RELIGION AND SUFFERING

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Introduction

There is no aspect of human life more central to religion than that of suffering – and what an ‘aspect’ it is! Even where suffering is not taken to be the principal reason for religion, as it generally is by Freudians, Marxists, anthropologists (e.g. Clifford Geertz), sociologists (e.g. Emile Durkheim) and psychologists, it is seen as central. After all, what role would there be for religion generally and theism in particular (heaven, hell, grace, prayer, salvation), apart from suffering?

The brief for this chapter, as for all the chapters in the volume, is ‘to provide in-depth discussion of the current state of play and to make an original and cutting-edge contribution that significantly enhances debate’. This chapter is not a comprehensive account of recent work. However, along with examining specific arguments, it presents an overview that contemporary analytic philosophers of religion (apologists) will find objectionable. Better this than another ‘neutral’ summary. The literature on evil is as repetitive as it is vast. If this chapter gives an accurate account of what the current state of play is with regard to suffering, which in analytic philosophy of religion focuses exclusively on the problem of evil, it will also have made a contribution that, though disputed, may enhance the debate.

In short, cumulative arguments from evil against the existence of God have been successful and therefore the ‘problem of evil’ is dead in the water. This is not to say that suffering does not remain the central issue in religion. If this is right and no advancement has been made on the problem of evil in a long time – though just ‘how long’ as well as what is meant by ‘advancement’ is disputed – then making ‘an original and cutting-edge contribution to the debate’ is problematic. Nevertheless, if the chapter goes some way towards establishing the ‘dead in the water’ thesis, this will itself be something of a contribution. The claim here is that instead of progress, insight or innovation, there has been backsliding, repetition, and obfuscation. As we will see, many of these moves are morally problematic. Others (most) are interesting less for what they say about evil, than for illustrating the current state of analytic philosophy of religion.
Over the past sixty years or so, what used to be known, and is still better known, as the problem of suffering has morphed into quite a different problem – the problem of evil. This is largely due to contemporary analytic philosophy of religion’s effort to contain, sanitize, and even obscure a problem that has long kept philosophers of religion on the back foot. Having nothing substantially new to say, they find ways of saying the same things over and over again. Where Leibniz talked about the ‘best of all possible worlds’, and Spinoza of our failure to understand or to see necessity in what occurs, van Inwagen, as we will see, talks about ‘modal scepticism’.

‘Evil’ is an irreducibly theological term that is more abstract and metaphysical than ‘suffering’. People are victims of evil and they do evil allegedly of their own free will because of some inherent flaw in their nature – a nature for which, despite being created, they somehow are responsible. They are also the victims of the many forms of physical evil – things like disease and earthquakes. On the other hand, suffering is something that both people and nature inflict, and that everyone, in varying degrees, must endure. Suffering is an existential problem while the problem of evil is largely its formulated logical counterpart, one which addresses a different set of concerns.

There are two principal points about recent treatments of the problem of evil which this chapter focuses on. The first is that the theodicies or partial theodicies offered are often immoral. The second is that contemporary theodicies are slight variations on well-established and soundly refuted strategies designed to deflect, if not defeat, the problem of evil. Thus, there are many variations on Leibniz’s ‘best of all possible worlds’ theodicy, one that is itself an instance of the ‘evil is necessary for a greater good’ theodicy – but no advance.

There is a great deal of truth in the claim that we can only properly understand how it is that we ought to live our lives if we properly understand the allegedly complex relationship between goodness and evil; and no one seriously doubts that evil may at times play a positive role in our lives. The question is: (i) whether there could not be even greater good(s) apart from the evils apparently necessary for certain goods; or (ii) whether all such evil was really necessary for greater good(s) since so much evil appears to be gratuitous. Why couldn’t a theistic God have creatively achieved a world containing as much if not more goodness than this world of ours has, without the amount and types of evil present in the world?

