COHERENTISM OF THEODICY: A MORAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract

That theodicy is coherent means that there is a version of theodicy that involves no logical impossibilities, both defined ultimately in terms of not leading to contradiction. Scholars argue that some versions of theodicy enjoying popularity among Christian theistic philosophers, are indeed incoherent. This paper is a descriptive examination of the coherency of theodicy using moral paradigm. It argued therefore, that given that the terms used by some theodicists are not coherent, there follows a *prima facie* case for the coherence of omnipresence, so that the burden of proof now shifts to the objectors. This paper concluded that theodicy based on amoral paradigms is morally incoherent.

Keywords: Theodicy, Coherentism, Moral, Critique

Introduction

The philosophical study of religious themes and concepts, as well as the broader philosophical task of reflecting on religious matters such as the nature of religion, alternative concepts of God or ultimate reality, and the religious significance of general features of the cosmos and religious historical events, is known as philosophy of religion (PoR).One contentious theme found in the domain of PoR is "Theodicy". Recent discussion on theodicy has led some scholars to propose that the term "theodicy" should be used in a broader way, such that theodicy will be any resolution to the evil dilemma from the point of view of Judeo-Christian religious belief system (Pinnock, 2002). The arguments on the coherence or incoherence of theodicy are complex, and are intricately argued many famous philosophers of religion.

This wider usage is suggested because of the variety of approaches now in evidence writings on theodicy. Such variety being not just stylistic, but reflecting deeper methodological and substantive differences. But even so, and granting that theodicy now takes in writers from the process, existentialist, and analytical traditions of philosophy, and from a wide range of theological commitments which brings such various thinkers together in debate, still has the background assumption that someone needs to be convinced one way or the other about God in the face of the fact of evil in the world.

One cannot assume, therefore, ahead of determining the coherence of the beliefs concerning the righteousness or justice of God, that those beliefs can be understood. Indeed, attempting to describe those beliefs may itself show they cannot be described, because they are incoherent in themselves. Traditional theodicy has, of course, seen itself as concerned in varying ways with settling a question of truth. The debate has been at bottom about not just whether it is possible that belief in God could be a true belief in the light of the fact of evil, but whether it is plausible. This article is set within the broader conception of what might constitute a valid form of theodical writing, but it sets on one side as an interest and intention the assumption that theodicy is an argument between believers and unbelievers in which each is seeking to defend his position or convince the other on one hand, and whether theodicy is plausible or implausible on the other hand.

Meaning and Basic Assumptions of Theodicy

Leibniz created the term theodicy from the Greek words *theos* (God) and dike (righteousness or justice) (Marty & Taliaferro, 2010; Ottuh, 2014). Theodicy, in its most basic definition, is an attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil in a good world. Theodicy's core assumptions are that God is all good, all powerful, and all knowing; the universe was created by God and lives in a contingent connection to God; and yet, evil still remains in the world. Clearly, these assumptions pose a difficult situation.

It begins, for example, with the belief that a being as powerful as God would desire to eradicate evil yet did not. If God is all good but not all powerful or all aware, he may not be able to intervene in every issue that affects the world. Similarly, if God is all-powerful and all-knowing but not all-good, then he may have a dark side (Oord, 2015).If God is all of these things, yet the universe does not exist in a contingent

relationship, then God has little to do with evil, despite the fact that his design can be criticized.

However, there are multiple dimensions to this difficulty. The first point of contention is that God is a personal being, albeit not all theodicists agree. Similarly, the second argument requires that God interacts, or at least has interacted, with the world, and that thus evil may be recognized in the universe, given that evil can be rendered comprehensible and therefore debated. According to Baird (2011), theodicists typically address one of four audiences: (1) atheists (atheodicists) who reject the existence of God or charge believers in God with being irrational because the above is illogical; (2) 'moral' atheists who find the notion of God repugnant because of the amount of evil and suffering; (3) theists who are troubled by the above; and (4) theists who are troubled by the above.

This distinction is critical to remember since theodicts and more general reflections and testimony on the problem of evil do not always address the same social and historical settings. Additional resources including the Trinity, particularly Christ, can and do play a role in creating a theodicy within the Christian form of monotheism (Calder, 2016). It should also be noted that there are further issues of contention among theists, particularly concerning the nature of God and free choice. Often, the theist is asking questions about theodicy to better understand God and the call to Christian conversion, while a debate between theists and atheists may be more concerned with the very tenability of God as a being considering the existence of evil in the good world he has created.

