

Theodicy

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This article offers an introduction to the problem of theodicy and the arguments that have attempted to cope with it. To this end, it discusses the concepts from the philosophy of religion and theology that have been influential as well as the criticisms of them. Ultimately, the analysis makes the plea for a theology that is sensitive to suffering and that deliberately keeps open the theodicy question.

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1. Term and Definition

How can one reasonably believe in a God who is all-good and omnipotent when the world is so full of wickedness, evil, and suffering? Within the philosophy of religion and theology, the attempt to answer this question is known as “theodicy.” It designates the theoretical task of rationally justifying the belief in an all-good and omnipotent God in light of evil in the world (where the concept of evil from here on out refers both to moral evil and physical suffering). The term itself is composed out of two ancient Greek words, *θεός* (*theos* = God) und *δίκη* (*dike* = justice). Accordingly, theodicy has sometimes been understood as the attempt to justify or vindicate *God Himself* before the tribunal of human reason. Currently, however, theodicy is primarily understood not as a vindication of God but as the justification of *belief* in God.

The term theodicy traces back to the philosopher and polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz ^{GND} (1646–1716) who, in a letter written in 1697, first used it in reference to Rom 3:5. He later included the term in the title of his respective book on the subject: *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (1710). Although the origin of the term is relatively recent, the actual problem that it refers to – the problem of theodicy – is much older. Indicative in this regard is the following well-known and oft-cited argument written by Epicurus ^{GND} (circa 341/342–370/371 CE):

God either wishes to take away evils (lat. mala) and he cannot,
or he can and does not wish to,
or he neither wishes to nor is able,
or he both wishes to and is able.
If he wishes to and is not able, he is feeble, which does not fall in with the notion of god.
If he is able to and does not wish to, he is envious, which is equally foreign to god.
If he neither wishes to nor is able, he is both envious and feeble and therefore not god.
If he both wishes to and is able, which alone is fitting to god, whence, therefore, are there evils, and why does he not remove them? ^[1]

Epicurus was here critiquing the understanding of the gods and the cosmos within the Greek tradition. Nonetheless, this argument came to be read as a classical formulation of the theodicy problem. The reason for this is that they express the basic theodicy-trilemma: 1. *God is all-good*, 2. *God is omnipotent*, 3. *Evil exists*. However, since projects in theodicy reference other properties of God such as perfection, wisdom, omniscience, love, and justice alongside of all-good and omnipotence, it makes more sense to frame the theodicy problem not as a trilemma but as a contradiction – that is, as a fundamental contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil.

2. The Theodicy Problem as Theme in the Philosophy of Religion

Leibniz ^{GND} not only coined the new term “theodicy,” but his *Essais de théodicée* have shaped the task of theodicy ever since.

By deploying the standards of autonomous reason in his enlightened justification of God, Leibniz’s theodicy presupposes the incipient crisis in modernity concerning the concept of God. His argument’s point of departure is the optimistic assumption that an all-good, omnipotent, omniscient God (cf. art. Attributes of God) chose and created the best possible world out of an infinite number of possible worlds. The best possible world (encompassing not only the earth) is a purposefully designed, optimally balanced, and harmoniously cooperating world of the greatest possible diversity and order. In response to the objection that this world could exist without sin and suffering, Leibniz claims the following:

Thus, if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it. ^[2]

Evil is therefore intrinsic to the best possible world. Unlike the tradition before him, Leibniz distinguishes between three types of evil (lat. *malum*): *metaphysical evil*, consisting in the finitude and limited perfection that creation necessarily possesses. This necessary metaphysical evil is in turn that which makes possible moral and physical evil. God does not will the *moral evil* that has its source in human freedom (cf. art. Freedom of Will), but he does permit it. Furthermore, although God also does not directly will *physical evil* (suffering), the latter has its purpose in preventing greater evils, either as punishment or as a means of instruction.

Leibniz’s theodicy was criticized early on and in a variety of ways. A central critique takes aim at his understanding of evil. Is it not the case that – with all three types of evil – Leibniz tends to make light of evil, to manifestly trivialize it? When an earthquake killed thousands and devastated the city of Lisbon in 1755, Leibniz’s theodicy was left tottering as a result. For many at the time, an optimistic justification of God like Leibniz’s was simply no longer believable,

something voiced clearly in Voltaire's ^{GND} criticism of Leibniz in his satirical novel, *Candide ou l'optimisme* (1759). Responses to Leibniz emerged not only from within literary circles but also from philosophical circles. Immanuel Kant ^{GND}, for instance, formulated a critique in an essay that appeared in 1791 under the title *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee* (*On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*). Kant arrived at the following conclusion:

