

A U S C H W I T Z   &  
F L O W E R S

MY VERY OWN HERETICAL THEODICY

Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

—David Hume

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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The entire theodicy debate rests on the ability of harmonising the triad of the following propositions.

1.      God is wholly good
2.      God is omnipotent.
3.      Evil exists.

The debate exists because of the complication inherent in (3). If (3) is true then God is not wholly good or God is not omnipotent—or both.

The debate is reminiscent on a level with working out “if a tree falls down in the jungle but no-one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” It is an argument based on speculation, conjecture and best guesses. Constructing a theodicy ultimately highlights human inadequacies on several levels simply because it is a spatially constricted, chronologically constrained, retrospectively oriented and ultimately a singularly human perspective on the problem of pain and suffering. At best it illustrates the limits of human cognition, but let us persevere.

At first glance the discussion appears to centre around semantic issues i.e. whatever assumptions are being made about the nature of ‘goodness’, ‘omnipotence’ and ‘evil.’ Definitions are critical. God is good in the sense that we cannot fault him; God is omnipotent in the sense that there is nothing he cannot do within the constraint of logical possibility<sup>1</sup>; Evil is the antithesis of good in that we find fault in our existence, a seemingly vague definition but the necessary starting point for clarification. There are two forms of evil that we need to consider: Moral evil, inflicted by human free choice, and Natural evil expressed through natural disaster and disease.

The triad is intrinsically dissonant as constructing a logically coherent theodicy inevitably ends up with compromising one of the three propositions—any two may resonate, but not three. The problem, therefore, is creating a harmony between all three. If God is not good then evil is in his nature and his

omnipotence need not interfere. If God is not all powerful, then he cannot interfere and evil's existence is sustained. On these two assumptions, logically consistent theodicies can be constructed but they are not orthodox.

It is my view that the compromise must be made in the definition of evil, simply because we cannot compromise the purity of God's goodness and God's omnipotence on the basis of our limited comprehension of the extent of either of those qualities. From within our finite limitations we cannot develop conclusive opinions about infinite attributes. However, we are inescapably bound by subjectivity when considering evil, thus making its definition far more fluid. As Millard J Erickson helpfully confirms "we are inclined to define good by whatever is pleasant to us at the present and evil with what is personally unpleasant, uncomfortable, or disturbing."<sup>2</sup> In other words, we qualify the moral value of an event from how it affects us.<sup>3</sup> Of the three propositions the definition of evil is the only one that is defined largely by our subjective appraisal. It seems natural and sensible that if any of our definitions and assumptions needed modification, our definition of evil would be the one.

There are few who would disagree that the Holocaust in World War II is probably the quintessential example of moral evil in human history. It is the event that lurks in the back of most social consciences as being the horizon of our negative potential—we know (or perhaps we would like to think) we could go further. The event is one of the contemporary driving forces for defining a theodicy. If God is really as concerned with humanity as he says he is, why didn't he interfere?

Auschwitz is what prompted the very probing statement:

"No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."<sup>4</sup>

In light of this it seems trite to say that "we will never comprehend the true magnitude of good that came out of the Auschwitz event" as the subjective reality of 6 million Jews suffering is not inaccessible to anyone who was not there. Philosophical discussions about 10,000 people being put through a super-grinder every day for over a four year period *are* dangerously trite—but they are, in spite of the risks, absolutely necessary.

So we have to ask "by which moral standard is Auschwitz judged as evil?" It cannot be a purely Biblical one where the 'unjust' relocation of the inhabitants of Canaan was specifically commanded by God<sup>5</sup>, or 42 children are slaughtered by a she-bear for laughing at a prophet<sup>6</sup> (however one justifies it with hermeneutical gymnastics). Maybe it is judged by a moral code developed

from reaction to screams of the tortured, conjured in the imaginations of desperately sensitive, late twentieth century onlookers. And yet the horror of the Holocaust is strangely appalling to a free-market society sustained feeding on the labour of a billion impoverished and unnamed people. Caught in the irony of writing an essay on a computer probably manufactured in a sweatshop, or reading this essay on a chair covered in cloth manufactured likewise, who says what is evil? Our inability to know that which we cannot see compels us often to make irrational leaps of faith. Who are we to judge? But if we don't at least try to understand, we fail on all counts.

So, could there be a greater civil good come out of the Holocaust? Calling the question 'trite' is not an answer; a simple 'yes', is not easily sustained and a simple 'no' is too horrific to accept.

What makes something evil? Is it scale? For America, Hiroshima was a righteous act, serving a greater 'good' purpose. For the perpetrators of the World Trade Centre attacks, September 11 was a righteous act serving a greater 'good' purpose. The common thread in both of these events are the self-interests of the oppressor and the oppressed each accusing the other of being more evil. Even Auschwitz was considered righteous by a certain ideology.

