

On Constructing a Jewish Theodicy

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How does one construct a Jewish theodicy? A simple and tempting answer goes like this: One takes Jewish sources – Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval and modern Jewish philosophies – and extracts from them the dominant opinion about why there is evil. *Voilà* – there is your Jewish theodicy.

The task, unfortunately, is hardly this simple. First, there are *many* theodicies in Jewish tradition, and it is difficult if not arbitrary to isolate one as dominant. Jewish theodicies contradict one another with respect to such major questions as the extent of divine intervention in the world and the correctness of divine approval theories of goodness. Second, numerous traditional sources despair of ever coming up with a correct theodicy. Third, the method I described seems to be purely historical and interpretive, rather than philosophical. The Jewish philosopher wants not only to describe and interpret what Jews have thought (both formidable tasks, to be sure), but also to do normative work – to assess whether what they have thought is convincing.

I propose that, for a Jewish *philosopher*, a Jewish theodicy should satisfy two desiderata: (1) overlap or at least connectivity, or at the *very* least, compatibility with Jewish tradition, and (2) philosophical cogency.¹ There is no guarantee that the theodicy that is the most cogent philosophically is dominant in Jewish tradition, or even connected with it at all, or even compatible with Jewish theological ideas; in the last two cases, it is not clear in what sense it is a *Jewish* theodicy. If a theodicy is constructed as a fusion, however cohesive, of scattered elements in the tradition, its Jewishness is diminished because the theodicy *per se* is not in the tradition. Thus, whereas many philosophers look for explanations of evil that “work” without asking whether they can work within particular religious traditions, the Jewish philosopher’s task would be to either find a theodicy with a reasonably loud voice in tradition and show it is philosophically cogent, or take a cogent theodicy and locate it reasonably well in the tradition, or build a theodicy out of elements in the tradition. The

¹ Laura Ekstrom’s chapter (Chapter 18) touches on such issues in a Christian context.

“Jewishness” of the theodicy will be a matter of degree, and the Jewish philosopher might compromise on Jewishness for the sake of cogency.

We may clarify the connections between religious traditions and the problem of evil by distinguishing four sorts of theodicy, confining ourselves to theistic religions:

- (1) *Universalist Theodicy*: This type of theodicy uses only propositions that are consistent with atheism and hence could be accepted by atheists who pose the problem of evil.²
- (2) *Maverick Theodicy*: A maverick theodicy relative to a particular theistic religion is one that uses propositions that at least ostensibly are inconsistent with some tenets of that religion – for example, a “limited God” theodicy (albeit many limited-God theologians argue that they hew more closely to the biblical portrayal of God than do “perfect being” theologians).
- (3) *Weakly Particularist Theodicy*: This refers to a theodicy that uses propositions that are explicitly stated or implied by more than one theistic religion, but are not consistent with atheism. (I leave aside nontheistic religions.)
- (4) *Strongly Particularist Theodicy*: This is a theodicy that can be used only by adherents of one particular theistic religion because only they explicitly state or imply the propositions used in the theodicy. Example: a Christian theodicy that depends upon claims about the Incarnation or original sin.

In (3) and (4), we can have either a theodicy compounded out of elements in the religion, or a full-blown theodicy stated in the religion. Notions of what is “accepted in one’s religion,” and even what individuates religions, of course will differ.

Numerous philosophers have argued that, in their debate with atheists, theodicists are perfectly entitled to draw upon their particular traditions; one can argue further that they must not be mavericks, and still further (plausibly or implausibly) that it is ideal to arrive at a strongly particularist theodicy. These conditions would both open up theodicy options for a particular religion, and place constraints upon them. I shall cite a few Christian and Jewish authors who advocate for the legitimacy or positive value of using particularist propositions in constructing theodicies:

Marilyn McCord Adams (1990, 210): “Where the internal coherence of a system is at stake, successful arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premises internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents.”

Ira M. Schnall (2007, 50): “[S]ome problems for theism can be given much more simple, effective, and elegant solutions if we do not limit ourselves to mere theism itself, but rather make use of the resources of developed theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

2 I have in mind here a judgment like “the value of free will outweighs the disvalue of suffering,” which is consistent with atheism, as opposed to the proposition, “God allows evil in order to promote free will,” which is not consistent with atheism because it implies God’s existence. So refinements are needed to more precisely define universalist theodicy, such as (as a first move) distinguishing building blocks of a theodicy from the theodic statement per se. Note that some building blocks of some theodicies are compatible with atheism but not with all theistic religions. I will not fine-grain the categories further, however, to isolate such theodicies.

Moshe Sokol (2007, 235): “Might not there be resources, beliefs, or attitudes [within a religious system] that themselves eliminate the purported inconsistency? . . . What counts as problematic for the system depends upon what the system itself teaches.”

Peter van Inwagen (2006, 6): “Attempts by theists to account for the evils of the world must take place within the constraints provided by the larger theologies they subscribe to.”

It may be debated, as I said, whether it is *an ideal* that a theodicy be particularist, and also whether a theodicy for a particular religion should ideally match or connect to *theodicies* that are part of the tradition, as opposed to connecting to propositions from which a theodicy can be constructed. More importantly, although it is true that a religion’s theodicy may justifiably draw on propositions that the religion accepts but other religions and/or atheists reject, a theodicy developed in this particularist fashion should not be allowed to escape criticism simply on the grounds that, once we take into account the relevant particularistic propositions, the existence of evil does not render the existence of God improbable. After all, there is no reason for atheists to be cowed by the theist’s particularist propositions. If a theist responds to the problem of evil by appealing to a Kabbalistic metaphysics, cannot the atheist’s next move be to raise objections to that metaphysics?

