

Feminism and the Problem of Evil

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Introduction

That feminists have something distinctive to say about the problem of evil and suffering can sound strange to philosophical ears. Confronted with the extent of suffering in the world, and the reality of human wickedness, exemplified in sickening acts of brutality, seeking a feminist analysis can seem at best irrelevant, at worst a distraction. There are few things that we can say with certainty about human experience, but it would seem that the experience of suffering – whether arising from natural forces or from human action – is something that unites all, regardless of their gender.

Feminists have challenged this claim, and this chapter considers a range of approaches offered by feminists to the problem of evil. Exploring these feminist perspectives enables a further feature to come to light: feminist theories invariably return to the practical solutions that might be made to evil and suffering in our world. This emphasis challenges the traditional focus of theodicy, but it also raises a question about philosophical engagements with evil more generally: to what extent are the kinds of responses that philosophers might make to the horrors of evil capable of ameliorating the experience of suffering? For feminists suggest that in approaching the problem of evil, the emphasis should be less on theological questions of how evil and God might coexist – or be shown to be incompatible – and more on drawing attention to ethical questions of how to live in a world that can be experienced as harsh and uncaring.

Defining Feminism

At the outset, it is important to recognize that feminism does not take only one form: different schools of thought make up the diversity of feminist perspectives. In contemporary feminism, the most obvious distinction lies between those committed to advancing the

cause of equality, and those who seek to focus on sexual difference as a way of valuing what is viewed as the *distinctive* experience of women. We will see how this difference in emphasis influences the way in which different feminists approach the problem of evil.

Yet despite such different theoretical perspectives, there remains a common concern. Feminism is first and foremost a political movement concerned to expose and correct the marginalization of women's lives and experiences and to address gender injustice. Both difference and equality feminisms engage to varying extents in forms of analysis connected to what Pamela Sue Anderson calls "the lived experience" of women (Anderson 1998). By addressing the injustice and oppression that women have experienced throughout human history – and, indeed, continue to experience today – the feminist goal is to advocate ways of organizing society that enable more just ways of living that promote the flourishing of all human beings.

Connecting theory and practice in this way leads to a particular approach to some of the key assumptions made in philosophy and theology. Ideas are not without an impact on the way in which the world is perceived and society structured. And this has particular implications for women's lives. Recognizing this connection has led some feminists to focus their attention on exposing often unacknowledged misogyny in theological and philosophical theorizing. Far from being purely theoretical musings, negative theological and philosophical statements about the nature of "Woman" affect the position of women in both religious and secular society (Lloyd 1984; Clack 1999). Recognizing this connection makes exposing theological and philosophical misogyny a vital practice for preparing the ground for fresh feminist arguments that take their starting place from women's lives and experiences.

Feminism is, then, denoted by a dual political and intellectual movement, and it is this interplay that lies beneath the range of feminist engagements with the problem of evil. For some feminists, the primary task is to challenge the habitual formulation of the problem in the discourse of theodocists (Jantzen 1998, 263–264; Joy 2010). As antitheodocists similarly argue, the theodocist shapes the problem of evil as a puzzle that needs to be solved (Surin 1986; Clack 2007). For it to be convincing, a theodicy must maintain belief in the good, all-powerful and all-knowing God of theism in the face of the experience of evil and suffering. In seeking to balance these apparently contradictory claims, theodocists provide a *metaphysical* account of evil: evil can be justified by explaining the role it plays in the structure of God's creation (see Chapter 12).

While there may be much to commend the rigor with which theodocists go about this task, questions might be raised as to what, ultimately, it achieves. And here tensions arise between different views about the goal of philosophical practice. Mary Midgley argues that the problem with the theodical approach – regardless of how convincing any particular theodicy appears to be – is that it fails to confront the reality of human wickedness as it is experienced in the world (Midgley 1984, 1–2). Evil is and remains a problem whether or not a solution is found that enables the existence of God to be held in tension with the reality of evil and suffering. For Midgley, theodocies ignore the real force of how the problem is felt in life, and she directs attention away from the metaphysics of evil to the ethical question of human wickedness, and particularly how it might be identified and combated.

