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**Can I Both Blame and Worship God?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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1. **Introduction**

Consider the following case, based on a well-known apocryphal story:

**Theresa:** Theresa of Avila falls off the donkey she was riding, straight into mud, injuring herself. She looks up to the heavens and says to God: “You couldn’t have picked a worse time! Why’d you let this happen to me?” God responds by telling her that this is how He treats His friends. To this, Theresa bitingly retorts: “No wonder you have so few of them!”

Theresa’s response is striking. She is holding God to account for God’s actions with a rather humorous jibe at the Almighty’s expense. Theresa is, if a bit playfully, both indignant on behalf of others and resentful of her own apparently ill treatment.

Now, one might think that all blame directed at God must be unfounded. Say Theresa wholeheartedly believes that God exists and is worthy of worship. (She is, after all, a saint in many Christian traditions). She should never think that God is blameworthy. Why? Well, it seems that one cannot blame what one worships. For to worship something is to show it a kind of reverence, respect, or adoration. To worship is, at least in part, to *praise*. And is Theresa praising God in the story? No! She is blaming Him.

Consider how Paul puts the point in his letter to the Romans: “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” (Romans 9:20, cf. Isaiah 45:9 NRSVCE). Anecdotally, many religious persons seem to agree with Paul on this point: blaming God is inappropriate at best and sinful at worst. (A quick google search for the phrase “blame God” will easily attest to these widespread attitudes).

Yet **Theresa** is not a one-off case. Blaming God is not wholly foreign to the Abrahamic faith traditions. However, this blame is often much less playful than Theresa’s. See for instance, the Psalmist’s angry rebuke at God in Psalm 44. Surprisingly, this rebuke is an act of worship. It is *a prayer*. So, we have found ourselves a puzzle. When we consider attitudes of blame and attitudes of worship, they seem straightforwardly in tension, perhaps even contradictory. As Paul says, who are we to talk back to God? And yet these cases are part and parcel of religious life in the Abrahamic faith traditions. Indeed, Theresa manifests a deep personal relationship with God in expressing her humorous retort.

This is the puzzle I address in this paper. My aim is vindicatory. I will suggest that a person can both blame and worship God. Paul’s objection points to the important point that blameful worship appears to be epistemically akratic, a case where one believes that P but believes that one should not believe that P. But I will argue that this irrationality may sometimes be acceptable given our nature as finite, emotional beings. This suggestion, I’ll argue, should change the way we think about the problem of evil by highlighting its interpersonal and moral psychological dimensions.

1. **What is it to Blame?**

Before we can begin to make sense of what’s going on in **Theresa**, we need to think about blame in general. In the most general terms, blame is a reaction to something of negative normative interpersonal significance (Tognazinni 2011). But from here, theorists diverge in many respects. Do we only blame negative actions (e.g., Wallace 1994)? Or do we blame people for their character and attitudes (e.g., Smith 2015, Adams 1985)? Is blame a judgement (e.g., Hieronymi 2004, Scanlon 2008)? Or is it an emotion (Strawson 1962)? Or an emotion in response to a judgement (Wallace 1994)? Is blame “thin”—purely constituted by a negative evaluation (Watson 1996) —or “thick”—involving conative attitudes (Arpaly and Schroeder 2013)?

Rather than decide all these questions, let’s start with a substantive but flexible view, one that could be modified in various ways while still allowing us to articulate our central puzzle. A widely influential (although not universally accepted) theory in the literature on moral responsibility, following P.F. Strawson (1962), understands blame to be paradigmatically expressed (or constituted) by moral anger in the form of resentment or indignation in response to a perception or judgement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Call these kinds of moral anger (along with other emotions like guilt, gratitude, and pride) *reactive attitudes*.[[3]](#footnote-3) They are reactions to what the agent who has them understands to be the animating forces behind another person’s actions. If I feel resentment towards someone, I am moved by what I see as the negative attitudes and intentions, the *lack* of care or concern for me, as displayed in this person’s actions (Strawson 1962; McKenna 2012: 59-60). If I think you have shoved me, I am very liable to interpret your action as being motivated by *ill will* towards me.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Given this set of moral psychological claims, Strawsonian theories of moral responsibility maintain that our practices of praise and blame track interpretations of good or ill will. Actions are a kind of evidence about what other people think. They are signals about our inner lives. We can see the practice of holding one another responsible as enshrining a moral demand that we treat one another with sufficient good will (and at the very least no ill will), or more generally, as enshrining a concern about the attitudes that we have for one another as persons (cf. Watson 2014).