Thus, the religious authenticity of a given solution does not guarantee immunity from assessment from a standpoint external to the religion. On the other hand, someone who objects to a given theodicy cannot wander so far from the theist’s proffered theodicy that the critic is really attacking central beliefs of a religion on some grounds other than the existence of evil. I am not sure where to draw the boundary that will pick out “wandering too far.” In any event, theodicies can be constructed for two different audiences: theists and atheists. Religious thinkers who construct theodicies might focus on how evil can be explained to *themselves*, working within their tradition, and may be less interested in refuting outsiders than in helping insiders create a solution that coheres with their other beliefs.

The Jewish theodicies (and antitheodicies) that I present and assess here tend to be either weakly particularist or universalist. None are comparable in their particularism to, say, a Christian theodicy that draws on doctrines about Jesus’s suffering on behalf of humanity (e.g., Adams 1990; see also Ekstrom, Chapter 18 in this volume). The theodicies I favor are not highly conspicuous in Jewish tradition, certainly not dominant, but they are present, and are *connected with* certain other traditional elements. A view I call “antitheodicy” – I shall disambiguate the term later (cf. Braiterman 1998, Fox 2003) – has deep roots in classical Judaism and may be more prevalent in Judaism than in Christianity. (On antitheodicy, see Chapters 25 and 26).

Before proceeding, we should note a few limitations of my discussion. First, even if Judaism has no special *answers* to the challenge of theodicy, it carries the burden of a special *question*. Time after time, God announces that He has a special relationship and covenant with the Jewish people; time after time, as the prophets and the psalmist and innumerable later authors painfully bemoan, He seems to break His promises and renege on the covenant. Over and over the Jewish people endure large-scale persecution and destruction. For Judaism, therefore, the problem is dual: one, evil to individuals and groups, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, and, two, evil to Jewish communities in particular. Post-Holocaust Jewish thought is especially rife with theologies that focus not just on evil per se (sufferings, deaths, and murders), but on the seemingly broken promise, and Jewish thought in general deals heavily with Jewish communal suffering and death.

Due to space limitations, I will not be able to enter into the topics of communal suffering and post-Holocaust theology except for a brief mention later, plus the following question. It is often thought that the Holocaust defies any and all prior theodicies; it is, people say, unique, and requires a unique solution. (The former does not entail the latter.) Others think, however – to the exact contrary – that the suffering or death of one innocent child poses just as large a problem as the slaughter of many millions. This latter contention, that nothing is new here, that magnitude of evil is irrelevant to theodicy, may appear to assume the so-called logical or deductive form of the problem of evil that was famously refuted by Nelson Pike and Alvin Plantinga (see Chapter 2). By contrast, it may appear that, if we adopt the evidential form of the problem – that the existence of evil makes the existence of God *unlikely* – the magnitude of the evil greatly intensifies the problem, because the thesis that the evil is justified becomes more improbable (see Chapter 4). But then again, maybe not: one may argue that the probability of a small amount of evil on the theistic hypothesis is just as low as that of much evil. It must be said, though, that discussing the atrocities of the Holocaust and other horrendous evils in these detached, mathematical terms may readily obscure their existential power and horror (cf. Adams 1990).

A second limitation to my discussion is that I cannot undertake a comprehensive survey of the rich Jewish treatments of evil through the ages. However, the ancient sources that classically were, and still are, vital in assessing Jewish authenticity – Bible, Talmud, and Midrash – generate a pool of approaches to evil that were elaborated and treated more rigorously in subsequent times.³ The classic sources are not philosophical treatises. Theological views often have to be teased out of stories and anecdotes, and explicit theological statements in the classic sources tend to be pithy, aphoristic, ambiguous, cryptic, tantalizing, and contradictory – which makes interpretation immensely challenging and interesting.

Finally, while knowing that some Jewish sources say otherwise, I will assume here that there is a standard of goodness independent of God's will and God's approval, a position effectively argued for by Leibniz (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, 2). To add to Leibniz, "God saw that all He made was very good" (Genesis 1:31), says more than "God saw that He very much approved of what He had made."

Retribution

Countless Jewish sources, beginning with the Bible, affirm that good deeds are rewarded in this world and bad ones punished. It is striking, therefore, that when a retributivist theodicy is stated by one rabbi in the Talmud in so many words – "There is no death without sin, no suffering without transgression" – the Talmud rejects his view (Babylonian Talmud [BT], *Shabbat* 55a). Many other theodicies are offered in classic sources.⁴ Questions have been raised about the scope of the rejection of retributivism, since the "refuting text"

3 The Talmud and Midrash include interpretations of Scriptural law and narrative, but also present original legal, historical, and theological teachings, along with occasional musings and stories.

