriety of which is grounded in the vicious character traits that it betrays. So, to use an analogy, proponents of this view may liken the theodicy to a military commander who calls death and suffering ‘collateral damage’, and thus remains at an emotional distance from the tragedies this euphemism obscures. As Tilley puts it, “theodicies are not only produced by, but also directed to, people detached from sin and suffering”.<sup>20</sup> In critiquing this stance, Phillips decries the theodicy’s economic view of evil, and the way this allows for the language of business and accountancy to be used in discussing matters of life and death. To say that God might have a policy of allowing evil in order to attain greater goods, Phillips says, “is to simply immerse ourselves further in the impropriety of this whole way of thinking”.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Kenneth Surin objects to the ways in which theodicy ignores “the radical particularity of human evil” and “averts its gaze from all the cruelties that exist in the world”. According to Surin, a person’s engagement in the discourse of theodicy requires them to maintain a serene attitude towards evil, which, with respect to the most horrendous evils like those already mentioned, is unacceptably heartless.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Roth (2001b), pp. 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Tilley (1991), p. 231

<sup>21</sup> Phillips (2001), p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> Surin (1983), pp. 231-32.

### *(3) The argument from harmful consequences*

This third argument claims that the proxy endorsement of horrendous evil is a moral impropriety because it has harmful consequences in our world. Or, as Phillips puts it, theodicy “actually adds to the evils it seeks to explain”.<sup>23</sup> The nature of the alleged harms may be construed broadly, on a social scale, or in narrower, personal terms. At the level of social impact, Tilley claims that theodicies legitimate harmful and oppressive social structures by declaring them to be ultimately beneficial and in accordance with God’s will. On Tilley’s view, the theodacist’s proxy endorsement of horrendous evil tacitly sanctions oppression and injustice, and in so doing discourages efforts to counteract and overcome social iniquities.<sup>24</sup> On the personal level, Robert Mesle claims that theodicies wreak harm by encouraging us to undertake a futile search for hidden meaning in our pain and suffering, when what we should be doing – he suggests – is working against the sources of our pain and *creating* meaning out of our suffering. Mesle accepts that the search for meaning can sometimes prompt an individual to confront their pain in a constructive way. At the same time, though, he thinks that this approach more often leads to inactivity, to a passive acceptance of pain, and to an acceptance of the circumstances under which personal hardships arise.<sup>25</sup> For Mesle, then, and other proponents of this critique, the call to abandon theodical practice has a direct consequentialist justification, in addition to any considerations of theistic apologetics.

### **Constraints on a successful antitheodicy**

There are, I believe, salient points about the moral content of theodicies to be found in each of these three objections. Whether or not any of these objections succeed as global arguments against theodicy, however, is another matter. To understand the difficulties that these arguments (and other possible global moral arguments against theodicy) face, we first need to consider some of the factors relevant to the success of global arguments against theodicy.

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<sup>23</sup> Phillips (2004), p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Tilley (1991), pp. 244-47.

<sup>25</sup> Mesle (2004), p. 259.

The first thing to note, to this end, is that any global argument against theodicy must start from a position of agnosticism in relation to the tenability of theodical discourse. If we suppose, in advance, that there *is* some plausible explanation as to why a perfectly good God would permit the evils in our world (and that theists just have to identify it), then we grant theodicy far too much. On the other hand, if we go the other way and *rule out* the possibility of there being any plausible explanation as to why a perfectly good God would permit the evils in our world, we not only beg the question against proponents of theodicy, but we also obviate the need for any global moral argument against theodicy. That is, if we are willing to accept that all theodical explanations for evil are untenable, then there is just no need to bring further arguments against the discourse practice of theodicy; whatever reason we have for accepting the premise about theodical claims being untenable should be reason enough to eschew theodical practice entirely. What this means, then, is that a global moral argument against theodicy needs to grant (for the sake of argument, at least) the possibility that there is a theodicy whose claims about why God might permit the evils in our world, and about how God's policies for permitting evil might ultimately be resolved in the hereafter, are actually plausible.