We might feel unsure as to the criticism being made of theodicy here: after all, the theodocist makes clear their starting point; who is to say that considering the concept of God necessarily excludes further discussion of the practical implications of any particular

theodicy? That may well be so, yet as Terrence Tilley (1991) and Kenneth Surin suggest, there tends to be a distinction between theoretical accounts which focus on the problem evil poses for God and accounts that engage more directly with practical concerns of how to respond to suffering. Feminists may come to different conclusions about how to proceed, but their commitments invariably lead them to practical concerns. Exploring how they do this opens up the subject in surprising – and sometimes disquieting – ways.

Women and Evil

Common philosophical practice draws a distinction between “evil” on the one hand and “suffering” on the other. Evil refers to the metaphysical dimension; the structures of the universe; or, put more simply, the way the world “really” is. Suffering, on the other hand, denotes the *experience* that comes about either through exposure to what philosophers call “natural” or “physical” phenomena like disease, volcanoes, earthquakes, or through the moral failure of human individuals. In recent years, secularists have challenged the propriety of using the word “evil” at all. To talk of “evil” assumes the existence of absolute values transcending the human world with which many are now uncomfortable. In practice, the two terms are frequently blurred in the writings of philosophers of religion and theologians; not surprisingly, given that both themes challenge belief in the God defined according to the tenets of theism.

An analysis of the definition of evil has led some feminists to draw attention to the role the category “Woman” plays in western forms of its construction. Defining evil as that which stands in opposition to God or the Good reflects a dualistic construction of human experience with a long inheritance. This dualistic framework is not without implications for the way in which men and women have been understood and their aptitudes defined. Grace Jantzen shows this by tracing this oppositional structure back to Plato’s dualistic account of the universe, which itself depends on categories developed by Pythagoras. According to Aristotle’s table of Pythagorean opposites, “limit,” “odd,” “one,” “right,” “male,” “resting,” “straight,” “light,” “good,” and “square” were understood in opposition to that which was “unlimited,” “even,” “plural,” “left,” “female,” “moving,” “curved,” “darkness,” “bad,” and “oblong” (Jantzen 1995, 32). Jantzen highlights the implications of these categories for how male and female are understood. The male is associated with implicitly good qualities, while the female is associated with all that is considered bad.

In Plato’s hands, a further dimension is added. The body and that which is physical is associated with the female, while the mind and that which is spiritual is associated with the male. Given that Plato’s aim for the philosopher was to transcend the flesh, the implications this has for women are profound. In the *Symposium*, the lowest form of love is love of man for woman, for all that can come out of such a union are more beings destined for death; only in the love of man for man are the “eternal children of the mind” (the ideas that lead to wisdom and the Good) capable of being created (*Symposium* 205b–209a). Connecting women with the passing nature of this world is reiterated in the account given of Socrates’ death. He rebukes his grieving supporters, saying that only women should fear death, the implication being that women’s fear results from their intimate connection to the physical world, itself destined to decay and death (*Phaedo* 117d–e).

The reversal of value implicit in Plato’s philosophy is noteworthy: not least for the effect it has on women. Their reproductive function ties them to the world of representations

and death; as Val Plumwood comments, that which is valued is now “the lifeless world of the Forms [which] gives eternal life, [while] the living world of nature is called a tomb” (Plumwood 1993, 97). Given this rejection of the physical world and woman’s connection with it, it is difficult to think of women as philosophers. Incapable of transcending the world of the flesh and mere appearance, they fail to have the necessary detachment for cultivating philosophical reflection. Little wonder, given this vision of what philosophy involves, that women have struggled to find a place for themselves in the history of philosophy.

If woman emerges as something base in Plato’s thought, a similar movement permeates the Christian tradition. The suspicion surrounding femaleness is given a new twist with the interpretations of the biblical story of Eve, which came to the fore during the period when the Church sought to establish its theology. While the account of the fall of humanity in Genesis 1–3 apports blame to both partners, in the works of these early church fathers, emphasis is placed firmly on Eve’s responsibility. It is through Eve’s successful temptation of Adam that death, suffering, and expulsion from the idyllic Garden of Eden come about. For influential theologians like Tertullian (circa 160–225CE), this dreadful punishment is the responsibility of *all* women, who he describes as “daughters of Eve.” Eve is no longer an individual accountable for her own actions but representative of all women who must share her ignominy (Pagels 1989, 63–68).

