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The problem of Evil: Ancient Answers and Modern Discontents

Abstract

This essay contrasts the beliefs and existential attitudes that shaped the approach to the problem of evil in antiquity with those of our own time. In early Christian theology, the patristic authors affirmed that evil is caused by the misuse of creaturely free will, and that God does not cause evil but permits and draws good out of suffering, seen especially in the narrative context of salvation history.

A number of significant changes of beliefs and attitudes have taken place in modernity, such as a shift of focus to the dilemma of undeserved suffering rather than metaphysical accounts of the origin of evil, and a

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willingness to explain evil by modifying classical theism, even by accepting the possibility of a limited or even nonexistent God. The problem of evil will never be completely free of mystery, but modern conversation is illuminated when seen in its wider context.

Keywords
theodicy, suffering, problem of evil, Stoic philosophy, Church fathers

I Introduction

This essay aims to bring out the differences between the approaches to the problem of evil in antiquity and our time. By design, the essay sketches out a picture of a large-scale transformation. Any painting with broad brushstrokes is bound to dissatisfy at the level of details. As someone who appreciates fine-grained historical contextualization of complex theological ideas - of the kind afforded by other papers at this symposium - I would be the first to acknowledge that the task of providing a master narrative is a very precarious affair. Admittedly, master narratives are not a popular sport nowadays. For some (presently audience excluded), such narratives are inherently "oppressive." In other words, master narratives are a part of the problem of evil rather than its solution, and as such should be consigned to deconstruction. While such demolition work might in some cases be necessary, a dirge for all master narratives is not merely premature, but inevitably self-defeating.

Aside from the general skepticism about the master narratives, one might doubt whether any narrative that assumes a shift in premodern and modern sensibilities is on the right track. I think that the transition needs to be handled with care and that

this question cannot be answered in the abstract. The argument of this paper is that there are indeed some significant points of discontinuity between premodern and modern times. What those are has to be discovered inductively by considering vast amounts of complex evidence.

In what follows I offer, in part one, an account of the web of beliefs and existential attitudes that have shaped the premodern Christian accounts for the problem of evil. Then, in part two, I chart the transformations of this web of beliefs and attitudes in modernity and beyond. While I wear the hat of an Orthodox patristic theologian most of the time, I do not have a plan here for returning the prodigal children of modernity into the house of patristic wisdom. To state the obvious, such a return is a historical impossibility. The sacred canopy of patristic theodicy cannot provide a complete cover for all our present-day struggles. This essay, then, has a more modest purpose of beginning a sort of a trans-historical conversation…

II The Problem of Evil in Antiquity

There was no shortage of solutions to the problem of evil in antiquity. Consider, for example, the wealth of insight afforded by Greek tragedy. The tragic poets locate evils variously in the will of the gods, in human ignorance and proclivity to be carried away by violent passions, and in the mysterious workings of fate (*tyche*, *moira*, *ate*) and necessity (*ananke*). Tragedy invites its spectators to become reconciled with the reality of suffering by admitting its inevitability. “Suffering for mortals is nature’s iron law,” declares Euripides.[1] In the final scene of *Oedipus the*

1 Euripides, *Hippolytus* 208, in J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill (eds.), *The Complete Greek Drama: Volume 1*, (New York, NY: Random House,

King, with the king of Thebes now blind and expelled from his city, Sophocles has the choir recite the following piece of folk wisdom: “Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race, until he hath crossed life’s border, free from pain.”[2] To expect a life devoid of suffering is to set oneself up for a major disappointment and to deny the central feature of the human condition, namely, mortality. The best thing to do is to admit with Aeschylus the law of Zeus “that man must learn by suffering (*pathei mathos*).”[3] Life is a tragedy in which we are both actors and spectators. As actors we undergo *pathos*, as spectators, we can hope that the *pathos* of others will have a cathartic impact on us.[4]

The Stoics agreed with the tragic poets that suffering could become a valuable *paideia*, a lifelong learning experience. It was futile, they argued, to regard unavoidable misfortunes as intrinsically evil. While a true philosopher could not control many external things that happened to her, she could control some, if not all, of her responses to adversities. In order to train the soul how to respond properly, a philosopher needed to realize that

1938). Euripides was probably drawing upon the following pessimistic comment of Theognis, *Elegies* 425–428, widely debated by later thinkers: “For man the best thing is never to be born,/ Never to look upon the hot sun’s rays, / Next best, to speed at once through Hades’ gates/ And lie beneath a piled-up heap of earth,” in: Francis Macdonald Cornford (ed.), *Greek Religious Thought from Homer to the Age of Alexander* (London/Toronto, ON: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923).

