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The Emotional Impact of Evil: Philosophical Reflections on Existential Problems

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Abstract: In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky illustrates that encounters with evil do not solely impact agents' beliefs about God (or God's existence). Evil impacts people on an emotional level as well. Authors like Hasker and van Inwagen sometimes identify the emotional impact of evil with the "existential" problem of evil. For better or worse, the existential version of the problem is often set aside in contemporary philosophical discussions. In this essay, I rely on Robert Roberts' account of emotions as "concern-based construals" to show that theistic philosophers can effectively address the existential problem (and so, the problem should not be set aside). In fact, addressing the emotional impact of evil is crucial, I argue, given that resolving just the impact of evil on agents' beliefs about God constitutes an incomplete response to the problem of evil.

Keywords: Emotion; Construal; Dostoyevsky; Kierkegaard; Theodicy; Existential problem of evil; Theism; Divine benevolence; providence

1 Introduction

Encounters with evil do not solely impact agents' beliefs about God. Evil impacts people on an emotional level as well. This type of impact is sometimes associated with the "existential" problem of evil. There is, perhaps, good reason for this association.¹ The existential problem is marked by an individual's deep, personal struggle with God (or belief in God) in the face of evil. It may manifest in feelings of betrayal, anger, disappointment, sadness, outrage, and so forth. As Hasker puts it, those in the grips of the existential problem are often (though not always) "personally suffering from terrible evil of some kind".² Insofar as the existential problem of evil and the emotional impact of evil are deeply personal, therefore, it makes sense to associate them. Yet, the existential problem is often set aside in contemporary philosophical discussions.³

In this essay, I rely on Robert Roberts' account of emotions as "concern-based construals" to argue that theistic philosophers can effectively speak to the existential problem. Engaging the existential problem is crucial, I argue, because merely addressing the impact that evil has on agents' beliefs about God forms an incomplete response to the problem of evil. Agents who struggle with emotional problems arising from encounters with evil may, for example, be unable to accept the claims of theism, even when the negative impact that evil has on their beliefs about God (or theism) is mitigated.

I proceed as follows. First, I briefly describe the impact of evil on agents' beliefs and emotions, respectively. I also explain why the latter type of impact is often set aside in philosophical discussions.

¹ As I will argue in Section 2, however, the existential problem of evil and the emotional impact of evil are not exactly the same thing.

² Hasker, *The Triumph*, 21.

³ See, for example, Hasker, *The Triumph*, 21-2, and van Inwagen, *The Problem*, 10-11.

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Second, I discuss Roberts' account of emotions as concern-based construals to provide the framework for an in-depth examination of the emotional impact of evil. Third, I use Dostoyevsky's character, Ivan Karamazov, as an extended case study of an individual whose encounter with evil impacts him on an emotional level (without affecting his *beliefs* about God or God's plan for the universe). In Ivan's case, even though his beliefs about God's existence (and God's goodness) remain intact, the emotional impact of evil leaves him unable to accept theism. I end with a summary of lessons that can be learned from Ivan's case, as well as suggestions regarding how theistic philosophers may work to resolve the emotional impact of evil generally.

2 Two types of impact

Encounters with evil have the potential to impact agents' beliefs and emotions. I will call these the "doxastic" impact and "non-doxastic" impact, respectively. Regarding the doxastic impact, encounters with evil sometimes affect agents' *beliefs* about God, God's plan, and/or the universe. The encounter may, for example, lead agents to give up belief that God exists. Perhaps agents will judge that the evil they learn about is logically incompatible with God's existence (or strong evidence against God's existence). These agents may follow this evidence to the conclusion that God does not (or likely does not) exist.⁴ Alternatively, an encounter with evil may lead agents to give up certain beliefs *about* God. Roth, for example, argues that learning about the evils of history should lead theists to give up the belief that God is *perfectly good*.⁵

Regarding the non-doxastic impact of evil, individuals' emotions toward (or about) God are sometimes affected by their encounter with evil. They may become angry at God for His allowing some evil(s), they may feel hurt, betrayed, or saddened by God's apparent (in)action, and so forth. Hasker associates the non-doxastic impact with the "existential" problem of evil given that both are deeply personal in nature.⁶ Those in the grips of the existential problem, he writes, are often (though not always) "personally suffering from terrible evil of some kind".⁷ Of course, the existential problem is not extensionally equivalent to the non-doxastic impact. It is possible for encounters with evil to have a very personal impact on agents in both a doxastic and non-doxastic way. But the non-doxastic aspect of the existential problem is usually set aside in philosophical discussions of evil.