This leads us to a second constraint on the success of global arguments against theodicy. Most proponents of moral antitheodicy argue against theodicy on multiple bases. For instance, in addition to his moral critique of theodicy, Phillips advances a number of other antitheodical arguments, including a fierce theological critique of theodicy. On Phillips's view, all theodical replies to the problem of evil are theologically incoherent. They purport to defend belief in God and in God's perfect goodness, and yet, Phillips argues

If we grant that things are as theodicies... depict them, even if the ultimate good did necessitate all the evil in the world, and... somehow redeems all evil, it would still be impossible to attribute perfect goodness to God.<sup>26</sup>

Surin likewise provides more than one global objection to theodicy, since, in addition to his moral critique, he also advances a meta-philosophical critique of theodicy, arguing that one of the main reasons for the failure of theodicy is its observance of the customary (and, he maintains, specious) distinction

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<sup>26</sup> Phillips (2004), p. 35.

between the theoretical and practical problems of evil. On Surin's view, "there can be no justifiable purely theoretical 'answer' to the problem of evil".<sup>27</sup>

It is immaterial in this context whether or not these and/or any other alternative global arguments against theodicy are justified. The point is that a global *moral* argument against theodicy cannot be regarded as successful if it relies upon another global argument against theodicy to rule out the possibility of there being any plausible explanation for God's permission of the evils in our world. The reason for this constraint is more or less the same as for the previous one. If we know that theodicies are untenable – say, because they predicate an incoherent theology – and our moral argument against theodicy depends in some way upon that prior knowledge, then the moral argument is ostensibly redundant. Our theological reason for rejecting the viability of theodical claims will be reason enough to abandon theodical discourse altogether. Of course, if one *can* establish an argument to the effect that all theodicies fail, this might provide the basis for a derived global moral argument against theodicy; something to the effect of 'theodicies are untenable, and therefore one (morally) ought not to espouse theodical claims'. But in that case the moral argument would quite clearly be secondary; our reasons for abandoning theodical practice would be theological (for instance) rather than ethical. Consequently, if a global moral argument against theodicy is to carry any weight in the debate over the viability of theodicy, it must proceed from the assumption that there could be a theodicy whose claims about God, evil and the afterlife, are plausible.

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that each of the three sub-arguments of moral antitheodicy that I have discussed thus far implicitly rules this possibility out. If I am right in this contention, then these sub-arguments should not be taken as grounds for accepting moral antitheodicy's central claim, that there is an inherent moral impropriety in the discourse practice of theodicy.

### **Insensitivity and plausibility**

Regarding the argument from insensitivity, I would not deny that theodicy's proxy endorsement of horrendous evil *sometimes* betrays an insensitive attitude towards the suffering of others. The question that we are interested in, however, is whether that insensitivity is a necessary or contingent feature of theodical

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<sup>27</sup> Surin (1983), p. 234.

discourse. In order to address this matter, we need to turn our attention to the status of the claims which underpin theodicy's proxy endorsement of evil.

An example will be useful to this end. Suppose a mother and father are caring for their five-year-old child who has contracted the mumps, a painful but non-lethal viral disease. Suppose also that the whole family has become quite distressed by the ordeal. The child has been experiencing pain and sleeplessness for several days, while the parents have been feeling anxious about the welfare of their child, and also (understandably) tired and rundown. Now imagine a friend of the family visits unexpectedly and, upon hearing of the child's illness, wonders whether the parents know that it is, in some respects, better for a child to contract the mumps at a young age, since he or she thereby gains lifelong immunity to the disease, and hence foregoes any risk of contracting the disease as an adolescent or adult, when the disease's symptoms and complications are known to become much more severe. In this situation, I submit, the sensitivity or otherwise of the friend's response will depend largely on how and when it is offered. If, a few moments after arriving, the friend tells the distressed parents to lighten up, because it's better that their child suffer the mumps now rather than later, then she undoubtedly shows a lack of sensitivity towards the family, considering the difficult episode they are experiencing. If, on the other hand, she waits for a more opportune time to comment (maybe a few days later once the symptoms have started to diminish) and takes care not to speak blithely about the child's illness and its effect on the family, then presumably she does no wrong. Now, to draw a comparison, suppose that instead of the mumps, the child had been suffering complications from type-1 diabetes, and imagine, once again, a family friend telling the parents to not worry so much about the illness because the child will benefit in the long run. Of course, if the friend just blurts out this response in the midst of a difficult moment, her behaviour shows a total lack of sensitivity. But unlike the previous example, I would suggest, her reply is no less blameworthy if it is offered at a more appropriate moment and in a more tactful way. The problem with this response, unlike the mumps example, at least, is that it is false, and all the more insensitive for being false.