This is a significant move that impacts upon the way evil is understood and constructed. There is something about woman’s essential character – traced back to the first mother – which means she is always more open to the forces of evil than her male counterpart. Her nature cannot be escaped. She is, according to Aquinas, a male *manqué* or “a defective male” (*Summa Theologiae* 1a. 92, 1). Read against the backdrop of Augustine’s theory of evil as that which lacks of goodness (*City of God*, book 11, chapter 22), a further connection is established between women and evil. Defined in terms of lack or defect, woman in her very being is connected to evil in a way in which man is not. Such thinking goes some way to explaining the weird piece of doggerel by J.K. Stephens cited by Nel Noddings in her *Women and Evil*:

If all the harm that women have done
Were put in a bundle and rolled into one,
Earth would not hold it
The sky could not enfold it,
It could not be lighted nor warmed by the sun.
Such masses of evil
Would puzzle the devil
And keep him in fuel while Time’s wheels run.
But if all the harm that’s been done by men
Were doubled and doubled and doubled again,
And melted and fused into vapour and then
Were squared and raised to the power of ten,
There wouldn’t be nearly enough, not near
To keep a small girl for the tenth of a year.
(in Noddings 1989, 35)

Such sentiments might well be dismissed as a crude attempt at humor, but considered against the backdrop of this philosophical and theological inheritance, there is a certain

logic to it. No matter that a quantitative analysis could establish the male role in atrocities to have been far greater, historically, than that of the female. This poem is not concerned with offering an accurate reflection of the acts of real women. What it reveals, instead, is a perception of the essence of femaleness derived from that philosophical and theological inheritance. It also does more than that, for what it reveals is the impact such theorizing has on the practical ordering of society. If women are viewed in this way, it is a relatively easy step to conclude that for there to be a safe, ordered society, they must be subject to patriarchal control. Eve's crime stands as a compelling example of what happens if they are not.

Tracing the development of the figure of Eve reveals a further aspect in the history of Western discourse about evil. As the story of the fall takes on more weight in the tradition, Eve's sin is described in increasingly sexual ways. She is *seduced* by Satan in his guise as a serpent and goes on to *seduce* her husband into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Brown 1988, 153). If Eve is "seducer," there are implications for the more general area of sexuality. Because of the female role in reproduction and the marked changes in the female body as a result, it is not surprising that sexuality should have been associated with femaleness. The male role in this process is hidden by comparison, and this has contributed to a view of sexuality as somehow distanced from the male. Sexuality has been connected with women, not men. Given the kind of pessimism that connects physicality with decay and death, it is not surprising that figures in the history of philosophy and theology should have viewed female sexuality with suspicion. Woman as creator of life also opens up the inevitability of death. Given that this is her "nature," it seems reasonable to doubt her ability to be "good," particularly when that which is good is defined in juxtaposition to the physical world.

Associating the female with that which is evil is not without consequences for real women. The most notorious example of this, according to the feminist philosopher and post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, is the witch craze of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. For Daly, these events can only be understood if one identifies the deep-rooted misogyny which lends itself to "gynocide" (her term for the systematic murder of women) (Daly 1991, 306).

In making this claim, Daly draws attention to the rhetoric of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), the Vatican-endorsed tome which acted as the handbook for the fifteenth-century witch-finders. Its writers describe the weaknesses of women, which they suggest make them more prone to become the devil's familiars than men. Somewhat contradictorily, they argue both that women are the weaker sex *and* that they are powerful enough to enact extreme evil. Importantly, if the evil embodied by the devil is to be identified and defeated, every tool available must be used, and that includes torture. A sickening dynamic is thereby justified: in order to defeat evil, the witch as the conduit of the devil can be treated as less than human, and acts of unbelievable cruelty can legitimately be inflicted upon her (Summers 1971, 223).

More recently, Margaret Denike (2003) has developed Daly's argument, drawing attention to the way in which the definition of witch as evil incarnate leads the Church to sanction a system that persecuted scapegoats. But this is not all. Denike argues that the witch craze reveals the mechanisms behind patriarchal attempts to control women. How better to keep women submissive than by designating some of them as witches who are then subject to torture and horrific forms of execution? What an abject lesson for the rest!