According to Adams and Adams (1990), the theist adopts an aporetic approach to the problem, sifting through the problems and delving deeper into the faith's resources. For atheists, the question of why such horrors exist at all is a challenge to God or a challenge to self. Many objections and criticisms are met during the thorough exploration of the problem of evil and its proposed remedies. Notable among these objections is the notion of impermissibility (incoherence) and piousness (coherence) of theodicy which this paper is set to discuss.

Historically, theodicy is a centuries old set of questions. Historical scholarship often looks at theodicy as a history of ideas or social ideologies (Ko, 2014). The history of the issue is important because the socio-political and religious contexts that gave rise to reflection on the problem of evil differ from era to era. While various thinkers' reflections may be said to be semi-commensurable or, at least, analogous, one cannot set aside a historical sense of where various insights come from. The

question is whether enough commensurability exists across periods and thinkers to say that a tradition exists or that later theodicists are justified in borrowing earlier ideas. Some have even suggested that theodicy is a contemporary issue, that earlier formulations, though concerned with evil, are not aiming to defend God, but rather arguing for a particular God (Marion, 2002).

The Problem of Evil as the Subject of Theodicy

If there is a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and completely good, why is there evil? In both Western and Eastern philosophy, the issue of evil is the most extensively discussed objection to theism (Neiman, 2015). There are many variations of the problem: the deductive or logical version, which asserts that the existence of any evil at all (regardless of its role in producing good) s in conflict with God's existence; and the probabilistic version, which asserts that given the quantity and severity of evil that actually exists, God's existence is improbable (Watson, 2019). The deductive problem is currently less commonly debated because many (but not all) philosophers acknowledge that a thoroughly good being might allow or inflict some harm under certain morally compelling conditions (such as injecting a sick person to cure him or her of the ailment). More intense debate concerns the likelihood that there is a completely good God given the vast total amount of evil in the universe. Evil's evidential arguments may be deductive or inductive arguments but they include some attempt to show that some known fact about evil bears a negative evidence relation to theism whether or not it is logically impossible to reconcile with theism (Svendsen & Pierce, 2010). Consider human and animal suffering caused by death, predation, birth defects, ravaging diseases, virtually unchecked human wickedness, torture, rape, oppression, and natural disasters. Consider how often those who suffer are innocent.

Some philosophers and theologians reject that God is all-powerful and all-knowing in the face of the dilemma of evil. This, was J. S. Mill's position, and panentheism theologians today are also questioning traditional approaches to Divine power (Hall, 2003). According to panentheism, God is immanent in the world, suffering with the oppressed and working to bring good out of evil, although in spite of God's efforts, evil will invariably mar the created order. Another response is to think of God as being very different from a moral agent. Brian Davies and others have contended that what it means for God to be good is different from what it means for an agent to be morally good (Davis, 2001; Murphy, 2017). A different, more

substantial strategy is to deny the existence of evil, but it is difficult to reconcile traditional monotheism with moral skepticism. Also, insofar as we believe there to be a God worthy of worship and a fitting object of human love, the appeal to moral skepticism will carry little weight.

The idea that evil is a privation or twisting of the good may have some currency in thinking through the problem of evil, but it is difficult to see how it alone could go very far to vindicate belief in God's goodness. Incidentally, it is to be noted that the theory of evil as *privatio boni* is not an "impractical" construct with no social relevance. It can be a mobilizing factor moving victims of evil toward Utopia through the historical practice of liberation if understood not negatively but positively as a reminder of something that should not be (Neiman, 2002). Searing pain and endless suffering seem altogether real even if they are analyzed as being philosophically parasitic on something valuable. With their abundant insistence on the actuality of evil, the three monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths offer little justification to try to defuse the problem of evil this way. Indeed, traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are so dedicated to the presence of evil that rejecting evil would be grounds for rejecting these religious traditions (Tomberlin, 2012; Osborn, 2010).What would be the point of the Judaic teaching about the Exodus (The people of Israel were set free from slavery by God), or the Christian teaching about the incarnation (Christ revealing God as love and releasing a Divine power that will, in the end, conquer death), or the Islamic teaching of Mohammed (the holy prophet of Allah, whom is all-just and all-merciful) if slavery, hate, death, and injustice did not exist?

The scale of the difficulty one assigns to the issue of evil for theism will be influenced by one's philosophical convictions in other domains, particularly ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. If one believes in ethics, there should be no avoidable suffering for whatever reason, regardless of source or effect, the problem of evil will conflict with one's belief in traditional theism. Furthermore, if one believes that any solution to the problem of evil should be obvious to all people, conventional theism is jeopardized, because the "solution" is clearly not obvious to all.