To relate the example back to theodicies, it might be that some attempts to explain God's permission of evil are like the diabetes example. For example, suppose a theodocist says that God is justified in permitting terminal illnesses because they improve the human gene pool. When this 'justification' for evil is stated bluntly it is offensive and crass, but even if it is couched in the nicest possible terms it remains appalling, because the content of the view itself is beyond the pale (and obviously untrue). Now, according to the argument from insensitivity, all theodicies, in their proxy

endorsement of horrendous evil, are in some way akin to the diabetes example or the terminal illness example; they are insensitive no matter how and when they are espoused. However, it is not clear how the proponent of this argument can rule out the possibility of there being a theodicy (perhaps one whose details are not yet worked out) that is more like the mumps example. Could there not be at least one theodicy whose proxy endorsement of horrendous evil was not inherently insensitive, even if there were insensitive ways of expressing it? In order to rule this possibility out, proponents of moral antitheodicy would have to make illicit assumptions about the plausibility of unknown theodicies. This is illustrated in our example, for the relevant feature which distinguished the mumps response from the diabetes response was that the content of the former was plausible, whereas the content of the latter was not. If the argument from insensitivity asserts that *all* theodicies are like the diabetes response, then it presupposes that the content of the claims in any given theodicy will be implausible, and, for reasons explained in the previous section, this assumption precludes the argument's success.

In relation to this kind of argument, the critic of theodicy needs to bear in mind that theodicians do not offer a proxy endorsement of horrendous evil for no reason at all. Rather, they do so because they think it is reasonable to accept certain propositions which support this endorsement, e.g. propositions about the nature of evil, propositions about the consequences of evil in human lives, propositions about certain events that will occur in the eschaton, and so on. Naturally, these propositions in a theodicy are not, and should not be, afforded any immunity from criticism. On the contrary, one might be able to argue quite persuasively that the metaphysical premises to which theodicies must appeal (e.g. premises about life after death, or free-will) are implausible. However, in so far as these claims concern metaphysical issues, there will be no *moral* bases upon which dispute them. Moral judgements about a discourse practice and its sensitivity towards the victims of suffering have no bearing on whether or not it is plausible to claim, say, that there will be a mass resurrection of human beings in the distant future. Theodicy's endorsement of horrendous evil depends, in part, upon these kinds of claims, and since the argument from insensitivity can neither demonstrate their implausibility, nor draw on any other independent arguments which might demonstrate their implausibility, it cannot be used to establish the impropriety of theodical discourse in a global sense.

## Virtue in theodicy

Like the argument from insensitivity, the argument from detachment also errs by implicitly discounting the possibility of there being a plausible explanation for God's permission of evil. To reiterate, this argument attempts to show that engagement in the discourse practice of theodicy requires an individual to have a vicious form of hard-heartedness or emotional detachment with regards to other people's suffering. Though some theodicians will want to dispute the idea that their attitude to suffering is vicious in any way, theodicians in general can just as easily accept this allegation whilst maintaining the propriety of their conduct.<sup>28</sup> Given the broadly virtue-ethical framework that is assumed in this critique, such a response can be advanced in either of two ways.

Firstly, the theodician might argue that the discourse practice of theodicy is a form of conduct in which the requirements of different virtues are in conflict. Let's consider this from the theodician's perspective. If the facts about God, evil, redemption, and so on are more or less as theodicians take them to be, then the act of propounding a theodicy may be motivated solely by concern for the well-being of others. That is to say, if it is true that God has a benevolent reason for permitting the evils we observe in our world, and that there will be an afterlife in which the travails of this world are redeemed, then it is in the interests of people generally to be informed as such. As Davis says

Suppose it is true that *God exists* and *A good eschaton is in the offing*. If so, then telling suffering people those facts... is about as helpful a thing as we can do for them. It would be wrong not to do so.<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, then, engagement in the discourse practice of theodicy may be seen as being in accordance with the virtues of benevolence and/or kindness, in so far as the theodician is motivated by the concerns Davis alludes to here. At the same time, it may be granted that engagement in this discourse practice is in accordance with the vice of hard-heartedness with respect to individual cases of suffering. But virtue ethical approaches to moral decisions will always give rise to situations like these, in which the

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<sup>28</sup> I am not claiming here that theodicians have to concede that the practice of theodicy evinces vices of character. Rather, my claim is that even if the theodician makes this concession, it does not follow that the practice of theodicy can be dismissed outright on this basis.