Perhaps bracketing the non-doxastic impact is done for good reason. Philosophers are (frequently) trained to present and weigh evidence and to argue for (or against) the rationality of particular beliefs. This training makes the doxastic impact seem like a more natural target for philosophy. As Hasker puts it, "not everything that may legitimately be said in a philosophical discussion of evil is appropriate or helpful for use in a grief-counseling session, and vice versa".⁸ van Inwagen goes further, calling it "stupid and cruel" to offer a philosophical response to a person in the grips of the existential problem".⁹ Put differently, theistic philosophers may be skilled at helping individuals reason concerning their beliefs about God. But these skills do not automatically translate into the ability to help individuals work through their emotions regarding God and evil.

⁴ Mackie in "Evil and Omnipotence" advances the first kind of problem, also known as the "logical" problem of evil. Rowe in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" gives a classic articulation of the second problem (i.e., the "evidential" problem of evil).

⁵ See Roth, "A Theodicy", 31. According to Hick "Critique", abandoning the claim that God is perfectly good amounts to giving up theism. This is, Hick claims, because the truth of theism entails that God is perfectly good. I will not adjudicate between Roth and Hick here.

⁶ Hasker, *The Triumph*, 21-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-2.

⁹ See van Inwagen, *The Problem*, 10-11. Also, to be clear, both authors do suggest that philosophical discourse may help resolve the existential problem. But neither author expands upon this possibility at length, since doing so would go beyond the scope of their respective projects.

Yet, by examining philosophical discussions of emotions (generally), theistic philosophers may be able to shed greater light on the non-doxastic impact of evil and, by extension, the existential problem of evil.¹⁰ To these ends, I will now consider Roberts' account of emotions as "concern-based construals."

3 Emotions as "concern-based construals"

Roberts maintains that emotions are a type of construal (what he calls, "concern-based construals").¹¹ Construals, for Roberts, involve "*conceptual* perception, as distinguished from *sensory* perception".¹² To help draw this distinction, Roberts presents Jastrow's well-known "duck-rabbit" illustration, pictured here:



Upon seeing this image, suppose one person sees a duck while another sees a rabbit. Both people are looking at the same thing (their sensory data is the same). But they "see" different things. That is, the agents *construe* the sensory data differently; they organize the sensory data according to different concepts. To use Roberts' words, "construal...is a kind of perception, an impression that results from a power of the mind to synthesize the diverse parts of something that 'works' as a whole into an impression of the whole that it works as".¹³

Before returning to the non-doxastic impact of evil, there are two major points to note. First, an agent's construal of an object may come apart from her beliefs about it. For example, an agent may be too afraid of heights to board a plane—their fear renders them unable to walk onboard—even though they *believe* that air travel is perfectly safe.¹⁴ In this kind of case, the agent may *see* (construe) air travel as a threat to their safety, despite *believing* that it is safe. Thus, their construal of air travel is at odds with their beliefs about it.

One may object: In these kinds of cases, it is more plausible to say that the agent does not *really* believe what they claim to believe. That is, if the agent truly believed that air travel were safe, then they would construe it as safe. Since they do not construe air travel as safe, it follows they do not actually believe that it is safe. In other words, the objector may claim that an agent's *genuine* belief about an object and their construal of it can never "come apart."¹⁵

In response, consider a simple case of placing a straight stick in a cup of water. To an observer, the stick may look bent. We may ask the observer, "do you believe the stick is straight?" Suppose they respond, "yes." The objector then declares, "If you *really* believed the stick were straight, you would see it as such. That you see it as bent demonstrates that you do not really believe it is straight." I do not expect many would be swayed by the objector's claim here. That is, it seems perfectly consistent for the agent to believe the stick is straight while seeing it as bent. The same sort of thing can occur when it comes to an agent's

¹⁰ Insofar as the non-doxastic impact overlaps with the existential problem, that is.

¹¹ See Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 38ff. I recognize that Roberts' account of emotions is not universally accepted, but it would go far beyond the scope of this essay to defend a particular account of emotions. For an overview of debates on the nature of emotions (and alternatives to Roberts' account), see Scarantino and de Sousa, "Emotion." Additionally, the general arguments developed in this paper do not require a commitment to Roberts' view; any evaluative theory of emotion will do.

¹² Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴ Cf. Roberts, "Justice", 36-7.