A Strawsonian view makes good sense of our practices of excuse, justification, and exemption. When I blame, I want an explanation. And I can find out if what I took to be a sign of ill will was not. Maybe the action was an accident, and so I excuse it. Maybe what seemed to be an act of ill will was in fact motivated by a good intention, e.g., a shove was intended to push you out of harm’s way.

In addition to changing our view of other people’s actions, we also recognize that some persons are exempt from moral responsibility altogether. Consider very young children, who may have ill will towards persons but who lack pertinent emotional regulation or adult interpersonal savvy. Persons who lack certain capacities are appropriately engaged with in light of a different set of attitudes, which are more objective in character. We might have to manage very young children or explain the behavior of the gravely mentally ill in neurochemical terms. These attitudes of management or explanation needn’t be unemotional; often they are present alongside deep love and affection. It’s just that these objective attitudes are not responsive to another person’s agency. Reactive attitudes, by contrast, are responsive to a person *as an agent*.

Blame, then, is a form of moral address directed to agents of a certain sort.[[5]](#footnote-5) Beinga responsible agent involves an interpretive competency within our practices of moral responsibility. Among these competencies is the ability to understand the meaning of blame.  When I blame you, I want you to know that I think you have acted wrongly, that you have acted with ill will (or insufficient good will). It would be inappropriate to blame someone who did not understand the meaning of blame. It would not have the intended effect of getting the blamed person to acknowledge that *by their own lights* they have failed a general demand for good will among persons.[[6]](#footnote-6) If the class of morally responsible agents—the moral community—is the class of agents that understand the meaning of blame, notice that blame can be a form of third-party moral address. Blame has the important function of signaling to third parties that a person has concern for victims (Smith 2012: 44). Indeed, blame can signal that one stands against evil and the ill-treatment of others.

This account of moral responsibility is strictly speaking neutral with respect to the free will debate.[[7]](#footnote-7) Plausibly, moral responsibility requires a broad set of emotional and actional abilities, including free will. In ordinary cases, however, we mostly presuppose the metaphysics. And although the Strawsonian account might seem to lend itself to subjectivism and sentimentalism, I also believe the account is metaethically neutral.[[8]](#footnote-8) Strawsonians are generally committed to the view that being the appropriate target of reactive attitudes is (in some sense) prior to our being morally responsible, but this sense need not be metaphysical.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since I am concerned with whether a worshipper can blame the God they worship, I will help myself to the thought that our demand for treatment manifesting good will (or at least no ill will) follows (in some sense) from God’s own goodness, as manifest in God’s will, in God’s nature, or in our nature as creatures as given to us by God.

1. **What is it to Worship? (What is it to Praise?)**

In the foregoing discussion of moral responsibility, I have focused on blame. Of course, moral responsibility has a positive dimension: praise. Since there is a close connection between praise and worship, I will discuss the two in tandem. A Strawsonian account of praise, I will argue, neatly overlaps with a plausible (if necessarily incomplete) account of worship.

Following Robert Adams, I take it that “the soul of worship is admiration” (1999: 193). The sincere believer takes God to be so morally perfect as to be admired, revered, followed, and emulated. Beyond this, I take worship to be a form of moral address. To worship is, at least in part, to express gratitude to the thing one worships. This expression has an all-encompassing quality. As Adams put it (1999: 227): “The whole ethical life is clearly assimilated to worship when its value is interpreted in terms of sacrifice or the expression of gratitude to God.” Additionally, Adams (1999) points out that worship allows us to symbolically extend ourselves. As limited beings, there are only so many good projects we can promote and participate in. There are only some evils that we can actively work against. But by worshipping—both explicitly in prayer and in conceiving of our moral activity as such—we can *be for God* as the good and *be against* what is evil.