From the theistic point of view, there is good reason to concern ourselves with the fact that evil may (does at times) result in good. Evil or suffering often brings about important acts of kindness, heroism and sacrifice, and is otherwise capable of providing conditions in which relationships may be deepened, the significance and meaning of one’s own life revaluated for the better, and the like. That good can come from evil, and that we should try to see to it that good does come from evil, is hardly a matter for dispute. The question of course is whether, given the existence of a theistic God, all such evils are necessary for greater goods, and whether even greater (albeit di) goods could not come about apart from such evils.

There is a third theme in this chapter as well. There is a strategy on the part of theodics like van Inwagen (1988, 1995a, 1995b, 1998a) and Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003) to make their solutions immune from any possible criticism. (Van Inwagen’s so-called move from ‘theodicy’ to ‘defence’ is indicative of this.) Given the right set of premises or assumptions, this is not difficult to do. Van Inwagen’s ‘for all we know’ strategy, one that relies on ‘modal scepticism’, is a good example. He claims that the empirical argument from evil, which claims that seemingly gratuitous evil makes it improbable that a theistic God exists, is misdirected since even genuinely gratuitous evil is no ‘evidence’ whatsoever against the existence, goodness, or power of God. He alleges that apart from every day and close at hand matters, we simply do not know what is possible or impossible. For all we know, laws of nature being what they are, much natural
evil simply happened necessarily. Van Inwagen’s modal scepticism is designed specifically to address the problem to evil. Modal scepticism is not a theory he argues for prior to a discussion of evil but alongside it.⁵ It’s the position that could do the job.

Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003), as we will see, also wishes to make her classical Christian theodicy, one that she alleges takes horrendous evils seriously, immune from criticism by ruling out those who wish to challenge either the premises or the plausibility of what she regards as the fundamentals of the Christian message of redemption. She is interested only in ‘internal’ cogency and consistency, which means she is really only speaking, and only intending to speak, to those who already more or less believe as she does. Her theodicy, as we will see, is one that is directed to those in the know, and one that makes assumptions that not even many believers would be willing to make. In short, such theodicy, like Leibniz’s, attempts to provide solutions that are immune to falsification. Even though the 1950s positivists were mistaken in claiming that propositions immune to falsification were meaningless, the view that such invulnerability may undermine a proposition’s plausibility and/or rationality may be sustained – as it is in the cases cited.

Penetrating analyses of the problem of evil can be found in essays by Mackie (1955) and McCloskey (1960).⁶ Although there are other accounts containing much the same material since that time, as well as some that significantly predate it, and although there have since been worthwhile restatements and reworking of basically the same points made in these essays (e.g., by William Rowe), there have been no significant advances. Mackie and McCloskey got it right.

**Horrendous evil**

Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003) recounts the Christian message of redemption in an afterlife as a response to the problem of evil. Preferring the term ‘engulfs’ rather than ‘redemption’ or ‘defeat’, Adams presupposes rather than argues that God through Christ will ‘engulf’ evil. She does not tell us how it will be done, and eschews any need to explain why there is such evil in the first place. If by ‘engulf’ she means ‘defeat’ or ‘redeem’ or (especially) ‘justify’ the evil, then her claim conflicts with what Ivan, in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, says is possible.⁷ Let’s then begin with Marilyn Adams.

Dominated by a group of conservative religious academics engaged more in apologetics rather than philosophy, philosophy of religion is now largely a conversation they are having among themselves on their own terms. Marilyn Adams, for example, says, ‘[W]here the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is at stake, arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premisses (explicitly or implicitly) internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents; likewise for successful rebuttals or explanations of consistency. … As a Christian philosopher, I want to focus … on the problem for the truth of Christianity raised by what I shall call “horrendous” evils.’⁸ Leaving aside the insuperable problem of finding premisses ‘obviously acceptable to its adherents’ (all Christians?), Adams’s statement indicates a clear retreat to apologetics. We are not to question her premisses.

Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Haldane, and others have established apologetics as the mainstay of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. If they do balk at being taken for apologists (van Inwagen might not),⁹ it may be because they see apologetics as incompatible with philosophy proper. Apologetics assumes the truth of central religious claims and tries to find grounds on which to defend them. If the assumed truth conflicts with arguments to the contrary, it is the arguments that must go. Philosophy reverses this order. It seeks the truth by means of rational investigation – without presupposing what that truth may be.
Adams’s remark about how the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is to be judged calls to mind Wittgensteinian fideism where truth claims are to be interpreted in the context of particular ‘language games’. Adams, however, does not mention fideism since she interprets religious truth claims literally and unbound by any language game or form of life. She cannot tell us how God is able to redeem (‘engulf’) horrendous evil in such a way that the person suffering those evils will agree that on the whole their life is worthwhile – though she cites the life of Christ as an example. ‘[W]here horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God’s actual reason for permitting them; we cannot even conceive of any plausible candidate sort of reason consistent with worthwhile lives for human participants in them’. Nevertheless she claims that God is able ‘(a) to defeat any experienced horrors within the context of the participant’s life, and (b) to give each created person a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole’.10

Contrary to John Stuart Mill,11 Adams does not think that attributing ‘goodness’ to God in ways we cannot understand or in ways the term could not ordinarily be used, is an absolute equivocation on the idea of ‘goodness’ and may not even be intelligible. At least where moral matters are concerned, conceivability is a test of possibility since the meaning of moral is fixed by the ways in which we actually do or conceivably could use them. Contrary to Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, who claims that the evil done to the child torn apart by the landlord’s dogs cannot be redeemed or made right in the context of one’s life as a whole, she thinks it can. Even if some great good were to come from such – and to suppose it always does is a supposition as ugly as it is silly, the evil itself could neither be termed good nor justified. Ivan’s claim is that there is evil that is genuinely gratuitous and cannot (not merely should not) be seen as plausibly consistent with a theistic God.

Nor does Adams explain why a victim’s agreeing that their life is a ‘great good to him/her on the whole’ should even count as a condition of the evil being engulfed (made right?). Believing that one’s life has been a great good, despite being hacked to death or gassed alongside one’s children, does not in any obvious way make it so. Nor does Adams consider that such a view may be morally offensive.

Arguably, Adams’s theodicy is basically an unadorned reiteration of the Christian message of redemption – one with counterparts in orthodox Judaism and Islam. But this theodicy combined with her refusal to defend her premisses; address the ‘why’ question; or conjecture as to how such ‘redemption’ can take place, conflicts with a conception of persons as having intrinsic worth, and as rational, autonomous, free, self-determining (to a degree) moral agents. Adams says:

[I]t is not necessary to find logically possible reasons why God might permit … [horrendous suffering] … It is enough to show how God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors – by defeating them within the context of the individual’s life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.12

Has Adams shown ‘how God can be good enough?’ Raped, killed, and dismembered? Gassed and tortured? Forced to watch loved ones die horrible deaths? God will see to it (be ‘good enough’), so that even the victims will agree it was all worthwhile. Do the religious believe this? This message of redemption conflicts with a more traditional and fundamental religious response to evil – that of Job’s consternation and confusion. Given God’s alleged goodness, knowledge, and power, evil is a mystery – on a par with the mystery of creation itself. God says to Job: ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?’ (Job 38:4).
Adams’s approach to the problem of horrendous evil rests on the distinction she draws between ‘generic’ and global approaches. These approaches:

- **defend divine goodness.** … by suggesting logically possible strategies for the global defeat of evils. But establishing God’s excellence as a producer of global goods does not automatically solve the … problem … For God cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives He allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils … Yet, the only way unsupplemented global, and generic approaches could have to explain the latter, would be by applying their general reasons-why to particular cases of horrendous suffering. … [Since] horrendous evil could be included in maximally perfect world orders; its being partially constitutive of such an order would assign it that generic and global positive meaning.  

She denies however that this solves the problem of evil. She asks rhetorically ‘[W]ould knowledge of such a fact defeat for a mother the *prima-facie* reason provided by her cannibalism of her own infant to wish that she had never been born?’  