2 Sophocles, Oedipus the King 1581–1584, in: The Complete Plays of Sophocles (New York, NY: Bantam, 2006).

3 Aeschylus, Agamemnon 177, trans. Peter Meineck, in Oresteia (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998). See William Chase Greene, Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), pp. 99-100.

4 Cf. Aristotle, Poetica (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6 (1449b27).

evil lies not in external misfortunes, but in human intentions that are contrary to reason: it is evil to inflict pain, but not to endure it.[5] On this account, "no evil could befall a good man."[6] Genuine evil was ruled out from the life of the true philosopher by redefining what counts as evil and by changing one's attitude accordingly. The Stoics also maintained that the soul-making telos of putative evils can be appreciated, when life is considered as a whole. Many ancients found this noble doctrine hard to swallow and followed the advice of Epicurus: maximizing life's pleasures by minimizing and avoiding pain.

Plato was the first Greek philosopher to see clearly that evil cannot be attributed to the gods. In the *Republic*, he formulates this principle in causal terms: "For the good things we must assume no other cause than God, but the cause of evil we must look for in other things and not in God."[7] Since Plato was hesitant to ascribe to God infinity or omnipotence, his answer to the problem of evil's ultimate origin was far from consistent. In *Timaeus*, he attributed imperfections of embodied beings to the creative agency of the lesser gods and to the limitations of the receptacle (*hypodoche*), later to be known as matter (*hyle*).[8] In

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5 A. A. Long, "The Stoic Concept of Evil," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968), p. 329.

6 Sénèque, Dialogues, 4. De la providence. De la constance du sage. De la tranquillité de l'ame D l'oisiveté / texte établi et traduit par René Waltz, (Paris: Soc. d'Ed. Les Belles Lettres, 1970), I. 3.

7 Plato, Republic, in: Chris Emlyn-Jones ed. and translated, (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), 379C; trans. Greene, *Moira*, 298; cf. *Timaeus*, 30A, (*Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).*

8 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40-42, 50-51. For patristic critique of the Platonic idea that some things were created by lesser gods see Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XII. 25 who also denies that angels had any part in creation, in: Books XV & XVI / edited with an introduction, translation and commentary by P.G. Walshed. Isabella Image and Christopher Collard, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018). According to Philo (*Conf*. 35. 179), some imperfections in creation are precisely attributa-

Theaetetus, Plato even hints in passing at the necessity of ontological dualism: “It is impossible that evil will cease to exist: for there must always be something contrary to the good (*hypernantion ti to agatho*).”[9] Plato did not develop this idea, but rather emphasized that the material world was beautiful, good, and ordered to the degree to which it reflected the realm of the eternal forms.

Building upon Plato’s vision, Plotinus placed matter at the very bottom of the hierarchy of forms, as that which was completely unbounded, measureless, and formless (*apeiron*, *ametron*, *aneideon*). It followed that matter was a “privation of the good” (*steresis tou agathou*) and, worse still, “evil in itself” (*to kakon to auto*), or even “the primary evil” (*proton kakon*).[10] Fighting with what he considered to be Gnostic distortions of his most sublime teaching, Plotinus argued that the material world was a beautiful, good, even if ultimately imperfect reflection of the intellectual universe.[11] For some of his critics, the tension in his teaching between the absolute evil of matter and the beauty of the material cosmos remained unresolved.[12]

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ble to angelic participation in the original creation. See H. A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), I:273. For an illuminating discussion of Platonic theodicy see Peter Harrison, “Purpose, Design and the Intelligibility of Nature,” p. 4 (unpublished). For a review of different competing theories of Plato’s theodicy see Harold Cherniss, “The Sources of Evil According to Plato,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98 (1954), pp. 23-30.

[9] Plato, *Thaetetus* 176a, cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I. 8. 6, II. 4. 5.

[10] Plotinus, *Enneads*, I. 8. 4; cf. a similar point attributed to Platonizing Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, IV. 66.