Now the outcome of this juridical process before the forum of philosophy is this: Every previous theodicy has not performed what is promised, namely, the vindication of the moral wisdom of the world-government against the doubts raised against it on the basis of what the experience of the world teaches. ^[3]

According to Kant, a *doctrinal* theodicy as developed by Leibniz inevitably fails. In its place, he proposes an *authentic* theodicy that he finds embodied in the biblical figure of Job. Given the immense suffering that he undergoes, the goodness and omnipotence of God are for Job only “matters of belief” that (theoretical) reason can no longer establish by itself. By way of conclusion, Kant argues that knowledge of God’s goodness can only ever come through practical rather than theoretical reason.

It is not possible here to do justice to the multifaceted contemporary discussions of the theodicy problem. We can, however, mention at least what is by far the most important and widely discussed argument: the so-called free will defense. The roots of the free will defense are found in the early Augustine ^{GND} who attributed the origins of evil to freely committed sin. Within the analytic philosophy of religion, Alvin Plantinga ^{GND} developed this line of reasoning into an important argument. Decisive here is the distinction between a *theodicy* and a *defense*. While *atheodicy* seeks to offer a reason for why God allows evil in the world, a *defense* merely argues that such reasons might exist, without claiming to actually know them. Plantinga argues further that creaturely freedom is one such possible reason. Since freedom is constitutively bound up with the possibility of doing evil, God must also accept evil. Plantinga’s argument does not assume any knowledge regarding whether and how evil is actually instantiated. He seeks only to refute the *logical* (or *deductive*) argument according to which the existence of God and evil are incompatible. Plantinga’s argument shows that the two can conceivably co-exist.

The question now emerges as to whether this theoretical possibility can actually be defended in relation to our world. The *empirical* (or *inductive*) argument opposes the presumption that it can. According to this argument, it is highly or utterly improbable that an all-good and omnipotent God exists in light of the fact of evil in the world. As attempts to refute this argument, *theodicies* have been offered that ascribe a specific aim to the evil that God permits: divine punishment, education, and so forth. Alternatively, it has been argued on the basis of the limitations of human knowledge that, even though we might not be able to offer reasons for why God would permit evil, we nonetheless have to accept that God could have reasons for doing so that we have no knowledge of.

The criticisms of the above-mentioned theodicies (and defenses) in the analytic tradition of the philosophy of religion have been multiple and forceful. Among them are those that focus on specific material aspects of these theodicies (a) and on the legitimacy of theodicy as such (b):

- a. Belonging to the first type of critique is a line of questioning that asks whether such theodicies do not in the end either downplay or misinterpret evil – for example, by suppressing what liberation and political theology calls social evil, such that they help reinforce or amplify the latter – or by tracing all evils (in at times exaggerated ways) directly or indirectly back to moral evil, although not all human or animal suffering can be accounted for in this manner. Additionally, it can be asked whether freedom (however one actually understands it) is in fact so valuable that its existence ultimately outweighs the terrible quantitative and qualitative magnitude of moral and physical evil that humans and animals have suffered and still suffer.
- b. The second form of critique operates at a meta-level: it is directed against the very task of theodicy as such. For example, by criticizing advocates of theodicy for having lost the sense for the tragic dimensions of life, it asks

whether theodicies are themselves morally questionable, indeed, maybe even productive of evil.^[4] Such foundational criticisms can be designated “anti-theodicies.”^[5]

3. The Theodicy Problem as Theme in Theology

It is impossible to make a sharp distinction between theological and philosophical attempts at theodicy. For example, one finds with Augustine ^{GND} attempts to exonerate God based upon a theory of order (evil as a function of a comprehensive cosmic order), a theory of privation (evil as a mere lack of goodness), and a theory of (original) sin (evil as a consequence of sin).^[6] Theologians and philosophers alike later elaborated upon all three theories. In this sense, it is possible to speak about attempts to exonerate God that are *analogous* to theodicy.^[7] In addition, there are also theodicies located at the intersection between theology and the philosophy of religion. Examples include the discussion of the problem of evil within process theology^[8] and the approach developed by Eleonore Stump ^{GND} that offered a new perspective on suffering as a means to deepen and heal our relationship with God.^[9]