¹⁵ An anonymous reviewer raises this as a potential objection.

construal of an object and their beliefs about it.¹⁶ It is possible to believe one thing about an object while seeing that object in a different way. Or, as Roberts puts it, in these kinds of cases “my emotion tells me something I don’t believe.”¹⁷

The second major point is this: It is possible to feel an emotion without being aware that one is experiencing that emotion. To see why, it will help to elaborate on Roberts’s account of emotions a bit more. Emotions are “concern-based construals” with a particular *affect*. Affect, Roberts writes, “is not something in addition to emotion, but is the way the concern-based construal feels to the person experiencing the emotion.”¹⁸ Furthermore, affect is typically pleasant or unpleasant. Emotions like joy, triumph, gratitude, etc., “feel good” while grief, despair, sadness, etc., “feel bad.”¹⁹ For Roberts, it is possible for an agent to have an emotion without affect (i.e., an “unfelt emotion”) and it is possible to experience an emotion’s affect without being aware of the fact that one is experiencing that particular emotion.²⁰ The latter type of case concerns me here.

Consider an example. An agent may feel their pulse quicken, their face reddening, etc., when they see a certain person, even though they cannot really explain why they have this reaction. In that case, the agent might be feeling the affect of anger, while not being aware of the fact that they are angry at the person they have encountered.²¹ They may see the person as an offender without recognizing that they construe the person in this way. Perhaps through reflection, conversation, therapy, and so forth, the agent may come to acknowledge their anger. Additionally, if we grant that young children are capable of feeling emotions like anger, then clearly enough one can feel the affect of an emotion without being aware of the name and conceptual structure of one’s emotions.²²

As one last case, imagine a child’s parent leaves home and does not return. The child is subsequently raised by her grandparents, but struggles with behavioral issues as she grows up (getting into fights at school, getting into trouble with local law enforcement, etc.). As a young adult, she has a breakthrough: Her misbehavior is rooted in her anger towards her parent for leaving. In this type of case, the agent experiences the affect of anger—even over a long period of time—and her anger shapes her life choices and personality in significant ways. Yet, all of this occurs despite the fact she is unaware that she is angry.

Suppose also that one day, the agent learns why her parent left her. The reason is an excellent one. The agent thinks to herself, “were I in that same position, I would have made the same choice.” Even so, it may be that she remains angry at her parent. At this point, the agent might even recognize that her anger is misplaced, unjustified, or unfair. But generally speaking, when an agent learns that one of their emotions is unjustified, that is not enough to change their emotion instantly. In other words, it may be a struggle to “give up” an emotion, even after learning that the emotion is unwarranted.

Much more could be said about relationships between agents’ beliefs and construals. But the two points made here—that (1) an agent’s beliefs about an object and their construal of it may come apart and (2) an agent may feel an emotion without being aware that they are experiencing that emotion—are sufficient for present purposes. Specifically, by examining the case of Ivan Karamazov from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, I will use the points made here to explain how an agent’s encounter with evil may affect her construal of God (or God’s plan), independently of her beliefs about those objects.

¹⁶ Cf. Roberts, “Justice”, 37.

¹⁷ Ibid. Furthermore, if the objector is correct, then it is impossible for phobics (in general) to believe that the object of their phobia does not pose a real threat to their safety. If I have a phobia of crickets, for example, while claiming to believe that crickets do not actually pose a threat to my safety, the objector would declare that this is impossible (i.e., I must not truly believe that crickets do not pose a threat to my safety). This strikes me as implausible. That is, it seems possible that at least some phobics can genuinely believe that the objects of their phobias are not actual threats to their safety.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 114.

²⁰ Ibid., 115.

²¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example.

²² Cf. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 89-90.

4 The “rebellion” of Ivan Karamazov

In beginning a conversation about God’s existence and the evils of the world, Ivan tells his brother, Alyosha, the following:

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that ... in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men—but though all that may come to pass, *I don’t accept it. I won’t accept it.*²³

Suppose we take Ivan at his word.²⁴ He believes that God will one day bring about some great good that will justify all the evils of the world. That great, justifying good is tied up with God’s ultimate plan for creation. Yet, Ivan is unable to accept God’s plan. We learn later that Ivan holds God’s plan to be unacceptable given Ivan’s own “love for humanity”.²⁵ Even though Ivan believes God’s plan may one day be justified by the good it brings about, Ivan cannot let go of his perception that the plan is unacceptable (given that it involves the horrific maiming of human beings in the process). It is the pain, suffering, and destruction of human beings that leads Ivan to perceive God’s plan as unacceptable. In Ivan’s mind, even if God is fully justified in allowing the relevant evils, that that is not good enough.