[11] Plotinus, *Enneads*, I. 8. 3-5. See Denis O’Brien, *Théodicée Plotinienne, Théodicée Gnostique* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

[12] See Edward B. Costello, “Is Plotinus Inconsistent on the Nature of Evil,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1967), 483-97; John M. Rist, “Plotinus on Matter and Evil,” *Phronesis* 6 (1961), 154-166.

Early Christian authors were careful not to impose any one solution to the problem of evil as binding upon the Church at large. More generally, in the history of Christian doctrine theodicy has never reached the level of dogmatic precision attained by the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation. Nevertheless, patristic authors shared an impressive number of common assumptions regarding the problem of evil, in part by holding to theistic ontology, and in part by excluding the rival metaphysical systems of Marcion, the Gnostic teachers, Mani, and most philosophers.

The general assumptions of patristic authors may be summarized as follows. Shared commitment to monotheism ruled out all forms of ontological dualism, although weaker forms of dualism were always in the air under different guises: Manichaean, Platonic, apocalyptic, and so on. In other words, early Christian thinkers taught that God was omnipotent with far greater precision and consistency than their philosophical counterparts among the pagans. The benevolent and almighty Creator of the early Christian apologists tolerated no eternal antipodes, be it another divine agent, or matter, or the realm of darkness and chaos. Unlike pagan Platonists, orthodox patristic authors refused to locate the origin of evil in matter.[13] The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* drove home the point that God's goodness and power were limited neither by matter nor by anything else.

Early Christian heresiologists had little patience with the speculations of the Gnostics, who located the origin of evil in the cosmic drama of the gods. The world was neither an afterthought of an incompetent committee of gods, nor the result of

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[13] Tertullien, Contre Hermogène, Introduction, texte critique, traduction, et commentaire par Frédéric Chapot, (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1999), IX-XI; Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, E. P. Meijering (ed.), (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 6; *De incarnatione*, 2; Augustine, *Confessiones*, VII. vii. 5.

Sophia's fall from the Pleroma. Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, Origen of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo, among others, concurred with the Neoplatonists that God was not the author of evil.[14]

Nurtured upon the biblical account of creation and having rejected ontological dualism, the orthodox Christians held that the omnipotent and benevolent God created everything good. It followed that evil could not be among the things originally created, and in this limited sense it was non-being. Following the Neoplatonists, Christian theologians explained that evil was a privation of the good (*steresis*, *privation boni*) similar to the way in which darkness was the absence of light.[15] Evil was not a substance, since it was parasitic upon the good, depending upon the good for its existence.[16] Pseudo-Dionysius, following Proclus, proposed that evil was beyond non-being since evil was not merely the privation of the good, but also the negative force destructive of the good.[17] The Areopagite's arguably more precise language was not followed by the majority of the Fa-

[14] Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI. 53-55; Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, II. 9; Basil of Caesarea, *Homily Explaining that God is not the Cause of Evil*, 3-5; Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, I. 2. 4. 10. Only a fragment of Irenaeus's letter to Florinus, entitled *On the Sole Sovereignty* or *That God is Not the Author of Evil* survives in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, V. 20.

[15] Plotinus, *Enneads*, II. 4. 5, 10; cf. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 7. 4-5.

[16] Augustine writes in *Enchiridion* VIII. 27: "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to permit any evil to exist," trans. J. F. Shaw. Cf. ibid. XXIV. 96; *Confessions*, VII. xii. 18; Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 4. 4, 7. 3; *De incarnatione*, 4. 5; John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, IV. 20. This point is emphasized by G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[17] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 4; Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia*, 38. 7-11, discussed in Carlos Steel, "Proclus on the Existence of Evil," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), p. 95.

thers, who continued to teach that evil was the corruption, perversion, and destruction of the good.[18]

Within the framework of Christian theism, the belief that evil was non-being did not lead to the conclusion that evil was a grand illusion (as, it did, for example, in Buddhism).

On the contrary, Christianity from the very beginning was characterized by a keen sense that evil was real, powerful, and all-pervasive.[19] Hence, the insight that evil was non-being was bound to provide a partial answer and generate more questions, such as: If God is not the author of evil, then who or what is? What feature of creation could be causally connected to evil without at the same time implicating God the Creator?