4 Nonetheless, there is a widespread tendency in Jewish writing to *equate* the problem of evil with "Why do the righteous endure evils and the wicked prosper?" This latter formulation focuses on what van Inwagen (2006) calls local evils, rather than on global evil. Rosenberg (1989) calls one the problem of evil, the other the problem of justice. For a parallel distinction in a Hindu framework, see the chapter by Purushottama Bilimoria in this volume.

states that four people died without sin. Was it *only* those four? And even if death is not always the result of sin, does the Talmud intend to extend the refutation from death to suffering? (See Shatz 2009b, 272 and the accompanying notes on 286–287.) Despite such questions, and even despite a Midrashic source in which the retributivist thesis, identically stated by the same sage, is voiced without refutation, the Babylonian Talmud’s rejection of such a theodicy when it is stated sweepingly would make a Jew who accepts the Talmud’s authority somewhat comfortable in rejecting a retributivist theodicy. Two caveats, however: (a) within classical Judaism, it would be absurd to deny that *some* suffering is punishment for sin; and (b) those who reject the retributivist theodicy are very likely to confine that rejection to *this* world – in the hereafter, all just deserts are meted out. The second of these caveats is illustrated by a view of Rabbi Jacob that “the reward for a commandment is not found in this world” but rather in the next (*Kiddushin* 39b). His statement was precipitated by the death of a child who fell off a ladder while the child was performing two commandments for which the Torah promises long life. Thus, empirical observation settled the matter for Rabbi Jacob – innocent people suffer in this world or die prematurely; so the biblical promise for the two commandments the child was performing, namely, “It will be good for you and your days will be lengthy,” must refer to the world to come.

Already a crucial *biblical* work registers a protest against the retributivist theodicy – and that is none other than the book of Job (see Chapter 26). Job’s three friends have stood united in their insistence upon the traditional theodicy of justified retribution, and they therefore believe that, despite appearances, Job *must* be a sinner. Job, by contrast, stridently and consistently complains that his actions do not warrant his fate; he comes close to blasphemy. But in the final chapter, God chastises not Job, but the friends, because “you [the friends] did not speak properly to me as did my servant Job” (Job 42:7)! The friends deserve punishment for trying to defend God! Job – the one who did *not* accept their affirmations of divine justice – must pray on their behalf before they can be forgiven. A stronger indictment of the retributivist theodicy could hardly be imagined. As to *why* is God angry, perhaps it is because by implying that God would consider a man like Job deserving of his afflictions, the friends make God appear irrational and unethical, a wielder of absurd standards. (Tellingly, we know from the book’s prologue that it is Job’s righteousness, not his sins, that led to his suffering – because of God’s wager with Satan, to which I will return.⁵) Let me add that Ecclesiastes, with typical pessimism, asserts that an identical fate awaits the righteous and the wicked (9:2).

The Bible and the Sages⁶ thus observed that the retributivist theodicy does not coordinate with experience. In addition, retributivist theodicy can become an exercise in blaming the victim. If Hitler was *merely* God’s instrument of retribution, would not that have to quiet our condemnation of him and elicit condemnation of those who perished? Granted, one could argue that we may still blame Hitler for his motivations.⁷ But intuitively we blame him for far, far more: after all, do we really feel that he deserves only the level of

5 Often the prologue is thought to be tacked on to the book; my reading is integrative.

6 When capitalized, “the Sages” and “the Rabbis” are the standard scholarly terms for rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash.

7 See Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), commentary to Genesis 15:14; see also 42:9. See also Genesis 45:5 and 50:20, where Joseph seems to excuse his brothers because they helped realize God’s plan. (I do not think he is really doing so, however; rather, he is reassuring them that overall the consequences of their deeds were good.)

censure appropriate to someone whose actions produce what God wants but who has bad motives? Finally, if someone who suffers surely deserves to, why help or sympathize? These counterintuitive implications further undermine retributivist theodicies.

Nevertheless, we must ask: How would a Jewish thinker who rejects retributivism explain the many texts in the Talmud and countless later sources that mandate that, when people or communities are struck by suffering, they must “examine their deeds” and repent (e.g. *Berakhot* 5a)?⁸ How can sufferers be so sure they have sinned, if we reject the retributivist theodicy? In reply, recent Jewish thinkers maintain that these sources are not urging the sufferer to find a causal account of his or her suffering, but to use the suffering as an opportunity for spiritual repair and improvement (e.g., Hartman 1985, 196). The person acts *as if* the suffering were punishment, and therefore scrutinizes his or her faults. I have dealt with this approach elsewhere – it is not easy to elucidate, and is not the texts’ obvious meaning – and touch on it later here (Shatz 2009a, 294–297; see also Stump 1997). Note, though, that Jewish texts which presuppose that suffering is retribution deal with *self-examination*. Talmudic sages strongly tend to attribute sins to *others* only if the sufferer *asks* them to explain the cause of the suffering. (See, e.g., *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2, 38. See also Cohen 2000.)

Atonement, Trial, Sufferings of Love

What theodicies are affirmed in ancient Judaism in addition to, or lieu of, a retributivist one? Yaakov Elman (1999) gives a lengthy list, which includes such ideas as *kapparah* (atonement), *nissayon* (a trial), and the notion that innocent individuals may get hurt because they are part of a group that is being punished or is in dangerous circumstances.⁹ Later thinkers, primarily Kabbalists, utilized transmigration (i.e., those who suffer have been reincarnated and are being punished for sins committed in a previous existence), and Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) used, *inter alia*, a Neoplatonic evil-as-privation account. To my mind, the most interesting concept in Jewish discussions of suffering is “tribulations of love” (*Berakhot* 5a). Normally, this concept is interpreted as follows: God makes (or one might say allows) the righteous to suffer in this world in order to increase their reward in the next.¹⁰ (Possibly, God is punishing them in this world for their minor sins so that they can be given only rewards in the next; in addition, possibly He repairs, via this suffering, a defect that led to a sin.) But there is a minority understanding of “tribulations of love” (and of a “trial”) that obviates reference to otherworldly reward and is a variant of the soul-making theodicy (SMT). Because the righteous are righteous, God gives them an opportunity – as a privilege, a benefit, a reward – to connect to God even more closely through suffering, or to display further virtue: the virtue of faith, of acceptance of God’s will, of loving God. On the verge of being executed by the Romans for teaching Torah, the sage Rabbi Akiva is said to have been joyful over the opportunity to fulfill the command-