The debate has generally focused on the propriety of taking a middle ground: a theory of values that would keep a clear judgment of the cosmos' fundamental evil while also comprehending how this might be reconciled with the existence of an all-powerful, perfectly good Creator (Watson, 2019). Could there be a rationale for God to allow cosmic calamities? If a person does not believe in free will, for example, no

argument to the positive value of free will and its function in bringing about good as a counterbalance to its function in bringing about evil will sway him or her.

There is a difference between a defense and a theodicy in theistic approaches to the issue of evil. A defense aims to show that rational belief in God is still possible, and that the existence of evil does not render God's existence implausible (Peckham, 2018). Some have chosen the defense tactic, stating that, despite our inability to comprehend how these two beliefs are compatible, we are in a position to rationally believe in the presence of evil and in a perfectly good God who hates this evil. A theodicy, on the other hand, is more ambitious and is usually part of a larger enterprise, arguing that it is rational to believe in God based on both the good and the obvious evil of the cosmos (Van der Ven, 1989). The goal of a theodicy is to create an overarching framework within which to explain at least roughly how the evil that occurs is part of an overall good, such as the conquering of evil, which is a great good in and of itself.In practice, a defense and a theodicy frequently appeal to similar considerations, the first of which is what many refer to as the "Larger Good Defense" - the idea that evil can be viewed as either a necessary companion to achieving greater goods or an intrinsic element of these goods (Swinburne, 2016). Thus, it is claimed in a form known as the Free Will Defense that free creature who are capable of caring for one another and whose welfare is dependent on one another's freely decided activity constitute a good. It is suggested that in order for this good to be realized, there must be a genuine potential of people injuring each other (Swinburne, 2016). The free will defense is sometimes employed narrowly to embrace just evil that occurs as a result of human action, whether direct or indirect. However, those offering a defense rather than a theodicy have speculatively extended it to embrace other evils that could be caused by supernatural powers other than God. According to the Greater Good argument, evil provides an opportunity to fulfill great qualities such as heroism and justice quest.

Some have used the claim that this is not the finest possible world to make an argument about the problem of evil. If there were a supreme, all-powerful God, he would undoubtedly create the best possible world. There is no supreme, maximally perfect God because this is not the best possible creation. Many now respond, as Adams (1999) did, that the concept of the best possible world, like the highest possible number, is incoherent. A higher world can be envisaged for any planet that can be envisioned with such happiness, goodness, morality, and so on. Is it feasible to

believe in the existence of a supreme, maximally wonderful creature if the concept of the best possible world is incoherent? On the contrary, it has been maintained that Divine excellences have upper bounds or maxima that are not quantifiable in a serial manner.

Defending Theodicy's Coherentism

Coherentism is an epistemic justification theory. It implies that a belief can only be justified if it is part of a larger system of beliefs. The beliefs that make up a system of beliefs must "cohere" with one another in order for the system to be coherent. Traditional writing on theodicy has taken a variety of approaches to the problem of proving God to the unbelieving. Some have argued that such theodicy is: not possible at all, as a matter of fact not possible at all, as a matter of logic possible in principle, but not possible in fact possible in principle, and in fact possible in principle, and in fact possible in principle, and in fact possible in principle, and in fact possible in principle, and in fact possible in principle, but not desirable not possible in principle, but possible in fact. When these techniques strive to vindicate God, they usually start with the assumption that the way things happen in the world is causally tied to God's will, either directly or indirectly, and that inferences can be drawn from the world to God. In response to these arguments, it is claimed that religious belief does not flow from the world to God, but rather from God to the world, and even then, not through inference. This is not to say that all cultures approach evil in the same manner.

According to Rorty (2001), evil and its relationship to the world has been viewed in the West in a variety of ways, including:

i. Neoplatonic: Evil is defined as the denial or negation of the good or being, such that evil is defined as evil in opposition to the greater good.

ii. Theodicy and coherence: Evil can be viewed as a part of or in relation to God's grander designs for the universe.

iii. Manichaeism: In human history, good and evil are equal warring powers expressing their opposition.

iv. Pious rationalism: Because human reason is incapable of comprehending evil, reason must postulate the existence of a God in order to explain human morality.

v. Pious fideism: Because human reason cannot comprehend evil, faith in God is essential.

vi. Pessimism: While evil exists, the world does not make sense and cannot be comprehended.

vii. Non-existent: Evil does not exist in and of itself; rather, people project their own subjective displeasure onto events and behaviours.