<sup>29</sup> Davis (2004), p. 271. Emphasis in original.

requirements of virtue are in conflict. The theodist can simply argue that the requirements of benevolence trump the requirements of non-hard-heartedness, at least in this particular instance.

The second kind of reply would also accept that detachment from the suffering of others is, generally speaking, a vice of character. However, on this reply, the theodist could argue that detachment or hard-heartedness is a *role virtue* for philosophers or theologians seeking an adequate theoretical response to arguments from evil against theism. This type of response is well illustrated by an example that David O'Connor uses to defend the legitimacy of theodical discourse against objections from Surin. Imagining a person suffering from an incurable, terminal illness, O'Connor suggests that

To the victim, trapped in the sure prospect of death and for whom each day is a heroic struggle... the notion of detached, disinterested research conducted wholly without reference to him in the particularity of his own anguish is beside the point... But to conclude from this that pure medical research, with its inherent abstract conception of disease, immunity, life and death *is* irrelevant... would be to misconclude.<sup>30</sup>

To extend O'Connor's analogy, theodist's attitude towards suffering might be seen as a vice if it were held by someone without the theodist's specifically theoretical concerns, or if it were carried over by the theodist into everyday, practical contexts. However, in relation to the specific role that the theodist takes on in the theoretical defense of theism against arguments from evil, those attitudes can be considered virtues, in the same way that a medical researcher's hardened attitude towards death can be a virtue for a medical researcher, even where such an attitude would generally be considered vicious.<sup>31</sup> Of course, this and the previous response both proceed on the assumption that there could be a plausible

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<sup>30</sup> O'Connor (1988), pp. 65-66.

<sup>31</sup> The propriety of the theodist's detached attitude towards suffering also depends, in part, on a parallel debate over the right way to approach problems of evil in general. As previously mentioned, Surin rejects a purely theoretical approach to the problem of evil because he denies the legitimacy of the distinction between practical and theoretical problems of evil. This distinction, Surin says, allows theodists to adopt a *bureaucratic* view of suffering, which he sees as a misrepresentation of the actual evils we face in life (1983, p. 232). Others make a similar point. E.g. Michael Scott (1996, p. 7) claims that a purely theoretical approach to the problem of evil inhibits the theodist's capacity to recognise the existence in our world of unconditional evils; Marcus Felderhof (2004, p. 397) says that a theoretical approach to the problem of evil "subverts the thinker morally and religiously". Responding to this view, O'Connor defends a theoretical approach to the problem of evil by distinguishing between theism's practical or 'life-guiding' aspect, and its theoretical or 'cognitive' aspect. According to O'Connor, theoretical theodicy is a legitimate enterprise because it is essential to theism's cognitive aspect in its response to the problem of evil (1988, pp. 66-68).



explanation as to God's permission of the evils in this world. If it is not the case that a plausible explanation exists, then it may be the case that any engagement in the discourse of theodicy constitutes a moral impropriety, due to the detached attitude it requires. Once again, however, to rule this possibility out would be to inappropriately presuppose the global failure of theodicy, in a way that would make global moral arguments against theodicy redundant.<sup>32</sup>

### **Theodicy's alleged harms**

In relation to the argument from harmful consequences, it should be noted that this is, to some extent, an empirical issue. If proponents of moral antitheodicy say that the proxy endorsement of horrendous evil is inherently wrong because it has harmful effects, we need not only a description of what those harmful effects are but also some evidence that, where those effects are observed in our world, they have (in at least some cases) been brought about by the discourse practice of theodicy. But where is such evidence to be found? More generally, how could we even begin to trace the effects of theodicy (or any other discourse practice) on people's lives, or on societies at large? Tilley and Mesle both offer anecdotal examples of the ways in which theodicies can wreak harm in people's lives, but a few case studies are hardly sufficient to establish their point.<sup>33</sup> And, moreover, proponents of theodicy can respond with their own anecdotes about *beneficial* consequences that arise from theodical speculation. Hick, for example, would say that if we are to struggle against our world's iniquities and injustices, as Tilley and Mesle insist we should, theodicy can help us by offering a reason for hope, and by being a source of 'cosmic