It is tempting to interpret Ivan as saying that even though God will bring about some great good in the end, He does so by morally repugnant or unjustifiable means. And so, God’s plan—insofar as it relies on horrific means to bring about some great good—is objectionable. This strikes me as a misunderstanding of Ivan’s view, however. Ivan explicitly states that the great good will *justify* all that has happened. It is not that Ivan believes God is bringing about some great good by unjustifiable means. It is that—though Ivan professes to believe that God is justified—he cannot *see* how that can be so. And this perception creates for Ivan a substantial emotional barrier—a serious existential crisis—which prevents him from being able to (willingly) play a role in God’s plan for creation. To use Roberts’ language, it looks like Ivan’s beliefs about God’s plan (e.g., that it is justified) are intact. But his conceptual perception—his *seeing* God’s plan as unacceptable—interferes with his ability to accept and adhere to the tenets of theism. Put differently, Ivan (and agents like him) *construe* the relevant evils of the world as so horrific that it appears as though nothing can be done to rectify, redeem, or justify them.²⁶ And given the force of this perception, Ivan is led to “rebel” (or to reject God’s plan, participation in it, etc.).

²³ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 258 (emphasis added).

²⁴ I suppose this because it may be that Ivan is being sarcastic (and so does not *really* believe what he claims). I will set that possibility to the side.

²⁵ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 269. One might worry that Ivan’s claim to possess such a “love for humanity” is suspicious, given his claim that it is impossible to love one’s neighbor (see Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 259-60). In response, however, Ivan has explicitly focused the discussion on children whom, unlike adults, “can be loved even at close quarters” (Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 260). As such, even if we must restrict “humanity” to innocents (or children), I do not think there is sufficient reason to think Ivan’s claim to love humanity is misleading here.

²⁶ An anonymous reviewer asks a fair question about the differences between Ivan’s perspective and the skeptical theist’s position. The skeptical theist’s project is, roughly, to argue that human beings are not in a good enough epistemic position to conclude that the evils that occur in our world provide sufficient reason to rule out God’s existence. Our cognitive limitations may be so significant, in fact, that we are not even in a position to say, “it *seems like* some evils are gratuitous” (see Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle”). This undermines arguments—like those presented by Rowe (see Rowe, “The Problem”), which rely on claims like “it seems as though there are gratuitous evils.” Ivan asserts belief in God’s ultimate justification. The skeptical theist is not doing that—she is merely saying we lack sufficient reason to conclude that God is not justified. In this way, Ivan more closely resembles defenders of what Draper calls “naïve theodicy,” who assert belief in God’s ultimate justification (as opposed to skeptical theists who make a different kind of claim) (see Draper, “Meet”, 164ff). Yet, Ivan refuses to participate in God’s plan given his perception of it. He does not doubt God’s existence (nor does he doubt God’s justification). Instead, he is so wounded—outraged, angry, etc.—by the horrors wrapped up in God’s plan that there exists a kind of emotional barrier between he and God. To use the terms developed above, even though the doxastic impact of the problem of evil is not active for Ivan, the non-doxastic impact is sufficient to generate a serious existential problem (a barrier between he and willful adherence to God’s plan).

To help illustrate this phenomenon, compare Ivan's case to the "fear of flying" case (from Section 3), where an agent construed air travel as a threat to their safety, despite believing it to be perfectly safe. In the fear of flying case, the agent's emotions were powerful enough to render the agent unable to (willingly) board a plane (despite the agent's belief that air travel is safe). In Ivan's case, his negative perception of God's plan—the impact of evil on his emotions—is so substantial that it leads him to oppose God's plan, even though he may sincerely believe that one day God's allowance of those evils will be discovered to have been justified. Most importantly, in Ivan's case, this construal is sufficient to lead him to refuse to play any part in God's plan (willingly, at least).

As further evidence that Ivan's opposition to God's plan is being driven his construal of the plan (not his beliefs about it), consider the way in which he presents various evils to Alyosha. He describes one horrendous evil after another. He begins with stories of prisoners having their ears nailed to a fence before being killed and stories about women being forced to watch their babies tossed into the air and impaled on bayonets.²⁷ He continues with horrific stories of parents that beat and torture their children.²⁸ Regarding one such case, Ivan puts a series of questions to Alyosha:

Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? ... Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'!²⁹

Why does he include *so many* stories of horrific evils? Is he simply attempting to tip the scales against God, as though the stories of seven terrible evils will not constitute sufficient grounds on which to oppose God's plan, whereas eight would? That seems implausible.