Incoherence of Theodicy: A Moral Critique

When the lived reality of suffering collides with two sets of ideas typically linked with ethical monotheism, the dilemma of theodicy arises. The concept that God is completely benevolent and kind is one of them. The other is the idea that he is all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing, and that he is in charge of all occurrences in history (omniscient). When these diverse notions are joined with other implicit beliefs, such as the notion that a good being would want to minimize suffering to the extent that he is able, these many notions appear to be contradictory. They appear to form a logical "trilemma," in the sense that while any two of these sets of beliefs can be accepted, adding the third makes the entire system logically incoherent. As a result, it appears that God is all-powerful and all-good, but not all-powerful and all-good at the same time. Similarly, suffering can be acknowledged alongside God's benevolence, but insisting on God's omnipotence seem to make the entire set of beliefs unworkable. The struggle to refute the conclusion that such a logical trilemma exists might be thought of as theodicy. Its goal is to demonstrate that traditional assertions about God's might and goodness can coexist with pain. That instance, although some scholars regard theodicy as logical, others regard it as illogical. Is it justifiable for humans to evaluate God by human standards?

Leibniz's theodicy, and equally with that of Bayle, is an example of epistemology "exercising its rights" (Leibniz, 1988 p.134). Consequently, by attaching theodicy to the controversial rationalist doctrine, the justice of God is made to turn on the success of that doctrine. That procedure does not seem to be very satisfactory, for then only the rationalist could claim to be able to defend God's justice. Should believers become rationalists to know God is good? There is a different point to be made also, and it concerns the temporal priority of the epistemological doctrine over the theodicy. Leibniz, linking together "truths" whereto the human mind could attain naturally without being aided by the light of faith, developed his notion of pre-established harmony, a notion which under-girds his theodicy (Wykstra, 1984). Should theodicy, in any case, be attached to the success of a free-will doctrine at all? Freewill in itself is a problematic notion in religion and philosophy, and indeed rejected by some major

thinkers in the Christian tradition. Should not theodicy be based on what is essential and irremovable from Christian belief? But moving on to Hick's other points, neither does there seem to be any need for evil as a necessary condition of our attaching religious significance to life-experiences, or indeed of our relating to God on the basis of personality (Hick, 1978).

Only in the case of religious ambiguity does evil seem to be required in relation to his thesis. The world as we know it, taken as a whole, does present in its good and evil faces a genuine religious ambiguity. But as this ambiguity is susceptible of other explanations, Hick's thesis can only remain a candidate for theodicy. In assessing this candidate, one is left finally, as with Leibniz, with the question whether the justice of God depends on our adopting a particular epistemological thesis. Optimism and pessimism enter in a substantial way into theodical writing. The point is simple to state, but its ramifications are complex. The issue concerns how a theodicists read the evidence of the way the world is, and also the degree of seriousness with which he treats the reality of evil. Some theodicists stress the evil in the world, and the content of theodicy concerns evil and God.

In protest a very few theodicists talk of the problem of good for the atheist. Others stress the harmony of the world, and Leibniz' notion of this world as the "best possible world" is sometimes referred to as Leibnizian optimism (Leibniz, 1988). Cowburn (cited in Boyd, 2001) is so impressed by these different ways of reading the evidence that he organizes around this tension, and proposes as his thesis to incorporate both sides of the tension in juxtaposition, preferring to be optimistic about physical evil, and pessimistic about sin. It is the position of this paper, that this factor does not enter into theodicy as the activity of descriptive understanding, for the descriptive process is neither optimistic nor pessimistic on the part of the theodicists.

Some of the moral arguments against the coherence of theodicy are as follows:

1. Theodicy is ipso facto irreligious

Theodicy *is ipso facto*("by the very fact itself") meaning that theodicy is indifferent to or absence of religion. One of those people who consider theodicy as impious is John Hick who puts his objection this way: "It is *ipso facto* irreligious for man to judge God" (Hick, 1978 p.64).

2. God cannot be judged by human standards

Fitzpatrick (1981), in his contribution to the idea of impious or pious of theodicy, objected to theodicy because humans lacked the capability of justifying God by their human standards. Fitzpatrick objected further by saying that the extent of human knowledge is not anywhere impressive. Fitzpatrick further states that, the problem of evil, or any other issues that pertain to God's providence should be treated with great caution because we are dealing with a Being that transcends the created order and human knowledge. According to Fitzpatrick, any investigations about God are subject to human limitations and inadequacies. Other reasons he claimed why theodicy is incoherent are as follows:

i. That the existence of sin which is basic to all forms of evil is essentially irrational and contra-rational, as such, the idea of theodicy is absolutely devoid of intelligible grounds and motives. That human in his sinful nature cannot, neither has he the moral ground to judge God who is holy and righteous;

ii. That the idea of theodicy is an incomprehensible lapse from reason, as from adherence to the good, and so, it cannot be rationalized or theodicized in any form by human;

iii. That theodicy is seen as an idea that is misleading, since a proposed understanding of it can only lead one to the misunderstanding of it.

