

## Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced

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**Abstract:** Much moral critique of theodicies is misplaced. Firstly, much of the critique begs the question because it presupposes something else to be true than what the theodicy claims; had the theodicy been true, it would not be immoral. Secondly, much of the moral critique shows situations where theodicies are inappropriate, and argues that they should never be communicated because of these situations. But if a theory is true, there will be some situations where it is appropriate to communicate it, and others where it is not. This is no basis for a moral dismissal of the theory.

### The moral critique of theodicies

In recent decades, an increasing amount of the critique of theodicies has become moral.<sup>1</sup> By ‘theodicy’ I here mean a theoretical answer to the theoretical problem of the apparent inconsistency between belief in a good and omnipotent God on the one side, and the existence of evil on the other side. By ‘moral critique’ I do not here refer to critique which disagrees with and discusses moral assumptions made in the theodicies, but critique which rejects theodicies because of their bad consequences. This kind of moral critique claims that theodicies create more evil.<sup>2</sup>

For example, many people have criticized Swinburne’s theodicy for being immoral.<sup>3</sup> One common critique of Swinburne (or similar higher-good theodicies) is that he misdeclares what evil is, and presents what is evil as good, something which creates extra suffering for those who already suffer meaningless evils innocently.<sup>4</sup> Some criticize the morality of concrete theodicies only, while others reject all theodicies in general as evil, such as, for example, Kenneth Surin, Terrence Tilley, or Sarah Pinnock.<sup>5</sup>

There are those who reject much of the moral critique as well.<sup>6</sup> One important counter-argument is that because some theodicies are bad, that does not mean

that *no* theodicies should be made, but rather that *better* theodicies should be made.<sup>7</sup> This means that a total rejection of theodicies, as found in Surin, Tilley, and Pinnock, is problematized, but the moral critique of concrete theodicies is much more accepted – although probably more in continental philosophy of religion than in English-speaking philosophy of religion.<sup>8</sup> However, the examples given in the notes do indicate that the moral critique is still widespread.

In the following I will argue that there are two problems which make almost all moral critique of theodicies irrelevant.

### **The moral critique of theodicies begs the question**

A moral judgment is dependent on what is true. This is not meant in an exhaustive way, as if the normative could be deduced from the descriptive, but the descriptive is relevant and important when the normative judgment is to be made. If I see a man hit another man, I may consider it immoral. But if I learn that they are practising for a play, and the hit is a part of the play, then it is not immoral. The moral judgment is dependent on the factual circumstances.

This is very relevant in the question of theodicy. The truth about God's relation to evil is uncertain. When you make a moral judgment on a theodicy, that judgement depends on what is true.<sup>9</sup> But moral critique of theodicies very often presupposes something to be true which is a matter of debate, and that begs the question (*petitio principii*).

Take, for example, the common moral critique against Richard Swinburne and higher-good theodicies concerning the immoral consequences of misdeclaration of evil. According to John E. Thiel, they are 'remarkable denials of innocent suffering's often scandalous proportions and even of its very existence'.<sup>10</sup> Terrence Tilley writes that, 'I have come to see theodicy as a discourse practice which disguises real evils while those evils continue to afflict people. In short, engaging in the discourse practice of theodicy *creates* evils.'<sup>11</sup> These are variants of the critiques pointing out the moral consequences of theodicies misdeclaring what evil is.

But if the theodicy is true, then it does not misdeclare what evil is. If Swinburne is right, then there are no meaningless evils. I do not believe that God allows evil in the way that Swinburne describes it,<sup>12</sup> but then I should argue why his presentation is not true, because that is the question in debate. It is question-begging to presuppose something else to be true, and then on that basis to criticize the moral consequences of Swinburne's view. Those consequences depend on what is true, and that is the topic of debate.

Note that there is much critique which disagrees with the moral assumptions made in theodicies. One can, for example, disagree with Swinburne that the evils of the Holocaust are outweighed by the potential it gave for learning,<sup>13</sup> and discuss

this with counter-arguments. I do find such critique to be relevant and not question-begging. But there is an important difference between disagreeing with and discussing a moral assumption in a theodicy on the one hand, and morally dismissing a theodicy because of its consequences on the other hand. What I am after here is the critique that rejects theodicies because of their bad consequences.