Engaging in the history of ideas is not without an affect on how the standard discussion of evil in the philosophy of religion might be approached. In the witch trials, philosophical

and theological arguments are shown to have shaped political and social action – in this case, supporting acts of great cruelty. Ideas are never innocent; they cannot be detached from the nexus of social relationships that shape our day to day lives. When constructing ideas about evil, we need always to have an eye on the implications of our conclusions for those with whom we share the social space. Philosophy understood in this way is a practical discipline that cannot avoid engagement with the social sphere. As Michele Le Doeuff notes, “knowledge either breeds hope or crushes it” (Le Doeuff 2003, 83), and it is a socially engaged model of philosophy that emerges from acknowledging the gendering of evil in the western tradition.

This is not to say that the readings put forward by Daly and Denike have gone unchallenged. Most obviously, it is difficult to maintain the idea that women were the sole victims of the witch hunts when men were also identified as witches and treated accordingly (though admittedly not in the same numbers). Moreover, it is far from the case that women were condemned only on the word of men. Women often accused other women, as in the infamous cases of the Pendle Witches and the Salem Witch trials. Daly and Denike’s gendering of historical events runs the risk of framing women as innocent victims, incapable of acting wickedly because of their oppression at the hands of men (see West 1995). Such views ignore the existence of women who perpetrate evil (we might think of Myra Hindley or Rose West), while also failing to engage with the complexity of female collusion in acts of violence and abuse committed by men (Motz 2008).

Accepting such criticisms need not mean that we ignore the importance of considering how definitions of evil are constructed. As Denike says, by tracing the history of evil as an idea feminists have exposed the means by which good is defined in contradistinction to an “other” which acts as the image for evil. So in the witch craze, the witch is a cipher for that which is *not-good*, playing a necessary role in how that which constitutes “the good” is envisaged. Once the gender of the witch is acknowledged, we become aware of the use of a specific model of the two sexes to create visions of what is good and what is evil. Male virtues are being opposed to female sins, which affect the way in which society is subsequently structured. We are back to the Pythagorean chart of opposing male and female values.

Tracing the historical identification of women with evil provides, then, the backdrop to the critique of the problem of evil that feminists launch. If feminists are far from content with elements of the problem’s habitual construction, how do they define it? There are a number of different approaches.

Gendering the Subject

By exposing the role that gender plays in the construction of evil, feminists reveal the habitual identification of femaleness with evil. That women and evil have been connected in this way might come as a surprise, given the continuing influence of the Victorian model of woman as “the angel in the house,” placid, wholesome, good, and kind, occupying the private rather than the public space. While these visions of woman occupy opposite extremes of a spectrum, they allow for the same result: women are removed from the social and political places of influence and power. Not surprisingly, feminists have been concerned to expand the sphere of female influence as well as challenge the distorted images of women that emerge from exclusion. In an attempt to expand the parameters of the

debates surrounding evil, feminists start their exploration with the experience of women. The discussion of moral evil provides an apt illustration of how this method works and how it challenges standard approaches to the subject.

Early feminist reflections on evil focused on exposing the gender assumptions that underpin the Christian notion of sin used to explain the source of the moral failings that lead to wicked acts. Valerie Saiving's groundbreaking work identified the dominant Christian formulation of sin as pride (Saiving 1960). For Saiving, defining sin in this way showed the limitations of a theology that proceeded from male experience of the world. Defining sin as pride is not necessarily appropriate for all; rather it reflects male preoccupations in a society that overwhelmingly revolves around their concerns and assumptions. If Western society assumes that "the male is God" (to appropriate Mary Daly's (1975, 227) famous phrase), it is not surprising that sin should be equated with pride and self-centeredness. To correct *selfishness*, *selflessness* must be cultivated.

Women face a different set of problems, for they inhabit a society whose political, intellectual, and social life is dominated by men. (And note that Saiving is writing before the achievements of the Women's Movement that began in the 1960s and that led to improvements in the legal and social status of women in the West.) Selfishness and pride are not the problems that dominate the lives of the majority of women. What might be called "female sins" emerge from an overemphasis on self-sacrifice as a virtue that stops women developing their own capabilities, allowing them to succumb to passivity, triviality, and the definitions of others (Saiving 1960, 15).

Here, we get an indication of how contemporary feminisms of sexual difference approach evil. Saiving's analysis is shaped by her contention that male experience of the world is different from female experience. Given that is the case, male temptations are different from female temptations. Saiving's analysis depends upon addressing the impact the structures of a male-dominated society has upon men and women. These affects are to be understood differently, bearing in mind one's sex.