But no amount of relativism can actually dilute (and nor should it) the reality that on one almost universal scale Auschwitz was horror. If we follow Roth's definition of evil as being that which wastes life<sup>7</sup> then we see the Holocaust is evil to at least the degree of 4 million. We cannot ignore Hegel's observation that history is "the slaughter bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed."<sup>8</sup> He is chillingly accurate.

"The cost of evil is just too great" cry many theodicians.<sup>9</sup> They conclude that at the very least any eschatological redemption of the cost of evil seems from this side of the eschaton somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory—God's 'Economy of Good' is bankrupt.<sup>10</sup> How can God make up for Auschwitz even in ultimate redemption? Any postulate of what 'greater good' came from that experience, and any speculation as to how many Holocausts it has stopped because of the ensuing heightened moral conscience of the West, trivialises the intensity of the evil that took place. Speculative redemption is a poor ointment for the scars of sorrow.

For some, God has been put on trial and found guilty. John Roth argues that this view of God need not destroy faith and that embracing the tension in this flawed God is essential to maintaining a moral conscience.

“It is important to maintain the tension between the ‘God is love . . . but not enough. God is light . . .but not enough’, at least not for now. Smoke and shadow have authority along with Word made flesh or written. . . . Do not let the tension go. To let it go invites harmony that flirts with indifference.”<sup>11</sup>

His tension lies between experience and transcendence, and ultimately disengages a distant and flaccid God from our experience. The theodical triad is harmonised through disempowering God for the time being. We need not go to that extreme.

Another position is based upon the Irenaean idea of this world being a kind of ‘boot camp’ for moral development. In the contemporary version, evolution becomes a theological teacher.

From this standpoint, John Hick argues that any theodicy that is developed from the traditional premise of ‘The Fall’ is flawed because its starting point is myth. And, because it is myth, it cannot be used as the control case for a perfect moral environment. He questions the value of the good that humanity would feel within an environment that knows no suffering and suggests that an evolving world is the only appropriate incubator for moral development. Humanity is not ‘created’, as such, and so is on a journey to a more valuable acquired goodness than if they were created intrinsically good with the potential to fall. It is more natural to progress toward perfection, than away from it. If it is the latter, why did God create us without all the virtue necessary to make pure decisions? He states:

“If, then, God’s purpose was to create finite persons embodying the most valuable kind of moral goodness, he would have to create them, not as already perfect beings but rather as imperfect creatures who can then attain to the more valuable kind of goodness through their own free choices as in the course of their personal and social history, new responses prompt new insights, opening up new moral possibilities, and providing a milieu in which the most valuable kind of moral nature can be developed.”<sup>12</sup>

So a greater good is achieved through suffering and evil because we grasp a more valuable moral goodness, thereby rendering us morally more mature.<sup>13</sup> In effect compensation is being realised through our existence. But what if someone’s life is abruptly cut short, how have they fulfilled their requirements for moral maturity? Hick argues that the eschaton will redeem their moral deficiencies and will make them whole—and this applies to everyone. This theodicy harmonises the triad but at the expense of the goodness of God and also introduces a problematic universalist eschatology if there is going to be total compensation for suffering.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to Hick, I consider it helpful to discuss the problem of evil from the lessons of ‘The Fall’ in Genesis because it brings the discussion back to a very uncomplicated and pure scenario. From here we can look at a single choice to do either good or evil within a controlled environment. This is actually the essence of the free will defence.<sup>15</sup>

Even without the Tree of the Knowledge, Adam and Eve still had an abundance of choices they could make inasmuch as they could choose to eat a pear or an apple for instance<sup>16</sup>. They would have had the same choices that all other animals had, instinctive and whimsical but not consciously destinator. These were not moral choices.<sup>17</sup>

But God instituted a very simple moral code in this paradise: “Don’t eat from that tree there.” Having this one proviso on their living in the Garden of Eden, enabled the choices of Adam and Eve to have a very simple moral component to them. Without prohibition, the parameters of morality could not be defined and, upon their reflection on this restriction, Adam and Eve could begin to comprehend the superiority of God. The prohibition gave them the ability to choose their moral destiny toward or away from God. Free will is demonstrated in that Adam and Eve chose of their own volition to eat the fruit, they are solely responsible for that *morally significant*<sup>18</sup> choice. But the concern is not that they brought evil into the world, it is that they now had first hand knowledge of it.<sup>19</sup> This is the knowledge of Good and Evil.