Of course, it is also a problem that it is very difficult to say what the truth is in the question of theodicy. But the point remains the same: one must enter the debate about what is true, even if it is difficult. One cannot just presuppose something else to be true, and then dismiss the theory as immoral on that basis.

### **‘Sometimes wrong’ is not necessarily ‘always wrong’**

Is it not possible, however, that a theodicy, even if true, may have bad consequences? Kenneth Surin and Sarah Pinnock argue that there are situations where communicating a theodicy has bad consequences, and they claim that for that reason it is always wrong to communicate it.<sup>14</sup> Much moral critique of theodicies portrays different situations where sufferers are silenced, pacified, inflicted with extra suffering, and so on.<sup>15</sup> From these examples the theodicy is morally dismissed.

This leads us to the second problem with moral critique of theodicies, which is that even if it is wrong to communicate a true theodicy *sometimes*, it is not thereby *always* wrong to communicate it. There are situations where telling someone something that is true has bad consequences and could rightly be judged as immoral. For example, it may be immoral for me to say that I think you are ugly, even if it is true. Note that this does not mean that I think one should lie, only that not everything that is true should be communicated in every situation. People have different needs in different situations, and it is a matter of practical wisdom to find out what is needed when.

When people suffer and say things like: ‘Why did this happen?’, or ‘Where was God?’, it can be difficult to know whether they are asking a theoretical question in need of a theoretical answer, or are expressing sorrow and complaint in need of comfort. Say, for example, that someone expressing their grief asks why something evil happened, and you interpret it as a theoretical question, to which you give a theoretical theodicy. Then it is easily interpreted as that the one who complains is not allowed to complain or express sorrow. It may be interpreted as: ‘Here is your answer. Stop complaining.’

But maybe the person in sorrow *did* ask a theoretical question, because she had some existential problems concerning whether she could still believe in God. In some cases of sorrow a theoretical answer is what is needed, and it may have the good consequences of bringing comfort and hope. It is a matter of practical wisdom to find out what is asked for and what is needed. This means that even if

there are some situations where a theodicy should not be communicated, that does not make it immoral in general.

Surin and Pinnock disagree, and both approvingly quote Irving Greenberg, who once said that, 'No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.'<sup>16</sup> The reason is that even if it is said in another setting, it may be remembered in a setting of suffering.

This argument claims too much. I can think of nothing to say in the presence of burning children, but I do not think it follows that nothing should ever be said in any situation. Some things are wrong to say in some situations, but right to say in others. The argument of remembering is not a good argument against that, since anything can be remembered in any situation, including things that would then be inappropriate. That cannot stop us from saying things that are right in another situation, otherwise we should all stop talking.

But to mention one final argument against myself: could it not be that some theodicies, even if true, have bad consequences in so many situations that we should dismiss them as immoral? The question can be put more generally: is it morally wrong to communicate something that is true, if it is likely to have many bad consequences?

I believe that there are good ways and bad ways to relate to truth and true propositions. But we cannot judge a proposition in general on its possible consequences. Possible consequences are too vague to base moral judgements on, since the consequences may, in fact, turn out to be something else. What is morally wrong is to use the ideas to do something immoral, but the statements themselves are not immoral; in some settings they are right to communicate, in others they are wrong to communicate.

This means that, even if people misunderstand Swinburne, or if Swinburne's theodicy some or many times has bad consequences not intended by him, his theodicy should still not be deemed immoral if otherwise true. Swinburne may think it is true that a certain response to evil leads to a higher good. If someone then concludes that he need not fight against evil, or think that he is not allowed to protest against concrete evils, these are misunderstandings or misuses, for which I think it is unfair to criticize Swinburne's theodicy. That would as unfair as morally criticizing Darwin's theories for social Darwinism or Einstein's theories for Hiroshima.

Finally, one more distinction should be made, and that is the important difference between searching for truth and communicating truth. Searching for truth is not morally wrong, although communicating a true proposition may be wrong in some situations, but not in others. Searching for the truth about God is what the theoretical question of theodicy is about. This means that a general dismissal of searching for theodicies at all – such as suggested by Tilley<sup>17</sup> – cannot be substantiated.