Instead, we should look at Ivan's inclusion of horrific story after horrific story as having the effect on his audience—in Alyosha's case, a theist—of *breaking down* their construal of the universe as a good place (or as a place that is governed by a wise, perfectly good, and loving God). He is inviting the audience to enter into his "point of view"; to see the world as he sees it. He wants Alyosha to see the way that horrific evils appear to him. He wants Alyosha to see the way in which he perceives claims about "God's good plan" in light of those evils.

By telling story after story, Ivan's speech may tend to break down the reader's construal of God's plan as an acceptable one as well.³⁰ The theistic reader's construal might even begin to change without them experiencing any real change in belief. And this shift may be accompanied by a general feeling of unease, uncertainty, fear, or discomfort. But in any case, if the relevant shift in construal occurs in the minds of Ivan's audience (including the reader), his opposition to God (or God's plan) may start to become their opposition.

Ivan seems aware that his stories may have this effect. At the outset, he states, "Dear little brother, I don't want to corrupt you or to turn you from your stronghold, perhaps I want to be healed by you" and Dostoyevsky adds that "Ivan smiled suddenly quite like a little gentle child. Alyosha had never seen such a smile on his face before".³¹ In a word, I would argue that Ivan is aware of the transformative power that this succession of stories may have on the mind of a believer. He understands that it may wear on them (emotionally, at the very least). This succession of stories may change the believer's perspective of God or God's plan, perhaps even to the point of destroying the believer's faith. In effect, Ivan might be telling Alyosha that he worries his stories will cause Alyosha to reconstrue the world (or God, or God's plan) in ways that will destroy Alyosha's faith. This follows even if we take faith to be a kind of belief.³² After

²⁷ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 260-1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

³⁰ Assuming readers begin with this kind of construal, that is. Readers that begin with a negative construal of God's plan may find that Ivan's speech reinforces their perception.

³¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 259.

³² Howard-Snyder, "Propositional Faith," 357.

all, agents' construals and beliefs about objects are often deeply connected. An agent who continues to construe his spouse as acting unfaithfully (even though he believes his spouse is faithful) may eventually begin to question those beliefs (or even give them up). In short, changes in perception may lead to changes in belief (and vice versa). So, the non-doxastic impact of evil—insofar as it affects agents' perception of God, God's plan, etc.—may also have a transformative effect on their beliefs about those objects (at least in some cases).³³

On the other hand, Ivan's adding, "perhaps I want to be healed by you" signals his awareness of the possibility that Alyosha's response to these horrific evils may provide a way for Ivan to reconstrue them in a way that undoes his opposition towards God. When two individuals who construe a given object differently clash, it seems typical that one of the following phenomena results. Either Person A will take on the construal put forth by Person B, Person B will take on the construal of Person A, neither will change their construal of the object, or both will change (or become *able* to change) their construal(s) in some way.

Ivan seems to hint at the dangers of eroding away Alyosha's construal while expressing some level of hope that he can, through conversation, become better able to take on Alyosha's construal of God's plan. If that were to occur, faithful adherence to God's plan would become much easier for Ivan. He would no longer be divided; Belief pulling him in one direction, perception in another.

To summarize, it seems plausible that Ivan is telling his brother (in effect), "I worry that I will cause you to see God (and/or God's plan) differently after this conversation. But I hope that you help *me* to see God (or God's plan) differently." Once again, this all takes place independently of Ivan's alleged beliefs about God, God's plan, and God's justification for His plans. The non-doxastic impact of evil overwhelms Ivan, causing him deep inner conflict and leading him to "rebel" against God, even when the *doxastic* impact of evil is not a factor for him.³⁴ As such, for agents like Ivan, philosophical endeavors to diffuse the doxastic impact of evil will likely fall flat in the face of his struggles.

5 Lessons from Ivan's rebellion

How can the theistic philosopher respond (if at all) to individuals like Ivan, for whom the non-doxastic impact of evil generates a serious existential problem (even while the doxastic impact is not a factor)? There are two types of responses, one negative, one positive. The negative response involves arguing that there is something *wrong* with Ivan's overall state. The positive response involves working to help agents like Ivan change their perception of God or God's plan. For Ivan, the positive response would involve attempting to bring his perception of God's plan into alignment with his (professed) beliefs about it.

These two types of response should not be thought of as strictly independent. It may turn out that the negative response helps motivate the positive response. That is, agents might be convinced to work towards changing their perception of something once they are convinced that there is something wrong with their perception. So, while I discuss each type of response in turn, I do not mean to suggest that they are altogether separate.