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<sup>32</sup> Further to the issues discussed here, Wetzel sees some versions of the virtue-ethical argument against theodicy as being essentially ad hominem in nature. The argument, on Wetzel's view, is that "if a person indulges in theodicy, then that person is morally corrupt. If a person is not morally corrupt, then he or she will not be indulging in theodicy". Wetzel sees this as an indirect defeat of theodicy, since, according to the objection, "theodicy can no longer be discussed by reasonable, morally sensitive people" (1989, p.3).

<sup>33</sup> Mesle's concern, in part, is that theodicies encourage us to look for hidden meanings in our suffering where no such meanings exist. In response to this concern, Hick (2004, p. 266) says that sophisticated theodicies have nothing to do with the kind of simplistic meaning attribution that Mesle objects to. It might be argued, however, that theodicy reinforces a natural psychological tendency in human beings to search for patterns and stories that help to explain the events of our lives. Recent studies in the psychology of belief suggest that our propensity to make sense of events in terms of teleological narratives is neither learned nor deduced from experience, but rather inherent in human cognition. See Kelemen (1999).

optimism' to motivate our efforts in those inevitable times when they seem futile.<sup>34</sup> Hick's roseate outlook is not likely to sway his critics, but as long as theodicy's putative harms or benefits are being measured anecdotally, any such appeal to theodicy's benefits will be no more or less defensible than a complaint about theodicy's harms.

Leaving aside the issue of evidence, suppose we grant for the sake of argument that the discourse of philosophical theodicy has, to some extent, been causally responsible for the harmful goings on that Tilley and Mesle describe, e.g. reinforcing oppressive social structures, and encouraging individuals to engage in futile speculation about the meaning of their suffering. Even having granted this contentious premise, more would still need to be said. For, to the extent that arguments from moral antitheodicy purport to be global in scope, we would still need to ask whether *any* theodicies which may yet be devised will contribute in some way to these problems, and given how difficult it is to ascertain the effects of the extant theodical discourse, it is hard to see how an answer in the affirmative could be given with any confidence. Perhaps if proponents of moral antitheodicy were to assume that any future theodicies will be flawed in their claims about God, evil, redemption and so on, they might be able to reasonably predict that the practical consequences of those future theodicies will be detrimental. However, as was the case with the previous arguments, such an assumption would be self-defeating.

If we think about this issue from the theodicist's perspective, it seems reasonable to expect that a theodicy which 'gets things right' in its claims about God, evil, the afterlife, and so on, will also support an upright moral orientation towards the evils that exist in our world, on both a social and personal level. Davis, for example, does not just regard his theodicy as a mere theoretical reply to the problem of evil; he also takes it to reinforce his convictions about social responsibility. Thus, in response to allegations of harmful effects, Davis says

Mesle is going to have to explain to me very carefully why my theodicy sanctions 'oppressive social structures in the status quo'... I think the reverse is true. The very God who I believe will triumph in the eschaton commands us to feed hungry people, heal sick people, and overcome oppressive structures in this world.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hick (2004), p. 268.

<sup>35</sup> Davis (2004), p. 272.

Irrespective of whether Davis actually offers a plausible explanation for God's permission of evil, his attitude about the relationship between right theory and ethical behaviour is instructive. If we grant the possibility that there could be a plausible theodicy, then we should also grant the possibility that this theodicy will offer theoretical support for right moral conduct, and thus have practical consequences which are beneficial rather than harmful. To claim that there is an inherent moral impropriety in the practice of theodicy because of theodicy's harmful consequences, then, is to just dismiss these possibilities out of hand.