Is Adams’s sharp distinction between global approaches and her own, which focuses on individuals, justified? Her approach requires that God does not allow any individual’s life to be engulfed in evil. Yet one who claims that instances of evil are not incompatible with God since they may be necessary for a greater good, can and ordinarily does also claim that Adams’s stipulation will likewise hold. Those who have suffered evil for a greater good will also accept that their own lives have been a great good. The ‘supplement’ to the global approach that Adams calls for is minor and one that, while not accepted by all those who take a global approach, easily could be. Thinking of Christ as a ‘personal savior’ does nothing to undermine the global approach. Adams’s supplement, however, leaves us with the problems such a view raises. We do not and possibly cannot, understand how such evil can be ‘engulfed’ and – importantly – the claim that it can be is, or may be, morally offensive.

**Theodicy takes a turn for the much worse**

Despite being at least *prima facie* immoral, much contemporary analytic theodicy has, at least since the days of Bertrand Russell, managed to elude critical moral examination. Consider, for example, the morally problematic ways in which horrendous evil (e.g., genocide) has been dealt with. Do they differ in kind from arguments by Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and other fanatics on behalf of the extraordinary violence and terror that are so quickly and universally and soundly denounced in the West?

Suppose I were to tell you that there are professors at major universities that offer a defence of genocide on theological and ethical grounds. I do not mean that they endorse genocide. I mean only that they argue that in permitting horrendous evil, God would be doing nothing that is necessarily ethically wrong. The claim that God would be doing nothing immoral in allowing genocide could (or should?) be seen as claiming not only that genocide could be morally justifiable, but that given that genocide has occurred, and assuming that God has allowed it to occur, it has been justified whether for a greater good or for some other reason.

Individuals who carried out such genocide would be acting immorally. But the claim is that even if God permitted it when he was capable of preventing it, God would not be morally culpable. It is assumed that the greater goodness of free will outweighs it. Whether those responsible for horrendous evil should be regarded as morally culpable when they are allegedly created by God remains an important question – one not recently discussed.
There is no shortage of morally problematic treatments of evil. Consider one that predates and is similar to Marilyn Adams’s view. George Schlesinger says,

A is permitted to cause another person suffering, with the view of providing opportunities for others to respond in a noble way, only if A is absolutely certain that he is capable of compensating the victim fully for his suffering. By fully compensating I mean that the victim will eventually agree that the experience of having to undergo the suffering … together with the subsequent experience of receiving compensation, are no less preferable to the experience of having neither. It is obvious that only God is in the position to guarantee this.17

One question is whether logically speaking God is capable of guaranteeing the requisite compensation to the person. Suppose the victim does not agree? In the case of genocide, what might the ‘stated goal’ and compensation be? Could the stated goal (‘providing opportunities for others to respond in a noble way’) not be reached by any other means?

Suppose the victim does agree; the thief agrees that cutting off his hand is proper punishment and that one-handed living under such a regime was adequate compensation. Whether or not the victim agrees is beside the point. The question is whether A acted morally in causing or allowing such suffering. Whether the victim should agree depends on whether A acted morally. J.S. Mill and Dostoyevsky argue that, in the case of some evils, God could not have acted morally. Schlesinger gives no reason to suppose that his justification for conditions under which ‘A is permitted to cause another person suffering’, is not as applicable to genocide as it is to those cases in which we readily agree a greater good is to be had in virtue of such suffering.

If Schlesinger’s reasoning were sound we might have a possible solution to at least one aspect of the problem of evil. As it stands, we have both a failed theodicy as well as an immoral justification of genocide. Filling in content without modifying the structure of Schlesinger’s argument we have:

[God] is permitted to cause another person suffering [e.g., have that person and their family tortured], with the view of providing opportunities for others [Nazis, ‘righteous’ Christians, the American Red Cross and Allied military forces?] to respond in a noble way, only if … [God] is absolutely certain that he is capable of compensating the victim [the tortured] fully for his suffering … I mean that the victim will eventually agree that the experience of … suffering [e.g., the person and their family tortured, gassed, mutilated], … [God] subjected him to … together with the subsequent experience of receiving compensation [Can these things be compensated for?], are no less preferable to the experience of having neither [that is, neither the gassing nor the compensation] … only God is in the position to guarantee this.