So, put briefly, I take it that worship consists of (at least in part): (1) admiration, (2) gratitude, and (3) the symbolic expression of one’s moral outlook as standing with what is worshipped. In the present context, these emotions will be directed at the deity, and the symbolic expression is communicated both to the deity and to third-parties. There is of course much more that could be said. But for present purposes we have a sufficient sketch of some of the attitudinal and expressive components of worship.

Let me now turn to praise and sketch the kind of account I find amenable. P.F. Strawson (1962: 22) suggests gratitude is a reactive attitude, which is an expression of (or constitutive of) praise in response to an act of good will that benefits oneself. I agree. It is the positive correlate of blame as resentment.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is a way to let others know that we recognize their good will. Even when we think about accountability for actions, we care about other people’s moral attitudesand outlooks. And caring about this should naturally lead not only to sanctioning what we take to be bad but also promoting what we understand to be good. Notice that just as blame can signal that we stand against ill will, praise as gratitude can also signal a recognition to others that we stand with and forthem. We can think about gratitude, then, as the positive dimension of our basic concern for the attitudes of others.

Robert Solomon calls gratitude a “philosophical emotion” since it involves an awareness of one’s life as a whole: “how much of life is out of one’s hands, how many advantages one owes to other people, and how indebted one is or should be to parent’s friends, and teachers” (2004, ix-x). Although a single instance of praise might not seem so philosophical, we can maintain that instances of praise as gratitude at least occasion the beginnings of this broader awareness of one’s vulnerability and one’s blessings because they are recognitions of the unbidden good will of others.

The overlap between this sketch of a view of praise as gratitude and Adams’ account of worship as gratitude-involving is striking. Considering it, we can make more precise what is so puzzling about **Theresa**. Blame as moral anger and praise as gratitude are incompatible attitudes. The former expresses that another has apparently acted with ill will. The latter expresses the recognition that one has been shown good will. To praise and to blame at the same time would be to see one and the same set of treatment as both expressing good and ill will. It is to have inconsistent reactions. Since worship involves gratitude, it seems like one simply cannot coherently blame what one worships, as this would involve inconsistent reactions.

Indeed, even in a single instance, to blame what one worships might mean that you fail to acknowledgethe good you have received from what you worship, since gratitude involves an at least inchoate awareness of one’s blessings. Blaming apparently entails setting aside or disregarding, at least in part, what grounds your worship in the first place.

1. **An Account of Blameful Worship**

We can now precisely state our puzzle. Because praise and blame express (or consist of) inconsistent attitudes, so do worship and blame. So, apparently, there is something inconsistent going on in **Theresa**. Yet Theresa is doing something good. She is in a close relationship with God. In this section, I’ll give an account of blameful worship to explain what is good about it. I’ll explain why blameful worship can be *prima facie* justified before returning to problems about inconsistency in the next section.

Recall that on the Strawsonian account I have articulated above, morally responsible agents are only those agents whom we could expect to understand moral demands. When we blame, there is a built-in expectation that the person will comply with those demands. So, put a bit romantically, when we believe a person is a morally responsible agent, we have faith in their goodness, construed here as the possibility that they could have and display sufficient good will towards others. When we blame someone, we stand with their capacity for good will againsttheir apparently bad action. The badaction, the way in which that action seems to speak against the possibility that the person blamed has good will towards us or others, is the immediate ground of our blame. To expect an apology or an excuse or a justification, then, is an invitation to restore our faith in the good will of the other person. And this is to hope in another person’s potential for goodness. We can of course blame poorly in all manner of ways; I might be vindictiveand simply wish to harm someone, for instance. But the fact that in blaming we hope in others goes some way towards explaining why blame can enhance relationships between persons, if done well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Job is an excellent example of how blame done well enhances relationships. He famously called God to account for all the maladies that befell him. And there is something good about Job’s calling God to account in comparison with his friends who insist that Job must have done something wrong to merit the ills he suffers. Eleonore Stump (2010: 217) suggests the following about what Job is getting right:

“In denouncing the comforters’ willingness to kowtow to God, Job takes his stand with the goodness of God, rather than with the office of God as ruler of the universe. Without losing his personal commitment to the person of God, Job refuses to accept what God does just because it is God who does it. If, *per impossible*, divine power and divine goodness were to be opposed, then in the way in which he reacts to his suffering Job is in effect choosing to be on the side of goodness rather than on the side of power, even if the side of power should be God’s side. In this choice, Job is as fervently on God’s side as it is possible to be.”