The general line of response to these perplexing questions was that the free agency of the rational creatures accounted for the actualization of evil. The Creator could not be held responsible for the free evil choices that rational creatures made, since God did bring about or causally determine these choices, but only permitted them to be made.[20] The reason for this permission, while ultimately somewhat mysterious, had to do with first allowing a genuine (as opposed to merely apparent) exercise of the freedom of choice as something intrinsically good and valuable, and second with the divine intention of ultimately drawing

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18 Augustine, *De natura boni*, p. 4.

19 A Syrian ascetic master known as Pseudo-Macarius/ Symeon ingeniously stated that while evil is very real for humans, in the sense of being an ever-threatening power of temptation living in one’s heart, evil in this sense is not real for God, upon whom it does not have a similar cognitive grip. See *Spiritual Homilies* [collection II] 16. 5-6.

20 Augustine problematized this claim in *De libero arbitrio*, I. 2. 4: “We believe that everything which exists is created by one God, and yet that God is not the cause of sin. The difficulty is: if sin goes back to souls created by God, and souls go back to God, how can we avoid before long tracing sin back to God?”

good out of all evil.[21] The obscurity of divine intention was no sign of divine failure, rather it was as sign of the human failure to comprehend God's ways and to consider divine intentions with a mind undistorted by evil. Also, God could bring about evil in the form of physical suffering, when it served the divine purpose of admonishing, converting, chastising, punishing, teaching, and healing those who were turned away from God.[22]

In addition to these philosophical considerations, the biblical narrative framework was indispensable for addressing the problem of evil. Salvation history, from creation to eschaton, offered the most comprehensive theodicy in narrative form. Creation account was relied upon to support the claim that God was not the author of evil. The Fathers drew upon Genesis 3 and the story of the watchers in Genesis 6: 1-4 to construct their theories of human and angelic fall respectively.[23] All patristic authors agreed that evil was causally connected to the misuse of free will, although their accounts of the fall differed considerably. Space permits me to only lightly scratch the surface of the three distinct patristic accounts. For Tatian and Irenaeus the first sin was a thoughtless act of an innocent, yet inexperienced childlike creature. For Origen, the fall was a pretemporal noetic catastrophe that brought about the soul's imprisonment in the material world. Augustine's complex and comprehensive theory of the original sin locates the root of evil

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21 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VII. p. 68, points out that God permits evil, but does not order evil by his will. Cf. Lactantius, *De ira dei*, 13; Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I. pp. 8-29, XI. P. 18.

22 Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, II. 13-15; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI. 56. See Hans Schwartz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 103.

23 Gary Anderson, *Genesis of Perfection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

in the disorder of the will for which no efficient cause can be found, but the only deficient cause, located in the inclination of the will towards self-absorption and ultimately, nothingness.[24] These theories share a common but differently expressed conviction that evil resides in the ultimately unanalyzable inclination of the free rational agent who mysteriously prefers the finite goods of creation to the infinite good of the Creator.[25]

It may be noted that while free choice could account for the existence of moral evil, the cause of natural evil was still left mostly unexplained. This problem was resolved in different ways. Some Fathers replied that human choice of evil had tragic and far-reaching consequences for the rest of creation. Others argued that "natural evil" was a misnomer: strictly speaking, all evils were unnatural.[26] Augustine proposed that such disasters as fires and hurricanes represented the working of natural forces that were inherently good, but could be misdirected so as to harm humans.[27] Others speculated, drawing upon the Stoic view mentioned earlier, that natural disasters were not evil at

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[24] Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis*, II. 4-5; Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, III. pp. 17, 48; *De vera religione*, XII. 23. Cf. *De civitate Dei*, XIII. 14: "Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters: mankind is led from that original perversion, a kind of corruption at the root, right up to the disaster of the second death, which has no end," trans. Henry Bettenson, *Augustine: Concerning the City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 523. See David Ray Griffin, "Augustine and the Denial of Genuine Evil," in Michael L. Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil: Select Readings* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 197.

[25] Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 7. pp. 3-5; *De incarnatione*, p. 15; Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. p. 18.

[26] John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, IV. 20: "[E]vil is no more than a negation of good and a lapse from what is natural to what is unnatural, for there is nothing what is naturally evil," trans. Frederic H. Chase, *Saint John of Damascus* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), p. 386.