8 See also Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Fasts 1.

9 I thank Jerome Gellman for highlighting sources expressing this last idea.

10 Maimonides rejected this notion; see *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:17.

ment to “Love God *with all of your soul*” – that is, love Him even when your soul will be taken (Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 5:5).

This theodicy involves a move we may call the axiological shift. If a feeling of closeness to God, or faith and strength of spirit, or love of God, or knowledge of God, are greater goods than material welfare, then the problem of evil dissipates; and the sufferer achieves tranquility through adopting this perspective (see Chapter 15). “As for me, the nearness of God – that is the good” (Psalms 73:28). An axiological shift was also employed by Maimonides (1138–1204),¹¹ and the approach calls to mind the memorable thesis of Epictetus that what upsets people’s minds is not events but rather their *judgments* on events (*Enchiridion* 5).¹²

The axiological-shift theodicy, however, does not readily apply to children, nonhuman animals, and adults lacking certain capacities; furthermore, it would make evils that destroy the capacity for morally significant behavior even more difficult for a theist to explain. Thus, the axiological-shift theodicy cannot be a *comprehensive* one; it must be complemented by other theodicies. Still another problem is that if material goods are not important and (various) spiritual ones are (closeness to God, and so on; this “good,” incidentally, makes for a weakly particularist theodicy), then just as we should value suffering in our own case, we should do so in the case of *other* sufferers. But this, objectionably, weakens our duty to relieve physical suffering experienced by others – and even grants license to actively make them suffer to achieve spiritual goods. Further, as Daniel Rynhold observed, the shift gestures toward asceticism – a fact that would give some Jewish theodacists pause, since, despite the presence of ascetic approaches in the tradition, Judaism generally bids human beings to enjoy God’s material world. Admittedly, in the Talmudic stories concerning “tribulations of love” (*Berakhot* 5a–b), some Sages prefer relief from such tribulations to the rewards they bring, suggesting that an individual’s axiology must be respected even if it is less than ideal. But still, why one should relieve the suffering of those who *are* accepting their tribulations? However, the problem at hand affects all SMTs that posit soulmaking benefits for those who suffer and not only for people who provide aid (see Chapter 14). The Jewish theodicy under consideration does not here encounter a *special* challenge.

An additional question about the axiological shift is this. Even though Rabbi Akiva viewed his imminent death as a means of fulfilling the love of God, it seems plausible that he should not court or seek out such circumstances. But why not, if love of God is the highest value? Well, for one thing, too many lives would be lost if proactive martyrdom were encouraged; further, not everyone who courts the circumstances will react with love when the moment for martyrdom actually arrives. In addition, an analogous objection could be raised against all SMTs that include benefits for the sufferer (e. g., why not seek out suffering that will call for courage?). Once again, the axiological-shift theodicy is not in a *special* difficulty.

11 See *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:23 (on Job). Maimonides takes human beings’ preoccupation with human suffering and death as indicative of an anthropocentric orientation, and also asserts that humans bring evils upon themselves. See *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:12.

12 Other chapters in this part of the book reflect axiological shifts in the context of other religions. See Ekstrom’s “divine intimacy” Christian theodicy, along with Mohammed Mobini’s description of epistemic benefits in his essay on Islamic theodicies (Chapters 18 and 20, respectively).

Mazzal

Perhaps the most startling Talmudic statement on theodicy is that “Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on one’s merit but on *mazzala* [astrological influence]” (*Moed Katan* 28a). Here the sage Rava removes these three important types of goods or tribulations from the realm of direct divine activity and places them in the hands of what were in his time considered the laws of nature. Rava came to his view by contrasting the radically different lives of two equally righteous sages with regard to the three goods he named. Although Rava here provides a *causal explanation* of tribulations, his view is not a justification of God’s ways. For he does not explain, as a theodicy would, *why* God runs the world in this way – why does He not distribute longevity, children, and sustenance based on merit, instead of letting nature take its course? Like the aforementioned Rabbi Jacob, who saw an innocent child fall and die, Rava was persuaded by experience to abandon (in certain areas) a retributivist theodicy.

Most likely discomfited by Rava’s semi-naturalistic approach, and buttressed by another Talmudic discussion (BT *Shabbat* 156a), some commentators posit that a righteous person can override the constellations by good deeds. But if good deeds override the constellations, why did not the two sages whose lives Rava compared enjoy identical boons? Both Rava’s and Rabbi Jacob’s dicta open up space in Judaism for a theodicy that views God as an infrequent intervener in this world – even though neither sage explains *why* God restrains Himself, but only gives evidence *that* He restrains Himself, and even though their views do not *entail* that He does not intervene much in nature. A metaphysics that allows little divine intervention gains considerable Jewish authenticity from the large degree of naturalism in medieval Jewish philosophy, for example, in Maimonides. Some thinkers restricted direct divine reward and punishment in this world to a small group – the exceptionally righteous and the exceptionally wicked – and even those exceptions were explained in a sense naturally. (See Berger 2011.)