By calling God to account, Job is standing with God’s goodness against the apparent exercise of God’s powers. Stump suggests that “in a paradoxical way, Job’s passionate accusations of God move Job closer to God” (2010: 217). If blame in part depends on a kind of hope in another person’s capacity for goodness, then this is not paradoxical at all, though. It’s rather ordinary.

So, in blaming God, a person can stand with God’s capacity for goodness against the apparent exercise of God’s powers. This can move a person closer to God. Given this, I think we should recognize a category of blameful worship as a non-paradigmatic instance of worship. (Maybe “non-paradigmatic” is too mild; more on this in a moment). It consists of (1) admiration, (2) resentment or indignation, and (3) the symbolic expression of one’s moral outlook as standing with the worshipped being. It is non-paradigmatic insofar as we are naturally prone to respond to actions what appear to manifest will with forms of moral anger. Moral anger is a natural expression of protest against injustice, oppression, and all manner of evils. When we express these emotions in response to the apparent action of the divine will, we stand with God’s goodness, which is in part the grounds of our admiration for God. It makes possible for the worshipper the symbolical expression of a moral outlook that affirms the goodness of God in spite of things that sincerely appear to undermine it. Thus, contrary to appearances, perhaps, blaming could be a way of worshipping God when faced with cases where God has apparently acted with ill will in the permission of certain evils.

1. **Paul’s Objection and Epistemic Akrasia**

Having articulated a story about blameful worship, it is now time to consider Paul’s counsel against back-talking God. I will argue that Paul’s objection is best understood in terms of incoherence. In blamefully worshipping, the worshiper is irrational given their own commitments.

First, let’s clarify Paul’s objection. Recall that Paul counsels against blaming God asks us to consider the following absurdity: “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?” (Romans 9:20). In other words, maybe Paul thinks we lack *standing* to blame as creatures. People use the term “standing” in different ways. I will use it to refer to whether or not a person is entitled to blame a wrongdoer (as in Radzik 2011). We are not always so entitled. When I am being a hypocrite, for example, I am not actually committed to the moral norms to which I hold others accountable, and so am not entitled to hold them to said moral norms (Wallace 2010).

Paul cannot be saying that we lack standing to blame God just because he made us. We can rightly blame the sources of our selves. We can blame our parents, reject the laws and institutions of our home countries (sorry Socrates!), and so on. So, a better way to put Paul’s thought might go like this: God is our superior (as evidenced by his being the Creator), and therefore we lack standing to blame Him. Pertinently for cases like **Theresa**, God is our *moral* superior. She knows that God is maximally good. She knows that God is *the* moral expert, if there ever was one! This undermines the grounds of her blame. Compare. If we know that someone has good moral reason for doing something, then we cannot think that they are acting out of ill will. Why? Knowledge is factive. If some subject S knows F, then F obtains. So, if someone like Theresa knowsthat God is maximally good, then she cannot on pain of irrationality think that God’s actions manifest ill will—the lack of due moral consideration. So, Theresa lacks standing to blame God for the simple reason that she knows that, really, no wrong occurred. There is no putative wrong that entitles her to call God to account.

One apparently easy way around Paul’s objection is to just deny that anyone can know that God is good in the pertinent sense. Maybe we could say that we know that God is good, but we don’t have a full understanding of it. We *hope* in God’s goodness. Perhaps the goodness of God is unfathomable to us, and we merely speak analogically when we say of God that He is good. If so, then we might be in a position to blame God insofar as God’s allowance of evil is apparent evidence that he has some modicum of ill will (or a lack of sufficient good will) towards us *even if* we are committed to God’s goodness in general. After all, didn’t I just say that any instance of blame is a way to stand with someone’s potential for goodness?