### **Is there a place for moral arguments against theodicy?**

While I accept that a proxy endorsement of horrendous evil may seem morally contentious on the surface, I have argued that the various attempts to establish its inherent impropriety, whether they appeal to matters of sensitivity, virtuous conduct, or consequences, presuppose that the claims put forward in theodicies are implausible. It might seem, therefore, that I am rejecting moral arguments against theodicy altogether. But this is not so, for my topic in this paper has merely been *global* moral arguments against theodicy. Beyond this specific class of arguments, I believe there are a number of legitimate objections that one can offer (including variants of those I have discussed in this paper) regarding the moral content of theodicies. And although I do not think these objections can be used to mount a successful global argument against the theistic discourse of theodicy, I do think they can usefully serve other dialectical purposes.

Firstly, moral arguments – in particular those based on considerations of sensitivity – may be effectively employed in a critique of one specific theodicy, or one particular class of theodicies. Unlike the global context, where the argument from insensitivity breaks down because of the presuppositions it has to make about the content of unknown future theodicies, the argument from insensitivity in a *local* context does not rely on unfavourable assumptions about the content of a given theodicy, since that content (i.e. various claims about the causal consequences of evil, post-mortem redemption, and so on) can be subject to direct analysis. Therefore, to the extent that the claims found in theodicies of a certain type betray an insensitive attitude towards victims of suffering, a local argument against theodicies of that type (using our earlier principle of theistic apologetics) can be given as follows:

- P5. There is a moral impropriety in the theodicies of type  $\mathcal{A}$  (premise)
  - P6. Theodicies of type  $\mathcal{A}$  are aimed at the defence of orthodox theism
  - P7. One ought not to offer a theory in defence of orthodox theism, if that theory constitutes or leads to some form of moral impropriety (principle of theistic apologetics)
- C. One ought not to propound type  $\mathcal{A}$  theodicies (from P5, P6 and P7)

Secondly, moral arguments can be used to motivate a global critique of theodicy on other grounds. So, for theists purporting to evaluate the different types of responses available to the problem of evil, the contentious moral status of the claims given in a specific theodicy may prompt further investigation into the controversial claims of theodicies in general. Following on from this, the third way in which moral arguments against theodicy might be employed is to reinforce a global critique of theodicy on other grounds. If it can be shown that some of the central premises found in any theodical response to the problem of evil are implausible, then a moral argument against theodicy could be derived from this independent finding. That is, if it turns out that there are compelling (non-moral) reasons to reject all theodicies, Tilley's characterisation of theodicy as "a monstrous generalization, or a staggering lie" may be justified.<sup>36</sup>

The question arises, though, as to which features of theodical discourse, if any, could provide a suitable focus for a global argument against the *plausibility* of theodicies. Given the purportedly global scope of the critique, the antitheodist cannot just focus on claims that are specific to certain theodicies; a more general method is required. One option for global critiques of theodicy is to challenge the conceptual framework which theodicies presuppose. By their very nature, however, critiques of this type branch off into conceptual disputes which, in some instances, represent serious metaphilosophical disagreements between theodicists and their opponents.<sup>37</sup> An alternative antitheodical strategy would be to evaluate the plausibility of theodical discourse while granting the conceptual framework that is assumed

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<sup>36</sup> Tilley (1991), p. 248.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the theoretical/practical distinction, for example, if the theodicist maintains the legitimacy of the distinction while the antitheodist rejects it, what third party may be consulted to resolve the impasse? Where there is no non-controversial, shared understanding between theodicists and antitheodists about meta-philosophical issues, the antitheodist's rejection of theodicy may amount to little more than a pre-theoretical dismissal of the theodicist's philosophical assumptions. Messer (1993) explores such issues in relation to the differences in Swinburne's and Phillips' approaches to philosophical theology.

in theodicies. The challenge in relation to this type of critique is to identify propositions which are common to all theodicies, but which also lend themselves to a plausibility analysis. One such proposition, often thought to be a *sine qua non* of theodical discourse, is the claim that there will be an afterlife of some sort for human beings. Despite it being widely accepted amongst theists, there are enough points of contention in relation to this claim that we might at least consider it a candidate for a topic upon which to base a global critique of theodicy. Further exploration of this possibility will, however, have to wait for another occasion.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A global critique of theodicy based on problems of the afterlife is developed in my forthcoming thesis, *Life after death and the limitations of theodicy* (Monash University). I am grateful to Graham Oppy, Nick Trakakis and an anonymous reviewer for providing critical feedback on draft versions of this paper.

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