[27] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI. p. 22.

all, because no evil intention was involved.[28] Still, others deferred to the universal religious insight that natural disasters were a form of divine punishment for human disobedience. God sent natural disasters to admonish, correct, restrain, and mete out retribution for sin.[29] Origen hinted more imaginatively if rather vaguely, that natural disasters were a part of the demonic revolt against God.[30] On this analysis, natural evil was reducible to moral evil in its demonic form. Despite their considerable differences, these accounts of natural evil shared one general point in common: the ethical categories of moral corruption and sinfulness blended with the ontological categories of physical corruptibility, disorder, and death.

The narrative framework of salvation history offered more than just an explanation of evil's origin. Human history was presented as a series of God's redemptive acts, which culminated in the divine incarnation. God's assuming of the human nature was interpreted as a new creation, as God's restoration of his image and likeness in human beings, as Godman's victory over the powers of sin, corruption, death, and the realm of the demonic. The fruits of this victory, abundantly available in the sacramental life of the Church, would be most fully manifest in the eschaton. The hope of the resurrection of the dead and the orientation of life towards the final judgment expanded the horizon of "the bigger picture" theodicy. Many early Christians endured persecution, torture, and martyrdom with the hope of attesting by their deaths to the power of Christ's resurrection and the reality of eternal life. The apocalyptic narrative, its awe-

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28 Plotinus, *Enneads*, I. 4. 4-13; I. 8. 4; IV. 4. 44.

29 Lactantius, *De ira dei*, 17; Basil, *De fide orthodoxa*, IV. 19.

30 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4. 65. See John M. Rist, "Beyond Stoic and Platonist: A Sample of Origen's Treatment of Philosophy (*Contra Celsum* 4. 62-70)," in *Platonismus und Christentum* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1983), 233-234.

inspiring features notwithstanding, also functioned as a theodicy: the punishment of the wicked and the rewarding of the righteous manifested the ultimate triumph of the justice and goodness of God and brought clarity into a world often fraught with moral confusion.

The common core of patristic theodicy may be somewhat schematically reduced to the following five points:

1. God is not the author of evil;
2. God prevents, permits, and draws good out of evil;
3. Ontologically evil is non-being, i.e., a privation, corruption, and perversion of the good;
4. The misuse of angelic and human free will is the cause of evil;
5. Salvation history provides a narrative framework, which answers the question of how God draws good out of evil.

III The Problem of Evil in Modern Theology

Let me begin with two cautionary notes. I take any answer to the problem of evil to be essentially contested. Modern answers to the problem of evil are as variegated as the ancient ones. What hope, then, does one have for finding some semblance of a common tune in such a cacophony of voices? I take the common tune to be the framework beliefs and points of emphasis in dealing with the problem of evil, rather than material answers themselves. Nevertheless, even the framework beliefs need to be approached with great care: it would be wrong to impose on them any artificial uniformity.

My second cautionary note is that I take the boundaries between premodernity and modernity to be porous. What this means is that modern views about the problem of evil have not replaced premodern views altogether. In many cases, modern views have succeeded in pushing earlier views from the center

stage to the periphery. However, most answers to perpetual questions are subject to the boomerang effect: they return in different ages under different guises. The problem of evil is no exception.

After these cautionary notes, we may identify six major shifts that have shaped the approaches to the problem of evil in premodernity and modernity.

1. With the exception of philosophical skeptics, most premodern thinkers were relatively confident that the problem of evil could be solved, at least theoretically, while they admitted that the eschatological solution was in the hands of God. The ancients may have disagreed on just what the solution was - Job clearly refused to accept all facile explanations of his pious friends - but most of them were confident that a convincing explanation was in principle available. Patristic authors insisted that the revelatory framework was necessary for articulating a comprehensive answer to theodicy and simultaneously found themselves baptizing select philosophical insights.[31] As the writings of Augustine on evil make especially clear, this revelatory framework presupposed a fundamental reorientation of one's worldview and a reordering of the self. A premodern theodicist was not an autonomous entity sitting in judgment of God's design. On the contrary, such a theodicist was a dependent creature seeking to align all of her thoughts and desires with the will of God.[32]

The contemporary discussion of theodicy is conducted quite differently. To most present-day readers the book of Job raises more questions than it provides answers. A few optimistic voices aside, modern thinkers tend to approach theodicy as a great

31 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, IV. p. 65.