Kabbalistic Views

Kabbalah – Jewish mystical thought – comes in highly diverse versions. Among its alternatives: there is a power that opposes God (and emerged from God); quite the opposite – evil is an illusion; transmigration; and evil as privation.

Having given the lay of the land, I want now to devote special attention to what I regard as one of the two strongest theodicies from a philosophical standpoint – the SMT. (The other strong theodicy is the free will theodicy.) I will not argue for SMT’s cogency but rather for its Jewishness. After that I turn to the anti-theodicy position prevalent in recent times.

Soul-Making Theodicy

The free will and SMTs are controversial in Jewish tradition because they typically limit divine interventions in the world (see Chapter 14). However, certain traditional texts embrace SMTs more or less directly. I will not explore the free will theodicy but will examine an SMT that values *free* virtuous responses, even though one could maintain SMT

even in a deterministic system (as Aaron Segal noted). Later, we will see that SMTs are a consequence of antitheodicy as well.¹³

The closest explicit fits I know of in Jewish tradition to SMT are certain understandings of “tribulations of love” or “trial.” Some medieval and early modern authors suggest that the suffering of the righteous – divinely inflicted – builds character, or cleanses the righteous of physicality, or distances them from the physical in some way, enhancing their spiritual orientation (for references, see Shatz 2009a 301, note 10; see also Stump 1997 on Saadyah Gaon). The first process of improvement seems to involve free choice (of actions that build good character); the other two do not.

These are not SMTs in the sense intended by most contemporary philosophers. First, SMTs normally justify God’s *allowing* suffering, not, as in the present suggestions, actively *inflicting* it. Second, the philosophers’ SMTs are not targeted at the sufferings of the righteous in particular – rather, the world runs mostly by virtue-indifferent natural laws. The feeling of closeness to God through suffering is not personal when the suffering is brought on by natural law rather than by God’s hands, though the natural law approach seems less problematic morally. Third, as we saw, some of the soul-making in the Jewish sources is not freely willed (instead, God purges people of physicality). Still and all, we have a close enough fit to furnish a potential precedent for a contemporary-style SMT. Suffering also can lead to growth naturalistically by, for example, creating empathy, puncturing illusions of power, bringing people closer to God (Soloveitchik 2002, 131–132) and, on occasion, making sufferers realize that they have brought adversity upon themselves by poor choices or deficient self-control.

I suggest that a crucial element of the SMT appears in Job. For one message of the book, I believe, is that suffering can improve a person spiritually and morally. At the end of the book, Job explicitly states, “I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes” (42:5). Surely this verse – he now *sees* God – intimates a sharpened religious perception; perhaps we should infer that this perception was created by suffering. Moreover, at the end of the book, Job prays for his rebuked friends, and does not (as in the prologue) act for his family alone (Soloveitchik 1992, 60–61). He has thus grown morally as well as religiously. On this approach, the book expresses a claim that is integral to the “SMT” – suffering promotes virtue. Without this understanding, what is the big mystery of Job’s suffering? We *know* why he’s suffering – God and Satan made a bet! But the bet in the prologue was about what the effects of suffering will be on Job – and the point, on my reading, is that God won. To be sure, we should distinguish, as Shalom Carmy put it to me, between affirming the *benefits* of suffering and affirming a *justification* of suffering, and I am not sure which the book is doing. It is certainly more interested in the psyche of the suffering believer than in philosophical problems. But the former claim *contributes to* a theodicy even if by itself it does not *constitute* a theodicy.

What we walk away with from our survey-*cum*-analysis of classic Jewish sources is that, although retributivist themes are very common, there is precedent for all of the following:

13 A free will theodicy sees the exercise of free will as good in itself; the SMT I consider sees freely willed *virtuous* responses as good, but freely willed *vicious* responses are of value only if the SMT is supplemented by a general high evaluation of free will.

- Denying that all suffering and death is punishment for sin.
- Explaining evils (some or perhaps many) by reference to laws of nature.¹⁴
- Embracing the core claim of the SMT that evil promotes certain virtues. (Philosophers argue that evil is *logically necessary* for the development of certain virtues.)

From these elements I think we can construct a SMT for Judaism that satisfies the constraints of both connectedness to Jewish tradition and philosophical cogency (though I have not here argued for cogency). Because relating to God is one good effect of suffering, a benefit that atheists could not possibly recognize but other religions can and do, the theodicy is in that detail weakly particularist. (See also Birnbaum 1986.)

One seemingly “maverick” element in a Jewish SMT pertains to Jewish eschatology. If the messianic age will be marked by peace, righteousness, and religious devotion there will be no evil from which to make souls: no challenges to faith, no opportunity to relieve suffering, and possibly no chance of relating more closely to God via suffering. Why pray for such a time? By way of response, it could be that this eschatology is Judaism’s way of acknowledging conflicting pulls in deciding whether soul-making outweighs suffering – it assigns different weightings in different epochs; or it could be that since it is through righteous conduct that people have brought the world to the stage of peace, righteousness and religious devotion, therefore that peace takes on special value; or that other opportunities for soul-making will present themselves in the *eschaton*; or that the negative value of evil in human history will, by messianic times, outweigh the positive value of soul-making, and so in messianic times, evil must be drastically cut back. All in all, though, there is a tension between SMT and eschatology.