More recently, Serene Jones has developed a similar approach through the lens of the French feminist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's feminism of sexual difference (Jones 1995; Irigaray 2005). For Irigaray, religious images play a key role in developing one's sense of self as a subject. Irigaray's analysis draws implicitly on Feuerbach's claim that the concept of God is created by humans and reflects human concerns and ideals. More than that, the divine provides a model for the values, ideals, and virtues to be aspired to by the individual. God becomes a template for human subjectivity.

In adopting Feuerbach's framework, Irigaray considers the implications of taking seriously sexual difference for such a model. The process of establishing male subjectivity is well served by a divine who reflects male experience. We might think of the masculine language and images used to establish the concept of God. God is described as "Father," "Lord," "King." In the Christian tradition, he sends his Son who appoints 12 male disciples. It is relatively easy for men to use such images and ideals to develop their sense of who they are and who they want to be.

For women, the situation is far from straightforward. There is no female ideal form espousing a genuine alterity to which women might aspire. We might think, for example, of the way in which ideals of feminine beauty – reflected in the fashion industry – force the female body to be shaped according to ideals of the male rather than the female body: how else to explain the obsession with thinness and angularity? Irigaray's analysis extends this idea to all areas of experience, concluding that women need a "Female Divine" to act

as a divine horizon for shaping their subjectivity (Irigaray 1996). Jones develops the implications of this assessment, arguing that the lack of an appropriate female divine means women are more likely to succumb to the sin of fragmentation. They fail to strive for integration, and thereby fail to develop their own subjectivity (Jones 1995, 61).

In similar vein, Irigaray identifies sin with the failure to recognize sexual difference. Forcing all human experience into one model that reflects male experience means the distinctive experience of women is ignored (Jaarsma 2003). Striving for equality becomes problematic as it can become a mere cipher for forcing women to conform to a set of alien (male) ideals in order to access the political world. Accepting sexual difference challenges this hegemony. But it also challenges the concept of God that underpins theodical discourse. The God of theism – conceived through a set of apparently abstract values – mirrors the masculine history that has nurtured its development. Power, knowledge, immutability, and impassibility (attributes at the heart of this conception) shape and are shaped by ideals of the male. And, of course, it is precisely these attributes that run into difficulty when confronted with issues of evil and suffering. If Irigaray's critique is taken on board, the concept of what is divine might look very different, and in consequence the framing of the problem of evil might, in turn, be presented differently (an idea that we will return to later in this discussion).

Structural Nature of Evil

Not all feminists accept Irigaray's analysis. The French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff sees Irigaray's solution as deeply problematic; not least because it reflects historical stereotypes of femaleness that place it in opposition to the male. Le Doeuff points out that Irigaray's emphasis on sexual difference is too easily appropriated by conservatives claiming the womanly virtues to lie in the three "c's" ("Ks") of children ("Kinder"), cooking ("Küche"), and church ("Kirche") (Le Doeuff 2003, 65). Le Doeuff's solution is more obviously political, employing the language of equality to challenge discrimination, thus resisting the social injustice women experience as the result of living in unequal societies.

In offering a political solution to evil that focuses attention on combating injustice, Le Doeuff echoes Sharon Welch's expansion of the problem of evil into an analysis of the political and social realm. Welch identifies structural evils – sexism, racism, and classism – enshrined in the political systems and institutions of the West. It is these structures that lead to the kind of experiences that blight women's lives and that a feminist approach to evil – grounded in social action – must challenge (Welch 1990).

Welch's shift in emphasis affects the examples used to illuminate the problem. Rather than employ dramatic illustrations of human brutality, she exposes the less obviously dramatic but much more prevalent effect of unjust structures. In this way, her analysis reflects the influence the writer and cultural critic Hannah Arendt has on feminist thinking about evil (Jantzen 1998; Birmingham 2003; Geddes 2003; Joy 2010).

Arendt's contribution emerges from her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the man responsible for the trains that took the Nazi's victims to the death camps (Arendt 1963). Arendt was struck by how little Eichmann looked the part of a villain. He was inconsequential, bland, boring. He was the classic faceless bureaucrat. He had none of the Promethean glamour associated with evil found in literary figures like Milton's Satan or Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. Instead, his chief worry as he faced judgment was that he had not

advanced quickly enough on his chosen career path. It was this – not his role in making possible the Holocaust – that led him to see himself as something of a failure.