32 On this point, see Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), pp. 1-38.

mystery.[33] For example, Paul Fiddes observes: "Much of human suffering is apparently meaningless in itself, and because we experience suffering as senseless we are driven into silence and numbness of spirit; we are paralyzed by it in our will and emotions. We cannot use suffering actively to promote what is life-giving, making something out of it. There is thus no hope of learning from suffering, or using it to overcome what has caused it"[34]. Fiddes continues that it is the meaning that the believers find in the story of God's suffering on the cross that liberates them from the meaninglessness of their own suffering. Not all contemporary Christian theologians would concur with Fiddes's solution. However, they would agree that no one solution offers a comprehensive answer.

2. The ancients were more preoccupied with the metaphysical problem of evil's origin; contemporary thinkers more acutely feel and more frequently discuss the problem of seemingly unfair distribution of suffering. For example, for the Neoplatonists and Augustine, the answer to the question *unde malum* was a cornerstone of a comprehensive theodicy. For the present-day theodicists, the metaphysical problem of evil's origin often recedes into the background, and the question why bad things happen to good people takes center stage.[35]

Early Christian theologians were more concerned to uphold the intellectual integrity of the claim that God was not the author of evil. The contemporary observers instead tend to focus on cases

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[33] Among the optimists are Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) and John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Most other contemporary thinkers concede that theodicy may remain an unsolvable problem.

[34] P. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 146.

[35] I have in mind the title of Harold Kushner's best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1981).

of gratuitous and horrendous evil. The claim of Platonizing metaphysicians that evil is a non-being generally leaves most modern students of the problem of evil unimpressed. A prevailing contemporary view seems to be that to condemn evil to nothingness is to dissolve, rather than to resolve an age-old problem.[36] The premodern Christian thinkers embraced the proposition that evil is non-being with the same readiness with which our contemporaries, both Christian and non-Christian theodicists, seem to dismiss it.

3. The polemical context within which the problem of evil is discussed has changed considerably too. In premodernity, the main alternatives to monotheism (and the associated theistic view) were polytheism and dualism. In the web of polytheistic beliefs, to the extent to which those could be said to form a coherent whole, evil was due to bad luck, the alignment of the stars, or the workings of some malicious god. On a popular level, different forms of fatalism are still with us, if we take into account the enduring popularity of psychics and the questionable comfort that millions still derive from consulting their horoscopes. On a less popular level, deterministic explanations are peddled as the latest achievements of natural science and medicine. While serious metaphysical dualists of the Manichean or Cathar bent are hard to come by today, some rather peculiar and watered-down versions of dualism have survived in the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy and the musings of some New Agers. It seems that the intellectual niche previously occupied by dualism now has a new tenant: protest atheism. While doubts about the divine realm were a theoretical possibility already in the time of the Psalmist: “The fool says in his heart: there is no God” (Ps. 14: 1, 53: 1), the number of people who were prepared to entertain the same idea publicly in premod-

[36] See H. J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Hague, 1974), p. 31.

ern times was admittedly quite small. The Epicureans had a very unpopular reputation of being covert atheists, even though they were professed polytheists, who denied divine providence. Even the long-suffering Job could doubt God's justice, but not his existence. Most ancients would have found Hans Küng's dictum that the problem of evil is "the rock of atheism" largely incomprehensible. Our contemporaries, on the contrary, naturally resonate with Stendhal's bon mot: "God's only excuse is that he does not exist."

To be sure, protest atheism itself comes in different forms. As one possibility, consider the existential agony with which Ivan Karamazov rejects the harmony of divine plan in the face of the atrocious suffering of children in Dostoevsky's famous novel. For Ivan, no prospect of future bliss or punishment could possibly outweigh the dark irrationality of evil. As a result, Dostoevsky's hero rejects the world and the Creator's plan as absurdly cruel. Ivan's rebellion was joined by a chorus of modern thinkers, including the twentieth-century French existentialists Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Atheism as a response to evil had next to no existential grip on our premodern ancestors. They could very well be disappointed in particular institutions that offered solutions to the problem of evil, but they were far less inclined to abandon God.

