Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thinking about Evil Editorial

John Culp*

Introduction for the Topical Issue “Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thinking about Evil”

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1 Context of contemporary theological responses to evil

Contemporary theological responses to evil take place in a context that has been dominated by philosophical efforts to explain how God can be thought of as both all-powerful and good. The development of analytical philosophical theology has sought to draw more explicitly from theological resources in thinking about evil. Throughout these efforts by both philosophers and philosophical theologians to account for the existence of evil, the predominant response has been to justify evil as necessary for human, and creaturely, freedom. Alvin Plantinga's shift from a free-will theodicy to a free-will defense and John Hick's soul-making theodicy still relied upon a free-will justification of evil. However, recent challenges to the appropriateness and adequacy of theodicies have arisen. Basically, these challenges find that theodicies are limited to intellectual efforts and do little to deal with evil, or even distract from efforts to overcome evil. Many of the following essays explicitly or implicitly express this criticism of theodicies limited to intellectual attempts to explain evil that do little to overcome the suffering that results from evil. Some of the essays develop suggestions for new ideas about how God overcomes suffering and evil, and others suggest divine and creaturely cooperation in overcoming evil. Other essays illustrate utilizing the resources of various religious traditions. These developments of challenging intellectual explanations and utilizing theological resources have resulted in a complex diversity of approaches to the problem of evil.

2 Essays

The following essays demonstrate this complex diversity of approaches. While the references to free will continue implicitly and explicitly and many essays seek to suggest ways that evil is overcome, there is diversity in the religious traditions appealed to, the concept of God, and the ways that evil is overcome. The grouping of these essays seeks to recognize important similarities but does not exhaust the similarities among the responses to evil. The essays are grouped first by diverse religious traditions in addition to Christian, then critiques of specific theodicies, and finally proposals for how evil is overcome. The three groups are “diverse religious tradition responses to evil,” “critiques of specific theodicies,” and “overcoming evil.”

* **Corresponding author: John Culp**, Department of Philosophy, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, United States of America, e-mail: jculp@apu.edu

2.1 Diverse religious tradition responses to evil

Anna Perkins develops Rastafarian theodicy; Christopher Pieper utilizes Islam to point to a frequently overlooked aspect of Christian theodicy; and Bogdan Faul, included in “critiques of specific theodicies,” deals with a theodicy based on two Jewish tendencies in theodicy.

Anna Perkins articulates Rastafarian theodicy by building on prior reflections. Rastafarian thought rejects traditional individualistic theodicies that understand suffering as either individual punishment for sin or individual redemptive suffering. Instead, suffering is considered in its corporate dimension and oppression is understood as the result of a corporate rejection of Jah’s will that leads to the oppression of others. Endurance waiting for Jah’s action should be the response to disadvantage and suffering caused by oppression. Rather than passive suffering though, Rasta thought calls for vengeance in overcoming racially caused suffering through two different responses: revolt through chanting words and patient suffering knowing that Jah is in charge and will bring vindication in God’s own time. This eschatological stance is expressed in the patience exhibited by Rastas in long hours of meditation and reasoning, willingness to work long hours for little remuneration, and the readiness to drop everything to entertain a stranger or a friend.

Christopher Pieper suggests that the koranic reply to catastrophe, pain, and violence can help Western thinkers recognize the overlooked biblical teaching that God overcomes human hardship. Although the Christian understanding of creation as good and without death and suffering and the koranic doctrine that the good God did create death and affliction as part of God’s good intent differ, the koranic doctrine of the good God as creating death and affliction can help Christian thought recognize that God overcomes rather than causes death and affliction. The basis for the distinction between overcoming evil and causing evil is the doctrine of the Trinity in contrast to the Islamic rejection of otherness in God. Otherness in God in Trinity expresses God’s concern for those other than God while the Islamic rejection of otherness means that all affliction is caused by God to bring people to obedience and acceptance of God. For Christians, affliction that is not caused by God is repurposed by God to overcome evil.

2.2 Critiques of specific theodicies

Bogdan Faul and Samuel Lebens engage in a debate about a theodicy holding that God might forgive or eliminate past evils; Arlyn Culwick critiques speculative explanations of suffering; and Brian Macallan rejects thinking of God as omnipotent and omniscient.

Bogdan Faul challenges the effort by Lebens and Goldschmidt to understand God as overcoming evil by changing the past so that past evil events are made non-existent and leave no trace. Several problems arise with this approach. One problem is that their position calls for an overly complex hyper-view of time that could be replaced by a simpler presentism. Another problem comes from the view of time that a changed past depends upon. That view of time does not explain how the truth of past events can be known in the present. The third problem is that God’s changing the past implies that unnecessary evils exist which is inconsistent with God’s goodness since God as good could have created a world in which evil was already eliminated.

In order to clarify their position that God defeats evil by changing the past, Samuel Lebens responds to Faul’s criticisms (1) that a hyper-present view of time that allows God to change the past is inadequate, (2) that this changed past cannot remember past events, and (3) that if God can change past evil there should be no evil. A hyper-present view of time, in contrast to a presentist view of time, can distinguish between the evil of the past and the property of evil in the hyper-present. In scene changing, God swaps a past evil event for the property of a past event. That property, a shadow or perhaps a memory, is about the event rather than being the event. With a free will defense, God’s changing the past allows for the expression of freedom. But God’s changing the scene goes beyond the free will defense to deal with the impact of evil on those who suffer because of the freedom of others. God allows expressions of freedom without the permanent evil results of that freedom. Instead of continuing, the consequences of evil are changed.