But this will not do. Indeed, I believe it raises a much deeper worry about the possibility of blameful worship (which is perhaps ultimately what Paul is suggesting). If a person is willing to worship a creator God despite the apparent evils in the world, then, in general, they should believe that there are reasons to morally justify that creator God in permitting those evils. This seems to entail that a blameful worshipper believes both that God has unjustly permitted evil and that they should not think that God has unjustly permitted evil. Blameful worship, then, is an instance of epistemic akrasia, where one believes what one believes one ought not to believe (Owens 2002).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Why is blameful worship epistemically akratic? Let’s consider a blameful worshipper’s epistemic situation. I think it is plain by reflection that the reasons that could justify the permission of evils are totally opaque to us in particular cases. I cannot reason my way to a justification for the particular suffering of a child with cancer, for instance. (If you can, I would like to hear how). Nevertheless, all of us can reason our way to a theory of how God could be morally justified in permitting evil, even if that theory is necessarily incomplete or partial. (See Stump 2010: 11-15 for a similar view). Maybe, somehow, that evil is required to make us the sorts of persons able to achieve union with God, for instance. I just can’t see how this helps the child…

Notice that this combination of beliefs puts someone who thinks that God is all-good, all-loving, all-knowing, simple, immutable, eternal, and impassible in a bad position. A God of this sort would not make mistakes. There are no bad outcomes beyond the reach of this person’s powers. If we take it that *this* God is good, even if we only have a dim comprehension of what that goodness is like, then we must take evidence of ill will as misleading. We must be wrong. We are in a position where we believe that God has permitted an evil—a child has cancer, and that is plainly evil—but we should not believe that God has permitted an evil since we can reason our way to a general theory of how God could be morally justified in permitting evils.

This is just to say that theists have *evidence of evidence* of moral justification in particular cases of evil (Feldman 2005, Tal and Comesaña 2017). Indeed, we seem to have found the especially troubling sort of case where one’s higher order evidence should lead one to doubt one’s assessment of the first order evidence (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014). In such a case, shouldn’t we just stop believing that God has permitted an evil? Doesn’t what we know about God defeat our first order belief? As Paul says, what can what is made say to its maker? It is of course no accident that when describing Job’s case, Stump (2010: 217) notes the *counterpossible* *conditional* that makes Job’s blame seem appropriate: “If, *per impossible*, divine power and divine goodness were to be opposed…”

Typical cases of epistemic akrasia involve reasoning while intoxicated or oxygen deprived. In being angry about particular evils, is a theist in a similar situation? Michael Rhea (2018: 55-56) has defended a plausible principle in response to the problem of divine hiddenness. Given God’s transcendence, the violation of our expectations about what manifestations of some intrinsic divine attributes should look like does not support the conclusion that God lacks that divine attribute. Part of what it means to be transcendent is for those attributes to be, in part, hidden! Unlike in ordinary interpersonal relations, I take it that God’s transcendence gives theists a special reason to suspend judgment on the possible right-making features of apparent evils. In general, we should not expect ourselves to be very good at figuring out what sorts of act types manifest divine goodness. On the contrary, if we are worshippers, we should have very good reason to think that God knows what God is doing. It seems, then, that our being angry about apparently unjustified evils, our blaming God, is epistemically akratic in the same way my belief that I calculated the tip right while intoxicated is. Paul might be right in counseling us against back-talk.

1. **Doing Our Best: The Value of Blame and the Problem of Evil**

So, maybe there is something irrational in blaming the God that you worship. Rather than deny Paul’s objection, I will try to absorb it. How bad is it that blaming God is irrational? Bad, and so to be avoided. But not always avoidable, and in such cases, preferable. I will argue that this conclusion should drastically change how we think about the problem of evil by highlighting the problem’s moral psychological dimensions.

To be upfront, I am not sure what to say about epistemic akrasia. Some argue that we need an epistemic principle that forbids epistemic akrasia (e.g., Horowtiz 2014), whereas others argue that epistemic akrasia can be rational (e.g., Wedgewood 2011). Perhaps an agent can be subject to epistemic demands that she can fail to meet without being irrational, as Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) suggests. Let’s return to our central case, **Theresa**. Theresa is in just such a situation. She is being asked to respect both the epistemic norms that require her to believe that God is treating her poorly while also respecting the epistemic norms that asks her to, minimally, suspend her judgment that God is treating her poorly. Either Theresa is in an epistemic dilemma, or we should back off from the idea that evidence about our own rationality can defeat beliefs formed in normally acceptable ways (like falling off donkeys).