3. Theodicy has a predetermined goal

Some contend that theodicy's predetermined objective tarnishes any potential for it to be a serious philosophical study (Fitzpatrick, 1981). This is because an intellectual pursuit with a predetermined purpose and predetermined results cannot be considered systematic, scientific, or rational in any conceivable way. Should one respect an investigation whose objective is to show, by all means necessary, that a certain fact that is fairly doubted is true? The theodicy is prone to confirmation bias if it proceeds from the proposition to be demonstrated to locate a demonstration of that proposition.

4. Theodicy is immoral

One argument made against theodicy is that if theodicy were true, it would render morality meaningless. If theodicy is accurate, then all evil events, including human actions, can be explained as being authorized or influenced by God in some way. As a result, even for a murderer, there can be no such thing as "bad" values. Indeed, the "moral argument from evil" is based on this.

5. Morally, theodicy is tough.

Ivan strongly opposed the coherency or legitimacy of theodicy in his work The Brothers Karamazov (quoted in Clarke, 1993) by pointing out a number of incidents of extreme and excessive cruelty in the world. Ivan believes in God's existence, purpose, and wisdom, as well as the eternal harmony that God intends to bring about in the end. However, he is unable to face the fact that there is far too much brutality and evil in the world.

6. Theodicy is anti-theism

Yoder's authored unfinished article "Trinity Versus Theodicy: Hebraic Realism and the Temptation to Judge God" (1996) can be viewed as a more nuanced variant of the ad-hominem attack on the theodicy problem. He claims that "if God be God," theodicy is a contradiction and idolatry. Yoder is not opposed to attempts to reconcile the existence of God with the reality of evil; rather, he is opposed to one solution to the problem in particular. There are ways in which forms of discourse in the mode of theodicy may have a purpose, subject to the discipline of a larger environment, he does not dispute. Yoder is preoccupied with the subject of evil, particularly the evil of violence and conflict, and how people respond to it. Yoder's argument is against commonplace 'theodicy,' that is, theodicy as a judgment or defense of God. Yoder's argument appears to be, strictly speaking, against theodicy. While Yoder recognizes this as a valid manner of discourse in theodicy, he believes it is the antithesis of theodicy.

In general, theodicy, if it is an evil, is at least a necessary or lesser evil, because it performs a critical role that defense cannot, namely, pointing out what should not be said about God and evil. Because defense is methodologically limited to demonstrating the non-incoherence between belief in God and divine omnipotence and goodness on the one hand and the existence of evil on the other, it cannot explain why evil is not an independent being at war with God to those who do not accept the Christian faith, such as Zoroastrians and modern Manichaeans, unless it invokes the theodical notions. Swinburne (2016) defines omnipresence as God's ability to cause effects at any location through a basic action, that is, an action that is not the result of any prior action, such as my raising my arm, just like that and God's direct knowledge of what is going on everywhere, rather than through a causal chain. His argument for the coherence of this idea, as with others throughout the book, is that because all of

the words he employs to explain this feature are "informative designators," the coherence of an omnipresent spirit follows (Swinburne, 2016 p.136). Because combining informative designators might occasionally result in a contradiction, this type of argument needs to be supplemented.

Conclusion

The possibilities that arise from viewing theodicy as a descriptive explanation of theistic belief and behaviour as contained in the classical theistic framework have been examined in this paper. The function of philosophy, for example, the location of epistemology, the basis of theology, and the taking of an apologetic posture are all examined in the first step of any theodicy activity. Traditional methods to theodicy, it is suggested in this work, suffer from methodological flaws resulting from framing theodicy in terms of unbelief and solely theoretical analysis. The superiority of philosophical description is claimed as being more suited to comprehending religious belief as held in a community of religious believers, with a focus on the interconnections that exist between language and reality.

A critical examination of a proponent of philosophical description's approach to theodicy follows. In light of this criticism, two attempts are made to use the model of theological and philosophical languages to characterize the shape of theodicy. The first attempt, which was based on a description of real interpersonal connections, was eventually discovered to be vulnerable to major criticism. A second attempt is then made, this time employing a distinction between surface and deep in religious language and arguing for the presence of an epistemological direction in religious belief, rather than just interpersonal language. The theodicy that is based on amoral paradigms is morally incoherent. The is because, individualistic beliefs derive epistemic justification from the degree to which they are coherent with the morally wider set of beliefs, which, according to coherentism is an internalist principle of belief justification based on probable *a priori* experience, whereas, theodical postulations are merely predicated on hypothetical assumptions.

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