With this in mind, first, consider the negative response. Perhaps it is irrational for an agent to adhere to their perception when their beliefs directly conflict with that perception (at least when those beliefs are well-justified and they are aware of this justification). The person who is afraid to fly, for example, may be irrational when they refuse to board a plane (given that they believe doing so would be perfectly safe). In

³³ Regarding the example mentioned here: Even if the agent who construes his spouse as being unfaithful maintains belief that his spouse is faithful, it is plausible that these construals will have a negative effect on their relationship (insofar as feelings of jealousy, betrayal, etc., will be something the agent is frequently having to combat). And, of course, should his spouse learn of these (unwarranted) feelings they may feel guilty, annoyed, frustrated, etc. Thus, the agent's construals have the potential to create problems for his relationship with his spouse (and this problem does not seem reducible to a doxastic issue). In the case of a theist—who believes that God is justified in allowing some evil, but struggles with the non-doxastic impact of that evil—the non-doxastic impact may have a similar sort of negative effect on the agent's relationship with God.

³⁴ Relatedly, Camus's *The Plague* features a character, Dr. Rieux, who presents a similar illustration regarding the non-doxastic impact of evil. The difference is that unlike Ivan, Dr. Rieux does *not* believe that God exists (or that God could one day be justified for allowing the evils we observe). As such, evil seems to have both a doxastic and non-doxastic impact on Dr. Rieux.

short, we could argue that (generally) it is irrational to act on a perception that one justifiably believes to be a *misperception*.

A weaker (but still negative) response would be to argue that agents like Ivan are inconsistent in some way (even if they are not being *irrational*). After all, it is not as though Ivan refuses to believe something that is supported by his evidence. Nonetheless, one might argue that there is still some fault with Ivan's divided state. If the philosopher can provide an account of that fault, then she has a way of addressing the non-doxastic impact of evil (in a negative sense). Furthermore, if the philosopher can defend some principle that explains how agents ought to proceed when their beliefs and perception conflict, then that is another way she can engage the problem. This leads us to the positive response.

As a positive response to agents like Ivan, the philosopher may seek ways to help agents reshape their construals of God (and/or God's plan). Construals can be changed. Sometimes this change can occur by simple act of the will. I can, for example, voluntarily see the duck-rabbit (pictured above) as a duck or as a rabbit (and this shift in perception does not seem to require that my beliefs change).³⁵ More commonly, however, construals can only be changed via practice. As Evans puts it, there is a distinction between "immediate" emotions and "reflective" emotions.³⁶ Immediate emotions, like fear in response to "a loud crash in a dark room" are "not something I choose to have or not to have".³⁷ But reflective emotions "are the kind of thing that we can patiently work at nurturing and cultivating".

As an example of working to change one's construal, imagine an agent is unable to see a duck in the duck-rabbit illustration (pictured above). Someone who can see the duck may be of great assistance. The helper may trace the outline of the duck while labelling key features, saying, "this is the beak, this is the top of the head," and so on. When successful, this process will lead the agent to see the image as a duck. With practice, she may also develop the ability to switch between seeing the image as a duck or as a rabbit at will.

Additionally, if emotions are concern-based construals, then a change in construal will often bring a change in emotion.³⁸ A person might, for example, construe a convicted thief as guilty, a threat, or deserving of scorn. Supposing this person is concerned to uphold justice, it would be natural for them to feel anger towards the thief. But imagine the agent later learns that the thief had stolen medicine to help treat his younger brother's life-threatening illness. The agent may begin to see the thief not as deserving of scorn, but as a desperate, caring (albeit misguided) older brother. With this change in construal, anger may give way to pity or sympathy.

Further, the agent may (at times) fall back into construing the thief as deserving of scorn (and so, *not* to be pitied). She may fight this impulse, however, by working to remind herself of the thief's desperation and concern for his loved one. That is, she has some level of control over the concepts she associates with the objects of her perception (which, in this case, is a person). Thus, by taking stock of those concepts and reflecting upon them, agents can work to change their emotions (and emotional dispositions) towards an object.³⁹

There is, therefore, some reason to think that agents like Ivan—who are angry at God or construe God (and/or God's plan) in an especially negative way—can change their perception (and, subsequently, their emotions) towards those objects. How this is to be done *generally* is difficult to say, since the existential problem is intensely personal. But the considerations in this essay have provided the foundation for constructing a general method of response.

³⁵ Cf. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 41.

³⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic*, 195-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁸ "Often" rather than "always" because there may be cases in which (all else being equal) two construals support the same emotion. Someone who is concerned that justice be done in their community may, for instance, feel anger at an agent they construe as a thief, but later feel anger towards the same person when construing him as a vandal. In this case, the construal changes, but the emotion (anger) does not.

³⁹ That construals (and emotions) can be changed through effort may be a surprise to many people. After all, as Evans points out, "it is often said that we cannot control our emotions and are not responsible for them" (see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic*, 195). If the current line of thought is correct, then we have good reason to reject these claims.

The general method proceeds as follows. Suppose the theistic philosopher encounters an individual in the grips of the existential problem. They may begin by identifying the type of impact that evil is having on affected party: Doxastic, non-doxastic, or both. If doxastic (wholly or in part), the philosopher may identify the structure of this particular existential problem. What is it that the agent believes (on the basis of their encounter with evil)? That God does not exist? That God has wronged them? Here, more typical philosophical projects—like those developed by Adams⁴⁰, van Inwagen⁴¹, Hasker⁴², and Stump⁴³—are especially applicable. These projects involve an evaluation of the connection between the agent’s beliefs about evil and their beliefs about God and God’s providential care of the universe.

If the impact of evil is identified as non-doxastic (wholly or in part), then the philosopher may engage in the following tasks: (i) Identify the object(s) of agents’ emotions, (ii) unpack agents’ construals of the object(s)—seeking to identify and understand the concepts that organize the agents’ perception of the object—and (iii) identify agents’ concern(s) that are relevant to the emotion(s) in play.

Regarding task (i), we may ask (for example) whether evil has affected the agent’s emotions towards God, God’s apparent (in)action, or the apparent rationality of theism. Regarding (ii), we may ask whether (in light of evil) the agent sees God as offender, as negligent, as morally repugnant for His (in)action or—if the object is theism—whether an encounter with evil has led the agent to see theism as ridiculous, irrational, or implausible.⁴⁴ As for (iii), we may ask (for example) whether the agent is concerned to protect their own safety, concerned for the welfare of others, or concerned to maintain their own rationality.

The discussion that results from tasks (i)-(iii) will vary on a case-by-case basis. This is unsurprising, given that the existential problem is so personal in nature. Returning to Ivan’s case, task (i) would lead us to identify God’s plan for the universe as the object of Ivan’s emotion(s). Task (iii) would lead to a discussion of Ivan’s concern—his “love for humanity.” This may, for example, lead to a longer discussion about what it means to love others, whether loving others entails willing that they never suffer (or that they never suffer in the ways Ivan discusses), and so forth. Task (ii) involves examining the concepts that shape Ivan’s perception of God’s plan. He seems to see the plan as unjustified (or unjust) even while believing that it is justified.

If the philosopher tells Ivan that these perceptions are defective (in some way), Ivan may respond, “yes, yes, I know that. After all, I told you I believe that God will be justified. I just cannot see how that can be so.” If construals cannot be changed, this would end the conversation. But, as noted above, construals can be changed (even though a change may take time and effort). One possibility—at this juncture—is that the philosopher discusses the changeable nature of construals, while giving reasons that should motivate agents to work towards changing their construals. Compare, for instance, the two cases from Section 3: (a) An agent who is too afraid to board a plane (given their construal that air travel is a threat to their safety) and (b) the agent who held on to her anger towards her parent (for leaving) even after learning that the parent’s departure was for an excellent reason.

In the first case, there seem to be fewer reasons to change one’s construal than the latter. Maybe there is something epistemically blameworthy about acting according to a perception that one believes to be a misperception. But a desire to overcome this kind of epistemic fault does not seem like a powerful motivator. For example, a desire to overcome the relevant epistemic fault would probably not serve as a strong enough reason to drive agents to work towards overcoming a fear of flying. In the second case, the same epistemic

⁴⁰ Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.

⁴¹ van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*.

⁴² Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering*

⁴³ Strump, *Wandering in Darkness*.