I like the idea that when Theresa falls off her donkey, she is in an irresolvable epistemic dilemma as a worshiper. Should she think God is a jerk? Or that she just does not understand what happened? What God asks of us may be so much that, given our non-ideal condition, we might just have to live with our epistemic dilemma. This strikes me as a way of understanding Theresa’s biting retort. When she says no wonder God has so few friends, she is indicating how very little we can understand God sometimes! But maybe in that moment, this is the only way Theresa can succeed in worshipping God. We are finite creatures who live in non-ideal conditions, and our emotions are a way for us to care and value. Again, per Stump (2011)’s discussion of Job, Theresa might be standing for the goodness of God given her impossible epistemic situation.

A similar point can be made for those sympathetic to the idea that epistemic akrasia is always irrational, for perhaps being epistemically akratic is not as problematic as it first appears. If it is rational for me to believe in the traditional theistic God, it might then also be rational for me on occasion to blamefully worship even if blameful worship is irrational, since it would be rational for me to worship God in whatever way I could manage.[[13]](#footnote-13) Again, we are finite creatures who live in non-ideal conditions, and our emotions express our cares and values, what we stand for and against. As Parfit (1984) famously points out, it might be rational for a person to induce irrationality in themselves. Blameful worship might be an instance of this phenomena.

In short, blame can be a way for us to communicate our values, to signal to others that we stand with victims and against the ill-treatment of others. More generally, our emotions reflect what we care about. Perhaps being angry at God is the best one can do in the face of the apparent evils of the world given our own cognitive limitations. It can be a way to, perhaps irrationally, stand with the goodness of God. Thus, I am tempted to think that Paul is expressing an ideal. Ideally, we should not back-talk God. But right now, we only “see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSVCE). Even a person whom many consider a saint had to resort to it in order to maintain a certain kind of relationship with God.

This brings our discussion of blameful worship into direct contact with the family of philosophical arguments which fall under the heading “the problem of evil”. These arguments seek to show that God does not exist based on the apparent evil in the world. Some of the arguments from seek to show that God and evil are logically incompatible (e.g., Mackie 1955). Others present the existence of evil as evidence against the existence of God (e.g., Rowe 1979, Oppy 2013). Any of these arguments requires a premise about the presence of unjustified evils of the world. (And the arguments only get stronger when we focus on the more specific and horrendous evils). Consider this very basic form of reasoning (cf. Dougherty 2016, sec. 1.1): If there is a God, then there are no specific unjustified specific horrendous evils. But there are unjustified specific horrendous evils. So, God does not exist.

On my view, blameful worship might be the best we can do given our finite nature. We are cognitively limited beings. Given that I have appealed to cognitive limitations, it might sound like my account of blameful worship falls in line with skeptical theist responses to the problem of evil. But actually, skeptical theism seems to undermine the aptness of blameful worship. Skeptical theism is the view that evils do not or should not count as evidence for or against the existence of God. Perhaps our cognitive limitations are so great that we cannot judge whether apparent evils are unjustified (Alston 1996), or maybe we should be skeptical about our ability to judge which states of affairs are possible (van Inwagen 2006). To borrow an analogy from Wykstra (Russell and Wkystra 1988): a child cannot understand the reasons why their parent might allow them to suffer justified pain. In any event, notice that if skeptical theism is true, blameful worship is straightforwardly irrational because the first-order belief involved in my blame, that God has apparently acted with ill will, is unjustified, contrary to the evidence of my ordinary moral senses. I lack the evidence to support it.

Even if skeptical theism is the best epistemological response to the problem of evil, I think it misses something important. Return to the parent-child analogy. There is a sense in which it is inappropriate for a young child to blame their parent—they are not able to fully understand why their parent is allowing them to suffer. But on the other hand, there is a sense in which the child’s blame is understandable, and perhaps even good. One should protest against seemingly unjustified suffering. It is hard to seriously consider the horrendous evils that prompt philosophical reflection on the problem of evil and not feel angry. (At least it is hard for me). In this sense, skeptical theism seems *unsatisfying* from a moral psychological or broadly interpersonal point of view. It doesn’t speak to our desire to understand other persons, including the divine ones. This strikes me as a kind of cost to skeptical theism in comparison to other responses to the problem of evil.