4. In premodernity, the trilemma of divine goodness, omnipotence, and the existence of evil was addressed by limiting the scope of genuine evil to sin and by insisting that God includes all evil into his redemptive purposes and turns it into good. By contrast, contemporary theodicists are more prepared to modify the divine attributes in classical theism than to question the possibility of gratuitous evil. In his bestselling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner proposes that God is not powerful enough to resist the forces of natural evil, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and deceases. According to

Kushner, God has limited resources for coping with the forces of chaos in the universe. Process thinkers offer a more philosophically refined version of this thesis, arguing that God develops with the world. Process theologians build the limitations of divine power and other attributes into the nature of God.

In contrast to process theologians, open theists approach the problem if evil not as a trilemma, but as a quadrilemma, including also the attribute of divine omniscience. Open theists reject any deterministic accounts of divine foreknowledge in order to safeguard genuine human freedom. The resultant version of theism is arguably more compatible with revelation, although equally fraught with difficulties of a purely philosophical character (coherence) and religious character (is God who does not know the future worthy of worship?).

Some Jewish and Christian theologians who study the Holocaust, propose a reconsideration of the traditional understanding of divine attributes and divine action in light of the tragedy. They argue that divine omnipotence and divine omnipresence cannot be approached in the same manner "after the Holocaust". While their approaches differ considerably, the common theme is that God's permission of horrendous evils requires a different understanding of God.

Most kenotic theologians (considerable differences among them notwithstanding), in contrast, propose that a limitation of any divine perfection is not an inherent "defect" of the divine nature, but a function of the divine will.[37] In other words, evil is permitted not because God is by nature incapable of preventing

[37] John Polkinghorne, ed. *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). For a recent assessment of different kenotic theories from the standpoint of Chalcedonian Christology, broadly conceived, see C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

it, but because God chooses to limit his ability to destroy evil. The kenotic models of God's interaction with creation often include similar limitations of divine omniscience and other divine perfections. The common denominator in process theism, open theism, and kenoticism is the impulse to modify classical theism in order to account for the reality of evil. Most premodern Christian thinkers were not prepared to make such an accommodation.

In addition, many contemporary theodicists question the traditional theistic concepts of divine immutability and impassibility. They propose instead that God suffers compassionately with and for humanity. For them God, to use Whitehead's oft-quoted statement, is "a fellow-sufferer who understands." For Jürgen Moltmann and other proponents of the theology of the cross, the cross is, first of all, a symbol of God's self-identification with the God-forsaken humanity.[38] For the premodern Christian authors, in the incarnation, God makes human nature his own in order to transform its experiences. The experiences of suffering and death that are involuntary for most humans are rendered redemptive and free when they are transformed by the Logos. The patristic emphasis is not on the Logos suffering with us, although this aspect of the divine incarnation is not neglected, but on the Logos incarnate overcoming the limitations of suffering and death.

5. In the premodern theories of atonement, the fundamental problem is not suffering or gratuitous evil, but rather humanity's sin and alienation from God. In these theories, humanity's sinful condition is cashed out in different terms: as a transgression of the covenant, as missing the mark, as a burden, as a debt, as a state of captivity, as a disease, as a crime meriting capital punishment, as a failure to love, and so on. Correspond-

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[38] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

ingly, God intervenes through Christ in order to offer sacrifice, to defeat the power of the demonic, to restore health to dying humanity by deifying it, to pay the moral debt in satisfaction of God's violated honor, to propitiate God's just wrath against the unrighteous, and to inspire all by an example of true love, to name the most influential possibilities. For modern theodicists, in contrast, God is on trial and stands in need of justification. God becomes reconciled to unjustly suffering humanity by becoming a fellow-sufferer. This shift of emphasis has led some theologians to speak of the "abandonment of atonement,"[39] as traditionally understood.

6. The traditional metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and eschaton has been questioned by historians, natural scientists, and postmodern philosophers on different grounds. While many patristic theologians allegorized the stories of creation and the fall, much of early Christian theology depended upon some version of the claim that there was a causal link between Adam and Eve's behavior in the garden and subsequent drama of human history. For most of our contemporaries, be they ethicists, biologists or historians, the claim that the first human transgression has radically changed the original harmony of all creation has lost much of its explanatory power.[40]

In late antiquity the sobering Augustinian doctrine of original sin put all doubts about the possibility of undeserved suffering to rest. According to this doctrine, all humanity, because of its

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[39] Colin Grant, "The Abandonment of Atonement," *Kings Theological Review* 9 (1986), pp. 1-8.