From this event many take that Natural Evil began to occur as a result of the fall.<sup>20</sup> This is speculative as there is nothing in Genesis (or anywhere else in scripture) to imply this. The implication that Natural Evil is a direct result of free choice<sup>21</sup> is not very compelling and nor is it necessary if, as some presuppose, the Garden of Eden is mythical. But the problem of Natural Evil is very real as John Stuart Mill states:

Everything . . . which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by natural agents.<sup>22</sup>

It is also difficult to accept the conclusion that the Natural Evils are actually a product of an evil agents’ influence in the world because this too is speculation.<sup>23</sup> It seems to me that Natural Evil must be viewed from an eschatological vantage point. It is an interesting twist of faith, that weeping takes place at Christian funerals. “She died so young . . .”, implies that life on earth is better than where she is now. I would suggest that this expresses a limited faith in ultimate redemption and hope for us in the future. I suggest that Adam and Eve had a perfect eschatology i.e. there is no reason to believe that they would not have gone to Heaven if they drowned. In light of their

understanding of death, they would merely see this as a *transition* to another existence. Where is the evil in that?

I accept that this is speculative as well, but it works and I think it gives a much sounder Christian basis for approaching natural disasters and disease.<sup>24</sup>

## C O N C L U S I O N

Given the scope of the different theodicy structures, it is clear that the triad is not easily resolved. It is true that the amount of evil that has taken place over history is unbelievably huge. We have very little concept of how this could at all be a part of the world that a morally good God would create for beings he supposedly loves. The horror of Auschwitz is immense, but our horror is not an argument or justification for diminishing the intrinsic nature of God.

Ultimately (and tentatively—I would not be burned at the stake over this), I accept a modified Free Will defence. That we do have free will and that is expressed in its most extreme form with the choice to do good or evil. Evil is fluidly defined and I will accept that I cannot really know whether Hiroshima was good or bad. I have no concept of the economy of God save for the eschatological redemption in which I have faith. I believe that ultimately it will all be alright in the end.

The idea of constructing a theodicy is not to interpret the nature God into our human moral constraints, but to constrain our human moral interpretations in light of the nature of God. In other words, in faith, maybe things actually aren't that bad after all. Even though saying that to burning children is a reprehensible thought, I can come to no other conclusion. I do not (and cannot) know the economy of God, but I know that this world does appear more negative than positive.

Yes, Auschwitz is horrific, but a field of 4 million flowers is still beautiful.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. He cannot make a square circle.

<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1983), 425

<sup>3</sup> I think it is dangerous to think that when God said of creation that “it was very good” (Genesis 1.31) that we understand fully what He meant.

<sup>4</sup> Irvin Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust*. Cited by John Roth, *A Theodicy of Protest—an essay in the reader* edited by Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 30

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 33:50-56

<sup>6</sup> 2 Kings 2.23–24

<sup>7</sup> John Roth, *A theodicy of Protest*, 8

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel. *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1953). 27

<sup>9</sup> Roth, 10

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Davis, *Free Will and Evil—an essay from the reader Encountering Evil* 78

<sup>11</sup> Roth, 31

<sup>12</sup> John Hick, *An Irenaean Theodicy—an essay from the reader Encountering Evil*, 44

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>15</sup> It is often assumed that death would not have been an issue before the fall but it is simply inconceivable that Adam and Eve could walk around a garden without standing on some bug somewhere. Furthermore, what we call disaster may actually have been the natural course of life. It is not necessary to correlate paradise with the absence of pain or death.

<sup>16</sup> Why did God not create Eve with a bias to do the right thing? It could be argued that he did (Genesis 3.2) where she is recalling accurately the instruction of God as her first response. But, I cannot help but feel that the discussion is somewhat truncated here. We really do not have any idea as to how many hours of deliberation are represented in each full stop. But somehow obedience gave way to a desire to be wise—to be like God. C. S. Lewis brilliant narrates this episode in *Voyage to Venus*

<sup>17</sup> One of Antony Flew's objections cited by John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 59

<sup>18</sup> Plantinga, 30

<sup>19</sup> Traditionally it is held that Satan fell from heaven before creation, so evil was present in the primeval chaos. It is interesting to note that evil just happens upon the scene in the story with the temptation by the snake. Von Rad is quick to point out that the snake is of secondary importance here (Von Rad, *Genesis*), but the primary thrust of the narrative is to externalise evil from Eve

<sup>20</sup> Rick Rood, *The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil?*, (Downloaded from Leadership University, <http://www.leaderu.com>, downloaded, 27 April, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> Even given Paul's comments in Romans 8.18–22 which are not scientific by any means.

<sup>22</sup> Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 145

<sup>23</sup> Even Plantinga admits that this is not actually what Free Will Defence requires to be true, it just has to be a possibility. That is not helpful at all. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 58

<sup>24</sup> I know that I have no support for this anywhere from any of my reading (which surprises me), but I can't see too many problems with this line of thought because of my views on The Fall.