Despite the multiple overlaps, the decisive difference between theology and the philosophy of religion should not be ignored: in contrast to theodicies in the philosophy of religion that operate within a theistic framework, theology takes as its starting point an understanding of God that is thoroughly determined by the scripturally-based, self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, this pertains to the attributes of God such as all-goodness and omnipotence. On the other hand, it manifests itself in the understanding of evil: evil is understood primarily as sin and is ultimately already overcome in the cross and resurrection of Jesus (e.g., 2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:14; 2:14f.). In the end, evil will be totally destroyed (see 1 Cor 15:20-28.55). While God and suffering are more closely related within this Christological framework, the enterprise of theodicy – especially after “Auschwitz!” – found little theological support. This is illustrated by two influential ideas:

1. In the second half of the twentieth century, various theological frameworks were developed that no longer attributed the property of omnipotence to God. While Jürgen Moltmann's ^{GND} theology of the cross uses Trinitarian logic (cf. art. Trinity) to counterbalance the utter powerlessness of God on the cross,^[10] the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas ^{GND} advocates for an image of God who, beginning with creation, renounces power and who suffers from and with the world while also forgoing any subsequent intervention in it.^[11] In the work of Dorothee Sölle ^{GND}, the idea of a suffering God goes so far as to make redemption fully dependent upon human action insofar as the redeeming, suffering God has “no other hands than ours.”^[12] These three exemplary frameworks all ascribe to the *Thesis of the suffering God* that, up to a few years ago, was advanced as a type of “new orthodoxy.”^[13] By denying God's omnipotence, what all of these models share in common is the attempt to neutralize the theodicy problem that events in the twentieth century had exacerbated immensely. In this sense, they reject a conventional theodicy. At the same time, however, they represent an attempt to exonerate God analogous to theodicy insofar as they seek to salvage God's goodness.
2. In his famous Section on *God and Nothingness* (*Gott und das Nichtige*) in his KD III/§50, Karl Barth ^{GND} developed a highly idiosyncratic approach to the problem of evil that is neither an Augustinian (i.e., sin-centered) nor an Irenaean model of theodicy, where the latter understands evil in relation to a divine pedagogy that brings about humanity's maturation.^[14] On the one hand, this Barthian approach is characterized by an unusual intensification of the problem of evil that, in a sense, burdens God even further: in contrast to the modern tendency to moralize and trivialize evil, Barth defines “the nothingness” (“*das Nichtige*”) as a web (*Gewebe*) of an eminently destructive negative-power that incorporates sin, physical evil, death, chaos, the devil, and demons. At the same time, Barth claims that this nothingness is “grounded in His (sc. God's) non-willing [*Unwillen*].”^[15] It is therefore primarily “the problem of God Himself”^[16] that God himself suffers on the cross of Jesus Christ – and ultimately overcomes. The tremendous burden that the reality of this nothingness places upon God is simultaneously accompanied by God's self-justification in Jesus Christ that exonerates God and, so to speak,

dissolves the theodicy problem Christologically. This is the case because, according to Barth, the question concerning the reality and function of the nothingness as well as its answer are already given in Jesus Christ. A theodicy is misplaced.

By revoking God's omnipotence, those positions that adhere to the "thesis of the suffering God" undermine the hope in God's final eschatological defeat of evil. Barth's position, however, tends to see the nothingness as already objectively defeated by the cross (and resurrection). Every question for God is thereby already answered, and the evil that remains is, as Christologically defeated, rendered harmless.

From the perspective of a contemporary *theology that is sensitive to suffering*, the theodicies offered within the philosophy of religion have their place: Before the tribunal of atheistic, agnostic, or anti-religious criticisms as well as criticisms internal to the logic of Christianity, they are able to show that belief in God can be logically consistent with the existence of evil. It is therefore not irrational to believe in God—even if the exact content of this belief is not specified further. However, what is viewed with suspicion from this perspective are those theodicies within the philosophy of religion and theology as well as those attempts at exoneration analogous to theodicy that downplay evil or relativize God's power to redeem to such an extent that the hope for a redemption (in and) of the world is ultimately undermined. Unlike such theodicies and theodicy-analogues, a theology sensitive to suffering deliberately keeps the *theodicy question* (*Theodizeefrage*)^[17] open until the advent of the eschaton. At the same time, the theodicy question no longer has the theoretical status of a speculative justification of belief in God. It now operates in the practical domain of faith and is addressed directly to God, in whom it places all of its hope in the face of the unadorned nothingness. The theodicy question so understood corresponds to the form of prayer that is central in the bible, namely, lament. Lament's central question is: "How long, Lord?" (Ps 13:2). For a theology sensitive to suffering, a "theodicy" would be plausible, at best, only in the context of God's eschatological self-justification that occurs in God's redemptive completion of all creation.^[18]

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