[40] Cf. the remark of Joseph F. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 59: "People brought up on evolutionary concepts, on the belief that all life forms struggle for survival, usually against other life forms, see Augustine's theory [that once the world had been perfect and that we had lived in harmony with all creation] as something fantastic."

implication in Adam's transgression, justly deserves nothing more than the perpetual pains of hell from which some are rescued by God's unmerited grace. Since the Enlightenment, the clouds of moral doubt have begun to gather over Augustine's doctrine, with the result that only a few contemporary Christian theologians would be prepared to defend this doctrine in its classical austerity. Contemporary theodicists point out that since humanity cannot be held collectively guilty before God, the rather facile explanation that horrendous evils are all forms of divine punishment or providential testing is not very compelling.

As I mentioned earlier, in our time other narrative frameworks are competing for the dominant position once occupied by the Christian master narrative of salvation history. Natural scientists have proposed a master narrative beginning with the Big Bang, continuing with the appearance of life and Neo-Darwinian evolution, and eventually resulting in the heat death of the universe. In the hands of Richard Dawkins and his followers, Neo-Darwinism has acquired the status of an alternative worldview, which purports to account for the extraordinary waste and atrocious suffering in nature by postulating a complex interaction of blind chance (random mutation of genes) and equally purposeless necessity of the laws of nature (natural selection).[41] Ironically, one may discern in the cosmodicy of Neo-Darwinism a resurgence of the Greek pre-philosophic view that misfortunes are brought about by a mixture of chance and necessity.

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[41] C. Darwin wrote: "I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance," quoted from Peter Harrison, "Purpose, Design and the Intelligibility of Nature,", p. 19.

Another metanarrative, which has gripped the minds of billions in the twentieth century, is Marxism. This theory offers what could be called a socio-dicy, i.e. a theory of how to fix the world's evils by building a perfectly just society of the future. Marxist theory removes the center of the spiritual battle from individual human heart (as in Christian asceticism) and relocates this battle in the sphere of large-scale historical events and social institutions. Karl Marx famously postulated that class struggle is the driving force of history. Having stigmatized Christian eschatology as an opium for the people, he proposed his own secular eschatological vision instead. The Marxist plan of world-improvement included a violent revolution, a godless apocalypse in which the force of the absolute good, the proletariat, would rise against the force of the absolute evil, the capitalists, to bring about communism. As a political project, Marxist ideology, when put in practice, has led to the loss of over fifty million lives, when we total up the victims of Stalin's Gulags, Mao's Cultural Revolution, and other experiments of this sort. Some western intellectuals seemed to be undeterred by these disastrous experiments, as theories of justice with Marxist features continue to be a popular sport in the academy.

The other twentieth-century project of radical world-improvement was Hitler's Third Reich, which also offered a (perverse) analysis of the causes of evil and a deadly solution for how to set things right. The self-inflicted horrors of the twentieth century should have taught us that nontrivial comprehensive world-improvement is exceptionally difficult to achieve without the bringing about of terrible evils. Tragically, some politicians remain undeterred by the lessons of the past.

The six major shifts identified here are meant to serve as rough indicators of the "climate of opinion" which colors our reception of premodern Christian approaches to the problem of evil. Theologically, my analysis is not intended as a paean to theolog-

ically happier times, nor as a Jeremiad about the present state of theology. Rather, I want to emphasize that we are dealing with a dynamic picture.

To add a seventh postmodern twist to the story, perhaps the greatest evil of postmodernity is that it recognizes no evil, or to be more precise, the prevailing postmodern sensibility is to treat evil not as a feature of external reality, but as a function of private judgment. As a countercurrent to this widespread relativistic tendency, which reduces all truth claims to power claims, there is an equally strong tendency to treat certain social taboos of the present-day western society as radical evils that demand regular sacrifices of scapegoats and vast amounts of money to run the institutions that address them. We might not be able to save ourselves from all our contradictions, but at least we might see them more clearly when we treat the problem of evil afforded by a horizon larger than modernity.

The task of contemporary theology is to combine the penetrating patristic analysis of the dynamics of moral evil with modern sensitivity to cases of horrendous and undeserved suffering. Such a synthesis holds the promise of becoming more existentially compelling than any non-religious answer currently on offer. Nevertheless, even if most objections to the traditional theistic account of evil were put to rest, there is much about this problem that is bound to remain shrouded in mystery, at least on this side of the eschaton.