Rather than a speculative explanation of suffering, Arlyn Culwick calls for accepting the essential role of suffering and death as part of loving and seeks to overcome evil through the experience of suffering. Understanding the universe and objects as relations which are primary for all reality provides the metaphysical basis for this position. Relationships as real provide an experienceable and knowable basis for theodicy. Every relation is both determining and representing in a two-way causality. These relations give rise to kenosis as self-sacrifice for others. Because God is trinitarian, kenosis is part of God. Kenosis as self-sacrificing love works to modify where and how much suffering is borne. A kenotic approach accepts that suffering and death are necessary parts of loving, and loving calls us to respond to the loss of possibilities rather than to seek an explanation for evil. Humans thus become co-creators with God of loving relationships.

For Brian Macallan, rejecting divine omni-properties avoids the unjustified suffering that both free-will and soul-making theodicies allow. Since God does not create from nothing, God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. God works with what is because freedom is the way things are rather than allowed or used by God. As in Process thought, God persuades, not controls. However, even if God is not omnipotent, divine-created action can still facilitate overcoming evil by persuading creation to respond to new possibilities.

2.3 Overcoming evil

The variety of ways of overcoming evil range from divine actions to human cooperation with God's purposes. Divine actions involve God's giving the dead an opportunity to relive their past lives (Mangion). Human cooperation with God's purposes ranges from being present with those who suffer (Scott), to praying (Burns), to working with modern science and local knowledge in disaster response (Rumahuru and Kakiay).

Claude Mangion's exposition and defense of Quentin Meillassoux's messianic vision of God concludes with some suggested questions for this vision. Meillassoux offers a new concept of God as emerging rather than being a revealed God. This new concept holds that God rectifies unjust deaths by giving the dead an opportunity to re-live their unjustly terminated lives. In order for God to be able to provide this redemption to all the injustices suffered within the world, the world must be seen as contingent. A contingent world allows for new possibilities where God can create meaning. Meaning arises out of the worlds of matter, life, and thought and overcomes the limitations of unjustly terminated lives.

Mark Scott examines the experiences of loss which three theologians have described in their writings. His examination identifies the failure of explanations of suffering to help deal with that suffering. Instead of trying to explain suffering, being present offers help to the person who is suffering. In these three experiences of loss, theodicies as explanations culminated in accepting the incomprehensibility of God's role in suffering, living with the mystery of evil, or the recognition that theodicy is distinct from experiences of suffering while not completely irrelevant to suffering. Scott concludes that responses to loss should not suppress feelings of fear, anger, confusion, and so forth; should acknowledge the depth of the suffering and respect the mystery of evil; should be offered only when requested; and should recognize the inadequacy of one answer for all suffering.

Elizabeth Burns, with others, critiques analytical theodicies for failing to account for the amount of suffering in the world and the uncertainty of any future existence. A transformational theodicy requires revisioning the concept of divinity while retaining elements in common with the God of classical theism and analytical philosophy. God is good, wise, powerful, and personal but not omnipotent or omniscient. God's knowledge is morally relevant knowledge, and God's power is the power to begin the universe, sustain the universe, and provide an objectively existing standard of goodness. The interconnectedness of all living beings makes it possible for prayer to play an important role in overcoming evil. Prayer prevents evil, alleviates evil, and promotes the flourishing of living beings. Burns concludes by responding to objections to this position.

Yance Rumahuru and Agusthina Kakiay recognize that diverse theological responses to disaster are often proposed. In spite of this diversity, considering theological understandings of disaster is important in developing a comprehensive public policy response to disasters because of the influence of religious beliefs on peoples' responses to disasters. Drawing on protestant theology by using an ethnoscience approach with interviews in Ambon City, Maluku, this study describes a perspective that views disasters as the means through which God glorifies God's creation while punishing those who have sinned and abandoned God's teachings. Even though Divine wrath has often been emphasized, disasters importantly are ways that God the creator more often shows love and mercy. God as creator shows love and mercy even through disasters that are part of a natural cycle and seeks to honor creation by mercifully creating balance. Disaster response strategies need to include local knowledge, modern science, and theology in a holistic approach in order to understand and respond to disaster.

3 Further work

The recognition of the need to overcome evil has general acceptance. That has led some to reject efforts to understand and explain the existence of evil. While many theologians have not gone to that extreme, most have not addressed the relationship between explaining and overcoming evil. The connection between explaining and overcoming evil requires further development if there is to be a basis for hope that leads to action that overcomes evil. Culwick's description of the universe as composed of relations deals with that issue to some extent by his effort to provide an experienceable and knowable basis for theodicy. But that does not directly relate explanation to action.

Divine-creaturely cooperation in Culwick, Burns, and Mangion as an explanation for how to overcome evil does offer the beginnings of a connection between explanation and overcoming of evil in that God's working with creation provides a concept calling for action to overcome evil. Rumahuru and Kakiay call for adding theology in developing responses to disasters. But, again, further work needs to be done to develop the understanding of this cooperation. How does this cooperation occur, what is the relation between divine action and human action? Does cooperation require a concept of God as limited either by self-limitation or elimination of omni attributes, and if so, is that an adequate account of how to overcome evil, is God praiseworthy? And finally, can a concept of cooperation lead to an emphasis upon creaturely action which might lead to a denial of the need for divine assistance in overcoming evil?

Another area needing further work is the concept of God especially if God cooperates with creation in overcoming evil. Is God persuasive rather than coercive (Macallan and Burns)? Must God come into existence, arrive, in order to be redeeming (Mangion)? If God is trinitarian does God both suffer and die in love (Culwick)?

The essays in this collection deal with these issues. Additional issues such as accounting for natural evil, evaluating efforts to overcome evil through artificial intelligence and transhumanism, and taking animal/plant suffering into consideration continue in the broader philosophical/theological discussion of evil.