## Conclusion

Almost all moral critique of concrete theodicies suffers from two problems: it begs the question, and/or it bases a general dismissal on particular instances. The last critique has value in showing situations where a theodicy should not be communicated, but then the conclusion is not to communicate it in such situations, and not that it should never be communicated.

A general dismissal of all theodicies for moral reasons is even less substantiated since it fails to recognize the difference between searching for the truth and communicating the truth. Searching for the truth about God is not immoral.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. Michael Stoeber *Reclaiming Theodicy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), x.
2. Examples, which can reasonably be interpreted as this kind of moral critique, can be found in John Swinton *Raging with Compassion* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 17–28; Jan-Olav Henriksen ‘Ondskap, teologi og religion’, *Arr*, 18 (2006), 81–91, 82; Grace Jantzen *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 259, quoted in Stoeber *Reclaiming Theodicy*, 63; D. Z. Phillips *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 59–60; Sarah Pinnock *Beyond Theodicy* (New York NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 135–138; John E. Thiel *God, Evil and Innocent Suffering* (New York NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 45–46 and 50–51; John K. Roth, in Stephen T. Davis (ed.) *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy: A New Edition* (Louisville KY: W. J. Knox Press, 2001), 17; Lars Fr. H. Svendsen *Ondskapens filosofi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001), 212; John Hick ‘Providence and the problem of evil’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47 (2000), 57–61, 61; Michael P. Levine ‘Swinburne’s heaven: one hell of a place’, *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 519–531, 531; Regina Ammicht-Quinn *Von Lissabon bis Auschwitz. Zum Paradigmawechsel in der Theodizeefrage* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1992), 254 and 257; Terence Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 219; David R. Griffin *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 5 and 19; and Kenneth Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 146–149. See also further examples in the notes below.
3. See for example Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 83–86; Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, 236–238; or Levine ‘Swinburne’s heaven’, 531.
4. All or parts of this critique can be found for example in Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, 235–251; Pinnock *Beyond Theodicy*, 138; Thiel *God, Evil and Innocent Suffering*, 46; William H. Willimon *Sighing for Eden: Sin, Evil, and the Christian Life* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 73; and Wendy Farley *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville KY: W. J. Knox Press, 1990), 69; the last two are both quoted in Dan Stiver ‘The problem of theodicy’, *Review and Expositor*, 93 (1996), 507–517, 509.
5. Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 146–149; Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, 219; and Pinnock *Beyond Theodicy*, 135–138.
6. For example Peter van Inwagen, in W. J. Wainwright (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 189–191.
7. Stiver ‘The problem of theodicy’, 512; Stoeber *Reclaiming Theodicy*, 65.
8. This is my impression from participating at conferences in Europe and the USA. See also Stoeber *Reclaiming Theodicy*, 65; and Ammicht-Quinn *Von Lissabon bis Auschwitz*, 14.
9. I avoid the big debate about truth here, as I believe my point will be the same if you substitute ‘true’ with ‘more or less likely to be true’. I presuppose that a theodicy can be discussed as more or less likely to be true.
10. Thiel *God, Evil and Innocent Suffering*, 46. See also 53.
11. Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, 3 (emphasis in text).
12. See Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

13. *Ibid.*, 151–152.
14. Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 146–149; Pinnock *Beyond Theodicy*, 135–138. This view is shared also by Michael Scott 'The morality of theodicies', *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 1–13, 4.
15. For example Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, part II; or Swinton *Raging with Compassion*, 17–28.
16. Irving Greenberg 'Cloud of smoke, pillar of fire: Judaism, Christianity and modernity after the Holocaust', in Eva Fleischner (ed.) *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York NY, KTAV, 1977), 23. This principle is quoted and accepted in Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 146–149; Pinnock *Beyond Theodicy*, 135–138; and also by Roth, in Davis *Encountering Evil*, 33.
17. Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy*, 219.
18. Thanks are due to T. Fagermoen, A. Eikrem, P. Gravem, J.-O. Henriksen, J. Kaufman, the Editor, and an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful comments on earlier drafts.