What is unsatisfying, precisely? Recall that when we blame someone, we call fora response on the part of the person blamed. We acknowledge that we may have misunderstood the action and so accept excuses and justifications. Indeed, if we know that God is good, we *must* have misunderstood the apparent action of allowing horrendous evil. Yet in calling God to account, we are signaling to God that we cannot see any apparent right-making features for any specific horrendous evil. When we blame, we want an accounting on the part of the person blamed. If they cannot offer an excuse or justification (and are not exempt from moral responsibility), then we want them to admit guilt and perhaps offer recompense, and so on. To hear an account is interpersonally satisfying. It is a way for two agents to come to a mutual understanding.

Interestingly, on the Strawsonian model of moral responsibility developed above, many theodicies and defenses look like excuses in the form of justifications.[[14]](#footnote-14) By “justifications”, I mean the justifications *internal to our practices of moral responsibility* rather than justifications in an epistemic sense. Consider the sort of justification that shows no wrong act occurred: “If I hadn’t pushed you down, you would have been run over by oncoming traffic!” Compare that to the so-called appeal to soul-making (Hick 1966), the Thomistic idea that suffering is required to make us capable of fully relating to God (Stump 2010), and the thought that evil is required so that virtuous connections among persons can exist (Collins 2013). These defenses against the problem of evil are, from the point of view of a worshipper, suggestive of justifications. They all suggest that contrary to appearances, evils are justified in roughly the same way I would be justified in pushing you out of the way of oncoming traffic. Appeals to the value of free will are slightly different. Free will is *so good* that God is justified in allowing some evils so that we have it. Some of the evils seem not to be traced back to God at all, since they are the products of free choice (e.g., van Inwagen 2006). So, part justification, part excuse.

These kinds of responses to the problem of evil open up the possibility of satisfying accounts of the permission of evils. But there is a problem. They constitute *possible* excuses or justifications. And possible excuses or justifications made by third parties are not particularly satisfying. Even hearing the *actual* excuse or justification from a third party can fail to bring about a sense of closure. They are unsatisfactory because blame is meant to communicate to the putative wrongdoer. When we blame, we are engaging in a form of moral address. We want to hear *from the person* we blame *about* a particular action. Why did you do it? Do you feel guilty? And so on. It can be incredibly frustrating when no answer is forthcoming.

Here then is a twist on the classic problem of evil. Let’s say that you and I both worship God and I have suffered some horrendous evil. Let’s say further that, as someone who worships, part of what I find so horrendous about this horrendous evil is that God has apparently abandoned me. To console me, say you start to rehearse the various lines of response to the problem of evil. That might help somewhat. But what I *really* would want is an accounting from the person who has ostensibly treated me out of ill will. You’ve given me, as it were, evidence of evidence that I am wrong about what happened to me, that I was not really abandoned. But you and I cannot settle the matter of what motivated the act of allowing me to suffer through this evil. (Sounds sort of like Job and his friends, if his friends were not jerks, doesn’t it?) The upshot of this reflection on blameful worship seems to be that the bar for what a successful theodicy or defense looks like is especially high. Calling God to account is, in part, an attempt to resolve our epistemically akratic state. God is on the hook to us in this special way. He seems to, from our point of view, owe us an explanation. To lack this explanation is itself to suffer a kind of evil. Thus, a successful defense or theodicy must have an interpersonal, moral psychological dimension.

Does any extant view attempt to meet this standard? Marilyn McCord Adam’s (1999) universalist solution to the problem of evil features just such an interpersonal dimension. When, on her view, it is revealed to all in heavenly beatitude that their participation in moral horror was in fact astonishingly engulphed by the salvific power of God’s divine plan, agents who suffer and participate in horrendous evils will “not wish them away from their life histories” (Adams 1999: 167). Such revelation surely is the right kind of satisfying accounting. Non-universalist solutions can also feature this interpersonal dimension. Stump (2010)’s Thomistic defense suggests that suffering is the best available means to enable a person to be *willing* to let God close to them. This, in turn, may enable everyone to achieve the deepest desire of their heart, namely, a desire for God, union with whom is the objectively best thing for a person. In fact, this willingness might be a precondition for the kind of communication that would enable a satisfiable accounting. [[15]](#footnote-15) Consider that ordinary blame often goes wrong because the blamer is unwillingto really hear what the blamed person has to say when they give an account of themselves.