If it seems outlandish to suppose that Schlesinger’s argument is meant as a justification for genocide, think again. Those I am discussing have just this kind of case in mind. Richard Swinburne holds a position similar to Schlesinger. Swinburne says:

It is because being of use is a good for him who is of use and increases his well-being, that when someone’s suffering is the means by which they are of use that the net negative weight of their suffering-and-being-of-use is not nearly as great as it would otherwise be; and so our Creator … has the right to use us to a limited extent for the sake of some good to others. Kant was surely correct to emphasise that one must treat
individuals as moral ends in themselves and not use them for the good of others. But the latter phrase must be interrupted as ‘on balance’. It is permissible to use someone for the good of others if on balance you are their benefactor, and if they were in no position to make the choice for themselves.\(^{18}\)

Despite the centrality of deontological/Kantian ethics to much Christian ethics (e.g., ‘treat people as ends in themselves’, etc.), Swinburne (like many another) wears his Kantianism on his sleeve. Even if one does (sensibly) agree that it is not always wrong to use someone for the good of others, one has to look at the cases Swinburne has in mind for his theodicy – those like genocide rather than uncontentious cases where no serious harm befalls the person used and a great good comes from it. What does Swinburne mean by ‘limited extent’ in the above? The idea that it was not wrong to butcher the child in front of the mother because it will benefit the butcher is … well, what can one say? Even to consequentialists, Swinburne’s justification will be rejected as a misguided and offensive parody.

Van Inwagen’s defence of a similar principle is as bad. Van Inwagen rejects the following principle both as a universal moral principle and as it applies to God – at least in certain circumstances: ‘It is wrong to allow something bad to happen to X – without X’s permission – in order to secure some benefit for others (and no benefit for X)’.\(^{19}\) He says,

> The circumstances in which it is most doubtful are these: The agent is in a position of lawful authority over both X and the ‘others’ and is responsible for their welfare … the good to be gained by the ‘others’ is considerably greater than the evil suffered by X; there is no way in which the good for the ‘others’ can be achieved … we might consider cases of quarantine or of the right of eminent domain … It is not to the point to protest that these cases are not much like cases involving an omnipotent God … They are counterexamples to the above moral principle, and therefore, that moral principle is false.\(^{20}\)

Relevant moral differences between cases of quarantine and eminent domain on the one hand, and genocide and torture on the other are not hard to find, especially when the agent is God. It is therefore very much to the point ‘to protest that these cases are not much’ alike. Why state the principle in question as universally applicable when doing so begs the question and the point of the principle? Van Inwagen must be aware of this and yet he disguises polemic as reasoned argument.

Does van Inwagen think that the conditions he cites as invalidating the moral principle are met in the case of horrendous evil? Is ‘the good to be gained by the “others” considerably greater than the evil suffered by X’? If he does not think so then some other account of why God would allow such evil needs to be given. (Elsewhere he argues that for all we know things had to happen as they did – i.e. God could not have made them happen otherwise – which would surely solve the problem.) In the case of quarantine or eminent domain it could be argued that the individuals involved are still treated as ends in themselves.\(^{21}\) Can this be argued in the case of, say, genocide? The former inflict comparatively trivial harm to an individual. Quarantine passes a Kantian universalizability test. Each of us desires that others with a deadly and highly contagious disease separate themselves from the population, and any reasonable person understands that this desire commits us to accepting that we ought to be quarantined in such a case as well. By contrast, few sane people desire that others face torture and death so that the rest may have a chance to prove their heroism. And if van Inwagen’s examples are to satisfy his stipulated conditions, then doesn’t a moderately plausible case have to be made that ‘the good
to be gained by the “others” is considerably greater than the evil suffered by X … [and that] there is no way in which the good for the “others” can be achieved?