⁴⁴ Again, on Roberts’ account, agents may believe one thing about an object while construing it in a different way. Even if an agent believes that theism is rational, therefore, it may still strike them as absurd (i.e., they may continue to see or construe it in that way). And depending on the agent, this type of perception may lead to great inner turmoil, a struggle to wholeheartedly embrace theism, etc.

reasons apply. But there are moral concerns as well: Generally speaking, to construe an innocent person as an offender (or a wrongdoer) is to wrong them (in some sense).⁴⁵

Ivan's construal seems more like the second case than the first. He sees God's plan as morally repugnant or unjust, while professing to believe that it will (one day) be clear that the plan is justified. There are epistemic reasons for Ivan to work towards changing his construal (since it conflicts with what he believes to be true).⁴⁶ But there are moral reasons for him to work towards changing his construal as well. Ivan perceives God to be doing something unjust. God has seemingly brought about a morally objectionable state of affairs (so bad, in fact, that it seems to Ivan that God would have been better off—morally speaking—if He had not created anything at all).⁴⁷ Yet, if Ivan truly believes God to be justified, his continuing to accept (or act on) his construal to the contrary is to assign a kind of blame to God that is undeserved. This is similar to the second case (mentioned above), in which an agent continued to see her parent as guilty. That agent seems to do something wrong if she refuses to change her construal of her parent. Or, at least, she does something wrong insofar as she refuses to *try* to change her construal.

Additionally, if Ivan (or agents like him) are concerned to embody the virtue of justice (i.e., to be just persons), then they should seek to see the justified as justified and the unjustified as unjustified. A refusal to do so may count against their being just (i.e. their embodying the virtue of justice). And this is especially strange given that a concern for justice is frequently what drives agents like Ivan to “rebel.” They see God as having done something unjust (and so, oppose it or reject it). But it seems hypocritical to oppose something in the name of justice while knowingly doing so on the basis of a construal that one recognizes to be unjustified. If agents like Ivan are concerned to be just, therefore, their concern for justice (and their concern for their own moral character) should motivate them to work towards changing their construals (when necessary).

One worry here is that the positive response seems to be drifting back into a negative response (insofar as the current lines of thought point out flaws with Ivan's state). There are two points to consider, however. First, as mentioned at the outset, the negative and positive responses are not strictly independent. Second, providing motivation to work towards changing one's construal goes beyond arguing that one's construal (or overall doxastic/non-doxastic state) is faulty. Ivan may, for example, admit that there is something faulty about the clash between his belief and construal without being concerned to correct this fault. The negative response ends with revealing the fault. The positive response may include revealing to the agent that construals can be changed, *motivating* them to correct the relevant fault (e.g., by giving them good epistemic and/or moral reason to change their construal), providing a discussion of concepts by which they should seek to reconstrue the object of their perception, and providing insight into why these latter concepts are more fitting than the concepts that organized their perception previously. Thus, there is much more work that the philosopher can do beyond pointing out the faults in Ivan's overall doxastic/non-doxastic state.

In sum, I have outlined a general method of response that theistic philosophers may engage in when addressing the existential problem of evil (whether it be associated with the doxastic impact, the non-doxastic impact, or both). Nonetheless, the general method—including tasks (i)-(iii)—should be approached with great sensitivity. Oftentimes, there is great wisdom in remaining silent in the wake of others' suffering. To empathize—to suffer with those who suffer—will (at times) be of greater value than any philosophical venture or response.

The point of this essay has not been to say what theistic philosophers *should* do whenever they encounter someone in the grips of the existential problem of evil. Rather, it has been an exercise in showing how the theistic philosopher *can* engage the existential problem. This was accomplished, in part, by providing a deeper look at the nature of the existential problem and second, by providing a general method to consider when faced with the existential problem. I would end by emphasizing the importance of exercising wise

⁴⁵ Given that the agent in the second case knows her parent left for good reason—reason that, in her mind, justifies her parent's departure—to cling to her anger (by continuing to see her parent as an offender, as unjust, as negligent, etc.) is unfair to the parent. Though it is unfair, it does not follow that giving up this anger will be an easy task, however.

⁴⁶ Assuming his beliefs are well-justified, at least.

⁴⁷ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 265.

judgment and discretion when seeking the most appropriate way to respond to a person in the grips of the existential problem.

6 Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that theistic philosophers have productive ways of engaging the existential problem of evil. This is crucial given that the existential problem—especially insofar as it involves the emotional (or non-doxastic) impact of evil—may leave people unable to accept theism even when presented with (what they take to be) excellent reason to believe the tenets of theism. This project also provides an outline of two types of response that theistic philosophers may pursue when addressing the existential problem (a negative response and a positive response). The negative response targets agents' beliefs about (and perceptions of) God, God's plan, etc., by showing that there is some *fault* with those beliefs or perceptions. The positive response works to help agents change their beliefs about (or perception of) God, God's plan, etc., in ways that are amenable to theism. Since both methods of response allow the theistic philosopher to speak to the existential problem of evil, I conclude that the existential problem should not be set aside in philosophical discussions of evil.

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