Perhaps, then, the ideal worshipper is skeptical, rational, and Pauline: we cannot understand God’s reasons, so are in no position to get upset, and so no backtalk. Maybe this is something to strive for. But in our finite and non-ideal condition, Theresa points the way towards what we might want from a God worthy of worship. Perhaps in that wanting, per Adams and Stump, a worshipper might draw closer to God.

1. **Conclusion**

I have defended the idea that one can blame the God one worships. I have done so in a surprising way, by arguing that blaming God can itself be a form of worship, if a non-paradigmatic (or even irrational) one. I have suggested that the possibility and justification of blameful worship should change how we think about the problem of evil by highlighting our own moral psychological needs.

I will conclude by raising an important objection to my view. One might argue that my view—that there is apt yet possibly irrational blameful worship—counts as a *reductio* of the whole idea of worshipping anything like the God of the Abrahamic faith traditions. My view entails that sometimes the best course of action is to get mad at the thing one worships. And this might just seem plain old bonkers. I am not convinced. Serious religious commitment is complicated. But, to wit, any serious interpersonal commitment is. Sometimes the best course of action in our ordinary lives is to get mad at persons whom we love, admire, and adore (Kauppinen 2018). Nevertheless, I leave the possibility of *reductio* up to the judgment of the reader.

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2. I am offering my own Strawsonian view here, with modifications from the view I defend in Wallace (2019). Several authors have taken inspiration from Strawson, including many cited above: Arpaly and Schroeder (2013), Brink and Nelkin (2013), Heironymi (2004), Mckenna (2012), Scanlon (2008), and Watson (2014), among many others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Strawson distinguishes between person and moral reactive attitudes. This distinction won’t matter here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As a technical term, many refer to these animating forces as *quality of will*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some non-paradigmatic instances of blame are not *directly* communicative with their addressee, e.g., indignation at the dead (cf. McKenna 2012: 175-178). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Macnamara (2015) for a similar argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Although Strawsonian theories of moral responsibility have been historically favored by compatibilists about free will and determinism, a Strawsonian view of responsibility is logically independent of the question about free will and determinism. A libertarian could insist that reactive attitudes are only appropriate in response to libertarian free agents (cf. Wiggins 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thanks to Bob Adams and Houston Smit for discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is a point of interpretive controversy. I take it that, minimally, this sense is a kind of explanatory priority. Some who endorse this basic Strawsonian picture maintain a response-dependent theory of responsibility (e.g., Shoemaker 2017), where the property of being anger-worthy makes something blameworthy. Others maintain response-independent views (e.g., Brink and Nelkin 2015), where free will grounds the aptness of blame. Others still maintain a metaphysical dependence relation with no priority between our practices of holding responsible and our being morally responsible (e.g., McKenna 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Two points. First, I am happy to accept third-party gratitude as a correlate to indignation on behalf of someone else. Second, R. Jay Wallace (1994: 37) denies that gratitude is a reactive attitude, since it does not express a moral demand for treatment that manifests good will (or at least no ill will). As mentioned above, I think the reactive attitudes are manifestations of a more general concern for the attitudes and feelings of others, and only sometimes does this general concern become a more specific demand for good will. So, I am happy to call gratitude a reactive attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Susan Wolf’s rich descriptions of her family life in her (2012) “Blame, Italian Style”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I understand blame to be a cognitive state involving beliefs or judgements, but even if blame is a non-cognitive state, it has fittingness conditions that are subject to rational appraisal (D’Arms and Jacbosen 2003). Abandoning cognitivism will not help us solve the problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thanks to Mark Murphy for this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I take theodicies to provide *actual* conditions in which God could permissibly permits evil and defenses to provide *possible* conditions in which God could allow evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Eleonore Stump for helping me see the importance of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)