Shocked by this lack of moral awareness and empathy, Arendt coined the term “the banality of evil” (Arendt 1963, 287) to denote the evil that arises from bureaucratic systems where moral judgment is detached from one’s actions. In such structures, all that matters is to do one’s job correctly. Under Arendt’s analysis, evil ceases to be something strange, becoming instead something grounded in the day-to-day processes of a system that cares nothing for the lives of its citizens. This kind of structural evil is extremely difficult to identify and, as a result, can also be incredibly difficult to challenge.

Arendt’s analysis shifts the problem away from the metaphysics of evil toward ethics and the question of how to identify and resist human wickedness. Taking on board Arendt’s ideas, Mary Midgley is hesitant about understanding evil primarily through discussion of the relationship between it and God. Her concern is more immediate: how to identify and deal with wickedness, and she cites with approval Erich Fromm’s maxim: “as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man” (in Midgley 1984, 5). Evil is less obvious, less dramatic than we might like to think. Expect the wicked to be monstrous and you are unlikely to recognize wickedness when it is being enacted. Like Arendt, Midgley fears that the language of evil too easily aggrandizes it, divorcing it from petty actions and failures that allow wickedness to flourish. Midgley’s analysis offers a rather mundane view of wickedness as based in thoughtlessness. Through the inability to *think* about the consequences of one’s actions, to empathize with the other, awful things can come about.

Neither Midgley nor Arendt offer explicitly feminist analyses, but their approaches suggest something of the way in which the feminist might proceed. Both make a shift away from metaphysical debates toward a focus on the lived experience of wickedness and – most importantly – how to address it and the suffering that results from it.

Recognizing that which is evil in the mundane affects the examples used by different feminist theorists. Rather than abstract or generalized examples of the effects of moral evil, feminists illustrate their work with examples derived from the ordinary experiences of women. For Morny Joy (2010) and Debra Bergoffen (2003), this means recognizing that some evils can only really be understood if located in an analysis of sex and gender. Both Joy and Bergoffen identify rape as a specific evil directed at the female body. In order to understand this phenomenon, the philosopher of evil must consider the complex roots that lead to such abuses.

A good example of what this approach means in practice is provided by the liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle. Soelle describes an instance of domestic violence as a means of identifying the overlapping structures and experiences that make up the contours of suffering. Describing the experience of a woman suffering domestic abuse, Soelle argues that her suffering is multilayered: it is in the bruises she bears on her body, but it is more than that. Isolated and financially dependent on her abuser, she does not have the means to leave. She feels ashamed that her marriage is a failure, but knows that to leave her husband would bring much criticism in a small community that views divorce with disapproval. Were she to divorce, she would have to move away, thereby losing her roots (Soelle 1975, 10–16). Her suffering is physical, but it is also psychological, as well as something shaped by the values of her community. If we are to truly understand the roots of such suffering, and – most importantly – do something to stop it, we must resist simplistic answers that distort its complex roots.

And Soelle is well aware of how theology can act as a further source for such suffering rather than as a solution to it. Soelle identifies a particular understanding of God and humanity that contributes to this woman's suffering (Soelle 1975, 22–28). This is the God conceived as a sadist who inflicts suffering for our own good or in order to punish us for our faults. If this is the case, then in order to be good, we have no choice but to be passive and accept "his" judgment. Soelle resists this image, and her analysis provides a powerful critique of the way in which theology can contribute to the structures of suffering. Responding to suffering entails challenging not just the experiences of suffering, but the ideas that support and sometimes create them. And as we shall see in a moment, it may lead to new visions of the divine that reflect struggles for meaning and liberation.

Michèle Doeuff's analysis is philosophical rather than theological, but like Soelle, she relies upon an example of domestic violence for its force. Her concern is to show the power of philosophical analysis for political liberation. She describes a woman trapped in a violent marriage, incapable of recognizing as violence the violence her husband inflicts on her. Le Doeuff suggests that philosophy has a practical focus, for it enables the identification of "cognitive blockages" that hold the individual prisoner. Through critical thought, it is possible to see more clearly. This clarity of thought is not simply theoretical; it is also liberating: in this case, recognizing as violence the injuries inflicted by her husband opens up the possibility of challenging her social circumstances (Le Doeuff 2003, xv). And here the philosophical engagement with evil takes on social importance. Thinking clearly about the problem, its structure and sources, enables practical and political solutions to emerge.