Antitheodicy: The “Halakhic” or Existentialist Response

A major medieval Jewish figure, Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), in his *The Instruction of Man*, declared that religious people who object to seeking theodicies are “fools who despise wisdom.” When people justify God’s ways, he argues, God’s justice becomes entrenched in their minds, and they achieve serenity and secure belief. Individuals therefore are duty bound to theoditize. (It may seem that Nahmanides’ rationale for theoditizing would not require a theodicitist to have a *correct* theodicy – only one that makes the theodicitist *believe* that God is just and that thereby breeds serenity. But Nahmanides values truth, too.)

There is in Judaism, however, a prominent opposite perspective to Nahmanides’ – “Antitheodicy.” Sometimes philosophers use this term to denote the atheistic view that all theodicies, proffered and unproffered, fail; there is unjustified evil. It may also refer to the *theistic* view that human beings cannot know the true reason why God allows evil. I will be using it in a third way, to refer to the theistic view that it is irrational, unethical, or inappropriate for theists even to *seek* theodicies. (See also Hick 1978, 6–11, who I believe coined the term “antitheodicy.”)

At the heart of antitheodicy thus defined is this question: What should theists do if, for them, seeking a theodicy is pointless, or instills a bad attitude, or distracts them from activities that are more valuable? What if it is, from his or her vantage point, irrational or unethical for a theist to seek a solution? The antitheodicitist argues that in these circum-

14 Of course human free choice is another recognized explanation.

stances, theists should eschew theodicies. Antitheodicy emphasizes responding to evil as opposed to theorizing about why it exists. Our reaction to evil must be to combat it, to relieve suffering, and to repair our faults, not to theorize about why evil is there. “We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but rather about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes . . .” (Soloveitchik 2002, 156). The fundamental question is not why people suffer, but rather “What obligation does suffering impose upon man?” (Soloveitchik 2000, 56) In short, “Response, not explanation, is focal” (Lichtenstein 1999; see also Carmy 1999). “Responses” here obviously denote responses other than theorizing. (See Sokol 2007.)

I turn to a critical, nonexhaustive examination of arguments for an antitheodic perspective. Perhaps because of the massive amount of suffering in the Jewish experience, there may be more appeals to ignorance in Jewish approaches to evil than in Christian ones (a possibility pointed out to me by Aaron Segal). The Holocaust has intensified the trend not to construct theodicies, and that trend has been bolstered still more by the general antimetaphysical predilections of certain Jewish philosophers, trained in Continental philosophy, who address religious phenomenology and behavior instead of metaphysics. (Cf. however, Berkovits’s (1973) development of a free will theodicy to explain the Holocaust.)

The objection from arrogance

C. S. Lewis spoke of atheists placing “God in the dock” (Lewis 1994). But some theists find it arrogant not only for atheists to *prosecute* God in the dock, but also for theists to *defend* him in the dock. Theists, goes the argument, must not *judge* God: *we* stand before *Him* in judgment, not the other way around. Additionally, it is arrogant even to try to read God’s mind: “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways high above your ways and my thoughts above yours” (Isaiah 55:9). Accepting that God is good and just, without trying to fathom His ways and judge them, exhibits proper humility.

The arrogance objection cannot easily be sustained, however:

- (a) Great sages of Jewish tradition *have* given theodicies; surely a religious Jew would not want to brand all these sages as arrogant. In fact, in Talmudic and Midrashic sources, biblical figures *challenge* God with impunity, speaking in “the audacious language of anger and demand” (Braiterman 1998, 32). Jeremiah, the Rabbis say, refused to praise God with the formula introduced by Moses – “great, mighty, and awesome” – because the Temple had been taken over by Israel’s enemies and the people were enslaved; he dropped the word “awesome”. Daniel omitted “mighty” (See BT *Yoma* 69b). Would not giving a theodicy be acceptable *a fortiori*? Perhaps the Sages at times legitimized reactions like Jeremiah’s because they found them so understandable, so natural, so difficult to resist, and recognized that they come from a place of empathy, from devotion to the Temple and the people, and from moral sensitivity. Cannot theodicies, too, arise from noble motives? (To be sure, in one text, when Moses asks why Rabbi Akiva, whose future suffering is revealed to him, will undergo such torment, God silences Moses (*Menahot* 29b).)
- (b) Believers normally do not fault someone who attributes to God thoughts, desires, and intentions that human beings consider *good*, and who try to show *in specific* that “all that God does is for the good” (*Berakhot* 60b). Is that not to read God’s mind – maybe even to judge Him? Why not read His mind in a theodicy?

- (c) Van Inwagen (2006) and others distinguish defenses from theodicies. A theodicy is a story that is claimed by the storyteller to be the truth about why God allows evil (or specific evils); a defense is a story that the defender merely maintains *could* be true for all we know, and the epistemic possibility of which makes the prosecutor's argument fail. Theodicies profess to read God's mind; defenses do not, and so (since defenses do not judge what God *actually* does) defenses are not subject to the arrogance objection. Why then, asks the critic of antitheodicy, can theists not at least offer a defense?

Perhaps antitheodic theists will reply that defenses are not really less arrogant than theodicies. When someone who believes that *p* has evidence against *p*, and can think of only one scenario in which *p* would be the case despite the evidence, that gives the person reason to think that the scenario actually obtains.¹⁵ We reason this way all the time. Thus, the defense/theodicy distinction collapses (McBrayer 2010),¹⁶ and, says the antitheodicist, it is arrogant to construct a defense and not only arrogant to construct a theodicy.

But even if a defense tacitly implies a theodicy – in which case, if giving theodicies is wrong, so is giving defenses – we have not shaken off replies (a) and (b) to the arrogance objection: Reading and judging God's thoughts, even challenging God, are not per se objectionable. What a theodicist should also say in response to the arrogance objection is this: there are cases and there are cases. The arrogance objection is right that one's approach to theodicy can *sometimes* reflect a religiously objectionable attitude, for example, judging God. But others might be humbly seeking understanding of His ways, just as they do by trying to find teleology in the physical universe. There is no good across-the-board objection to producing theodicies – it all depends on attitude. Theodicists must approach the project with a consciousness of human fallibility and a measure of trepidation. Establishing the religious permissibility of trying to read and judge God's mind requires that the theodicist privilege some sources over others, but privileging is inevitable in a rich and complex religious tradition.¹⁷

The objection from futility

Notwithstanding Jewish theodicies we have canvassed, a Talmudic passage relates that even Moses was not told why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (*Berakhot* 7a; see also *Menahot* 29b). That we are ignorant of the reasons for evil, in fact are unable to know them, is rooted in other sources too (e.g., *Avot* 4:19; for further discussion, see Fox 2003 and Braiterman 1998, chapter 3). The standard interpretation of Job (as distinct from the soul-making interpretation mentioned earlier) runs along these lines: God overpowers Job by showing him the puniness of his understanding as compared with God's. Thus, the

15 Assuming that skeptical theism is not being invoked here.

16 Justin McBrayer also questions the distinction (McBrayer 2010). As Aaron Segal noted, my point would not apply to someone who thought up multiple defenses but did not profess to know which one is true. As I say next, however, even if a defense does not imply a theodicy, the antitheodicist has a response.

17 It might also be argued that thinking about possible reasons for evil – the subjective experience itself – is valuable regardless of the truth of the resulting theodicy.

futility of theodicy is firmly rooted in classical Jewish sources. Antitheodicy ostensibly prevails.

Proclaiming such ignorance of God's reasons, however, confronts a familiar objection. If we cannot figure out God's reasons, we must be very bad at ethics – after all, evils that look to us clearly, even self-evidently, unjustified must in truth be justified, since God allows them. Hence, we face skepticism about our trusting our moral judgments: Would you use a calculator to solve complex multiplication problems if it has yielded wrong answers to what seem like far simpler questions? Even where relieving suffering is not at issue, but instead we confront quandaries about truth-telling, impartiality, equality, and tolerance, perhaps we must take our ability at moral reasoning to be faulty.¹⁸ Granted, God presumably has a good reason not just for allowing evil but also for not explaining why He allows evil; perhaps, for example, His principles are so complex that we would make too many mistakes if we tried to apply His standards (just as a utilitarian may say that it would be disastrous if people knew utilitarianism is true, because they would miscalculate consequences). But this just reinforces skeptical theism – even if we knew God's reasons, we would err in decision-making (see Chapter 29).

Ira Schnall (2007) has suggested, however, that, because of a specific feature of Judaism, Judaism can turn back this challenge to skeptical theism. For Jewish ethics is derived from God's commands, and God commands us (for example) to save life whenever we can, regardless of any philosophical considerations that might make us hesitate or decide otherwise. Judaism's adherents can therefore have confidence that they ought to relieve suffering and save lives whenever they can. Schnall cites several biblical laws to show that Scripture mandates that humans relieve suffering.

As Schnall also indicates, however, in his example of a physician having biblical license to heal, the interpretation of Jewish law is decided by rabbinic authorities. (See Deuteronomy 17:8–11.) But rabbis are human; so why, given skeptical theism, should they and their disciples trust their determinations of right and wrong? The skeptical theist may retort in turn either that skepticism about the rabbis' *interpretive skills* in law is not warranted, or that God commands Jews to follow rabbinic determinations even if rabbis do not arrive at the law that God believes is correct (*Bava Metzi'a* 59a). At times, let me add, Judaism calls upon rabbis to use their independent *ethical* judgments to make *legal* judgments. They and their "constituencies" have divine permission to trust those judgments, whatever reason God has for that permission. Hence, ignorance of God's reasons for allowing evil does not leave human beings in the dark about how to act, and the claim of futility may be salvaged.

Some may reject this version of skeptical theism because it focuses on heteronomous acceptance of divine commands; some will be baffled by why God issues commands (to relieve suffering) that He Himself does not obey. While these concerns can probably be allayed, the futility argument is only as good as its premise that we cannot hit upon a cogent theodicy. That assumption is shaky. Let us turn, therefore, to a final antitheodic argument.

18 Some philosophers go further and argue that skeptical theism casts doubts on our cognitive equipment more generally. See Chapters 29 and 31.