Challenging the "Purpose" of Evil

Feminist analysis of the problem of evil seems, then, to be located in a rather different conceptual place to that inhabited by theodocists. In the standard approach to the subject, the philosopher of religion's concern is to secure – or challenge – the existence of God in the face of what is undoubtedly the greatest threat to "his" acceptance. Central to this task is the attempt to establish whether suffering is meaningless or whether it has a place in a universe created by God. This focus makes possible the sidelining of political and social injustice; as best it is placed on the margins, at worse ignored altogether. Yet feminists highlight another problem with this approach: attempting to establish the meaning or meaninglessness of suffering can avoid a proper engagement with the voice of the victim.

We might start with the examples provided by Richard Swinburne as he seeks to explain the place of evil and suffering in God's universe. Like toothache or the socializing of small children (Swinburne 1977, 81–82; 89), pain plays an important role in the creation. Evil and suffering are also meaningful, he argues, for they provide the necessary counterpoint to goodness and pleasure, enabling the development of moral virtues and help to establish better, deeper ways of living (Swinburne 2000): a rather neat approach to solving the problem.

Jennifer Geddes illustrates something of the feminist dissatisfaction with this kind of approach through considering Charlotte Delbo's reflections on her experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz. In contrast to Swinburne's rather bland examples, Delbo refuses to lessen the horror of the experience of real suffering: it is brutal, dehumanizing, and lacks any quality that suggests the possibility of future redemption. Delbo describes the extremes to which human brutality can bring a person, resisting the idea that such suffering could

ever have a purpose. To the contrary, such suffering brings with it only “useless knowledge” (Geddes 2003, 106). To illustrate this, she describes the experience of knowing that your mother is dead, yet being completely unable to shed a tear. What *precisely* does knowing that it is possible for a person to respond to their mother’s death in this deadened way add to knowledge of what it is to be human? Delbo’s answer is short and to the point. It adds nothing of real value. It is the kind of knowledge it would be better not to know.

Geddes believes Delbo’s comments raise questions about the academic engagement with evil and suffering. Feminists stress the importance of hearing women into speech. Given the history of evil that we traced earlier, we see what happens when women are denied a space in the intellectual and political sphere: ideas and systems that exclude them become commonplace and enshrined.

Geddes extends this insight to the experience of the sufferer and their place in theodical discourse. The philosopher of evil or the theodist can all-too-easily become an interpreter of the experiences of the one suffering. As Geddes points out, the problem is that we can easily “impose our “vision” of suffering onto their experiences” (Geddes 2003, 106), rather than paying attention to what the sufferer actually says. And this is vitally important for considering how suffering might be understood. Only the sufferer can determine whether their suffering was useful or not. Placing the sufferer centre stage marks the end of discourses of mastery where one speaks of evil with “a knowledge of evil from on high” (Geddes 2003, 114). The implication here is that the language of theodicy is inadequate to the task of really listening to the suffering, and Geddes moves away from theodicy toward a perspective that has much in common with that of liberation theology. When we reflect upon evil and suffering, we should do so in such a way that the victim is able to speak and to be heard rather than forcing our own words and concerns into their mouths.

Evil in Relationships

Geddes exemplifies the feminist concern to place the discussion of evil and suffering squarely in the context of concrete situations. Attention shifts away from discourse of God toward an analysis of human relationships. Evil is understood as something relational, for, as Geddes notes, “evil occurs between people” (Geddes 2003, 105).

Taking this approach generates a variety of perspectives. So Claudia Card draws attention to sources that support acts of genocide. Her analysis focuses specifically on the kind of social relationships that lend themselves to the rejection of particular groups (Card 2003). For others, such as Drusilla Cornell (2003), Alison Jaggar (2003), and Sara Ruddick (2003), it necessitates addressing the events of 9/11 and the relationship between religion, the state, and systems of terror. This does not mean that there is agreement on the kind of approach to this epoch-making event on the part of feminists. Ruddick focuses on “the moral horror” of this event, while Cornell recognizes the dangers of allowing one violent act to spawn more violence.

There may be differences, but what is being offered here are forms of contextual philosophy. That popular slogan of Second Wave feminism – “the personal is political” – also informs the discussion of evil. Evil and suffering are rooted in human relationships rather than (primarily) in some cosmic narrative about the nature of the universe. Making this shift means identifying, as Grace Jantzen notes, the central task as “putting an end to

suffering” (Jantzen 1998, 111). Understanding the roots of evil actions is important, but only if it acts to inform a deeper activism that seeks change.

It is worth paying attention to this claim, for it suggests that feminist philosophy is never a purely intellectual matter. It is practical, connected to the task of how to live. For that reason, a book like Blake Morrison’s (1997) *As If* provides a suitable model for the kind of engagement with evil a feminist might make. Morrison recounts the trial of the ten year old boys who killed the toddler James Bulger; but the book does far more than that. Morrison seeks to understand the complex roots of this appalling act, but uses it to consider what it means to be a child. It is an approach that leads him to challenge the propriety of a legal system that tries children in adult court. Approaching evil in this way lends itself to the critique of the political and legal status quo.

Evil and the Concept of God

Emphasizing practical engagement with evil and suffering does not mean that no feminist accounts consider the effect on the divine. There are, however, significant differences between such accounts and those offered by theodocists.

A good example is provided by Melissa Raphael in her Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust. Raphael resists the attempts of Jewish (male) theologians to find reasons for justifying God’s failure to act in the face of such suffering. She highlights the use made of the free will defense to achieve this end, particularly in the theology of Eliezer Berkowitz. Raphael identifies a key assumption: Berkowitz and others who employ a similar method see freedom and autonomy as the defining characteristics of humanity. This leads them to conclude that the best approach to the suffering in the camps is to show how individuals were able to maintain a sense of their own autonomy, thereby overcoming the evil that had engulfed them.

Raphael’s approach is different. She focuses on the experience of women in the camps and suggests a different model of what it is to be human. Rather than stress the shoring up of individual autonomy, she focuses on the relationships of the “sisterhoods” that sprang up in some of the camps. Identifying this collective network of support leads her to develop a radically different view of God from that which defines other theistic accounts. Rather than seeing God as the ultimate example of a free individual (the image that she believes lies behind the free will defense), she offers an image of God “immanent as Shekinah” (Raphael 2004, 146–147). This immanent, suffering God is not separate from the experience of the camps, but is found in the faces of those in the camps and (importantly) in their relationships.

Raphael thus develops a rather different view of the divine from that which constructs familiar narratives concerning evil. In similar vein, Grace Jantzen develops a form of pantheism where the divine is not seen as apart from the world, but immanent within it. The world is God’s body, as she frames it in her early theology (Jantzen 1984). Later, drawing upon Irigaray, she sees the divine as a horizon toward which we are moving; an ideal that is reflected in the world around us. Shifting attention away from a God who exists separately from the world allows for a different focus to develop in relation to evil and suffering. And in this Jantzen reflects that broader principle of the feminist engagement with evil. What matters is not justifying the ways of God to “men,” but taking seriously the world

and the people that inhabit it in order to find ways of challenging injustice and bringing about better ways of living for all.

Conclusion

Feminist responses to evil and suffering are rich and varied. While there is not one feminist way of engaging with such realities, there is a common concern to relate the problem less to a hypothetical divine, and more to the kind of systems, actions, and ways of living that might bring about a better kind of world.

Considering evil can be dispiriting. It can lead us to wonder if things could ever be different. But by grounding the discussion in the reality of human relationships, feminists suggest what Morny Joy has called a “muted optimism” (Joy 2010, 23) about the future. Joy’s claim comes as she considers Jantzen’s advocacy of natality as a way of understanding what it is to be human. Jantzen argues that we are all natal; we have all been born. She claims this offers the possibility of a more positive engagement with each other than the traditional focus on mortality where we are defined by the fact that we will die. Affirming natality suggests the possibility of taking seriously our relationships with each other, for in birth, we are all born into community, however weak or limited it might be. We are all dependent upon each other. A philosophy that starts from this principle will – as a matter of urgency – have to consider the things that promote better forms of community and relationship.

This practical focus forms the basis for the kind of engagement with evil and suffering that feminists offer. Resisting the temptation to practice philosophy as a form of detached, intellectual game leads feminists to an approach to evil and suffering that always necessitates engagement with the effect structures and practices have on human beings. It is this practical focus that offers the possibility not just for creative engagements with suffering, but for the kind of philosophical practice that is of relevance not just to the academy but to the wider world itself.

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