The objection from moral complacency

The next antitheodic argument is that asking “Why am I suffering?” hurts us because (i) it makes us feel we are living an existence of “fate,” in which outside circumstances control us, rather than an existence of “destiny” in which we are not objects but rather freely willing subjects (Soloveitchik 2000); (ii) theodicies distract us from moral action. For suppose I have a particular theodicy *T*. If *T* is correct, why should I battle evil? Emmanuel Levinas (2007, 453) thus writes: “the justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality.” It would seem that the aim of theodicy is to make peace with evil – whereas the aim of moral agency and halakhic action, the action dictated by Jewish law, is to make war on evil. Theodicy, goes the objection, spells quietism and moral complacency. In this form, the existentialist response has been called the halakhic response to evil and has been thought to be strongly particularist. It does not strike me this way, though, since other religions and also atheists agree that people are obligated to relieve suffering; it is just that the details of laws concerning humans’ treatment of one another are so minutely developed in Jewish law.

The concern over complacency has been framed vividly by Lord Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Rabbi Sacks draws upon a homiletic idea of his teacher Rabbi Nahum Rabinowich, one focused on Moses’s encounter with God at the burning bush.

“Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6). Why was he afraid? Because if he were fully to understand God he would have no choice but to be reconciled to the slavery and oppression of the world. From the vantage point of eternity, he would see that the bad is a necessary stage on the journey to the good. He would understand God but he would cease to be Moses, the fighter against injustice who intervened whenever he saw wrong being done. “He was afraid” that seeing heaven would desensitize him to earth, that coming close to infinity would mean losing his humanity’ (Sacks 2005, 22–23)

I am reminded of the quip: “If the world were perfect, it wouldn’t be perfect.” Knowing God’s reasons, it is said, would lead us to abandon the fight against evil. Soloveitchik similarly argues that, whereas theodicies view evils as a necessary part of a greater good, the Halakhah views evil “as a dreadful fiend with whom no pact may be reached, no reconciliation is possible” (Soloveitchik 2002, 101). Judaism, says Soloveitchik, oddly muting the many theodic parts of the tradition, has an “ethic of suffering,” but not a “metaphysic of suffering,” because a metaphysic of suffering implants moral complacency.

We need not review our earlier discussion of how humans can trust their moral judgments given that God allows evils for reasons unknown, and of how God could allow evils given what He himself commands. The complacency argument seems weak on other grounds. First, is it not a *problem* that Jewish law demands that people do things that make no sense according to Jewish theology? Second, the complacency argument seems to be saying at least one of the following:

- (1) A person’s having a theodicy psychologically precludes, or at least reduces the likelihood of, that person’s engaging in moral action.
- (2) Having a correct theodicy logically precludes, or at least reduces the rationality of, a person’s engaging in moral action.

I know of no empirical evidence for either disjunct in (1) and much empirical evidence against them. Religious people perform great acts of charity and benevolence, even though many have their own theodicies. Moreover, it seems that if (1) is true, it is not just *having* a theodicy that would preclude or render unlikely theodicyists' engaging in moral action, but even *believing that there is some unknown justification for evil*. It would be difficult to find a traditional theist who did not believe *that*.¹⁹

Nor is (2) correct. For what if the reason that God allows evils is, precisely, to enable human beings to engage in moral action? For someone who holds this theodicy, moral action would not only not be precluded by theodicy but would be mandated by it. Indeed, the complacency argument eventually *motivates* such a theodicy. For suppose we start by saying, with Sacks, that the world is really perfect, but then we add, "God wants humans to act to remove evil anyway." How shall we understand this? Would it not be irrational and unethical for God to risk human beings messing up His perfect world? Rather, it is better to hold that God deliberately leaves the world *imperfect* because part of its hoped-for perfection is that humans participate in making it better – they are "partners in the work of creation" (*Midrash Tanhuma* to Leviticus 12:3). In short, the best way to both have a theodicy and engage in moral action is to develop a theodicy where the very reason for evil is one that encourages moral action. An SMT (and a free will theodicy, suitably formulated) fits that bill. Converting antitheodicy into a theodicy of this sort can also explain the disconnect between God's ways and our own, because theodicyists have supplied reasons for the disconnect. (See Dore 1970.)

Apropos our earlier discussion of soul-making, we have found another route to a SMT in Jewish tradition besides looking for explicit statements: Derive it from what initially looks like another approach, namely, antitheodicy. If I am correct, the antitheodicyist's insight in the complacency argument – that the fact human beings must engage in moral action sits at odds with the idea that all evil is justified – can be explained only if we embrace a certain type of theodicy.²⁰

Summary

Different theologians have different religious sensibilities, and each privileges different texts in authenticating the Jewishness of his or her approach. Classic Jewish sources allow the rejection of retributivist theodicies, even though when adversity strikes, the sufferer should use that occasion to mend his or her ways. Some sources also allow a large enough scope to natural law to allow for a SMT, and such a theodicy has some support in classic sources. Finally, antitheodic approaches are difficult to establish, and when driven by the complacency argument, collapse into theodicies. The latter are weakly particularist if they include the goods of relating to God and faith in God. The soul-making and free will theodicies are strongly particularist not at their core but only in the sense that Halakhah's providing laws to cover all situations gives a more complete statement of interpersonal obligations and virtues, covering myriad closely defined situations, than do other religions.

19 I assume antitheodicyists will not claim that the existence of some (unknown) justification for evil precludes moral action, since theists believe there is *some* such justification yet engage in moral action.

20 Nick Markakis also explores antitheodicy in Chapter 24, which includes additional references.

We have seen, finally, that one thing Jewish tradition contributes to the problem of evil is a large number of vivid aphorisms, stories, disputes, homilies, and dialectical discussions that enrich the abstract formulations of philosophers – and bring to the fore not one but the many sides of the problem of evil.

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