Van Inwagen, Swinburne and others seem to have taken Rom. 9:20f. to heart. ‘Who are you, sir, to answer God back? Can the pot speak to the potter and say, “Why did you make me like this?” Surely the potter can do what he likes with the clay. Is he not free to make use of the same lump two vessels, one to be treasured, the other for common use?’ God can do what he likes but would not necessarily be ethical in doing so. God commanding or doing something cannot make it right. That is the point of the Euthyphro problem. Rom. 9:20f. does not explicitly say that God would be ethical in doing whatever ‘he likes with the clay’, though this seems to be its meaning. Commenting on Rom. 9, Karl Barth (1886/1968) says

According to human conceptions such a God can be described only as a ‘Despot’ … and men are bound to rebel against his tyranny. But he whom men would not naturally wish to name ‘God’ is, nevertheless, God. Through the knowledge of God which is in Christ, he whom men name ‘Despot’ (Lk. ii. 29, Acts iv. 24, etc.), is known and loved as the eternal, loving Father. … There is no road to the knowledge of God which does not run along the precipitous edge of this contradiction.\footnote{22}

If this is meant as a justification of evil by authority or some other means, then it is just what Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, and J.S. Mill, reject.

Van Inwagen’s consequentialist views rest on moral principles antithetical to sensible Consequentialism – one that preserves certain duties towards individuals. Christian moral theory rejects such a latitudinous Consequentialism altogether. The contention that people can morally be used in ways these theodicies suggest is a justification in principle of all horrendous evil. It is a pattern of reasoning much the same as that denounced in the West (and elsewhere) as religious extremism that is linked to violence.

Van Inwagen does not think he is equivocating on the meaning of moral terms but he is. In an exuberant footnote he says, ‘when we no longer see through a glass darkly, when we know as we are known, when God’s sorrows are made manifest to us, we shall see that we have never felt anything that we could, without shame, describe as sorrow’.\footnote{23} How could what we call ‘sorrow’ not really be ‘sorrow’? Van Inwagen’s view entails a peculiar and pernicious global moral scepticism. If \textit{this} does not count as sorrow what does? That God may suffer more than ordinary people does not entail, as van Inwagen implies, that the mother in Ivan’s tale will be \textit{ashamed} at describing as sorrow what she previously felt at seeing her child ripped to shreds by the landlord’s dogs. On his account, the victims of hideous evil do not feel anything that they could ‘without shame’ call sorrow – or so they will one day come to see. Tell a concentration camp or torture victim that their suffering is not real – in order to win them over no less!

This view distorts Christian theodicy and affirms what Ivan and Mill deny is possible; that once one no longer sees ‘as through a glass darkly’ we will see how and why God is just and things we thought evil really are not. For Ivan, for this to be possible, we should be able to imagine a scenario in which the evil that occurs can be properly understood as good, perhaps when seen \textit{sub specie aeternitatis} or from a God’s eye perspective. But Ivan, contrary to Adams, Swinburne, van Inwagen, and Schlesinger, claims this is impossible. No reward, no retribution, no change in perspective, can make it good or right.

Van Inwagen claims ‘that the patterns of suffering that exist in the actual world do not constitute even a \textit{prima facie} case [i.e., “evidence”] against theism’.\footnote{24} This position is a repudiation of the traditional theistic problem of evil since both the existential and logical dimensions
of the problem are generated by recognizing that suffering does constitute a serious prima facie case against theism. Whatever one wants to say about Job’s consternation or Ivan’s rebellion, on a traditional theistic account they were not simply confused or unenlightened in thinking that evil constituted a case against theism. Van Inwagen’s assertion is as misleading as it is aberrant since he does not deny that evil presents a prima facie ‘difficulty’ for theism – but rather denies that evil constitutes prima facie ‘evidence’ against theism.25 Yet surely the prima facie ‘difficulty’ is generated by the prima facie evidence ‘against’ – whether or not that evidence proves to be anything more than prima facie?

Van Inwagen takes on this objection and asks, ‘[I]f a phenomenon is a “difficulty” for a certain theory, does not that mean that it is evidence against that theory? Or if it is not evidence against that theory, in what sense can it raise a “difficulty” for that theory? Are you not saying that it can be right to accept a theory to which there is counterevidence when there are competing theories to which there is no counterevidence?’26 But the fact that it may be right ‘to accept a theory to which there is counterevidence when there are competing theories to which there is no counterevidence’ obfuscates the specific issue. Van Inwagen conflates ‘evidence’ against a theory with the question of criteria for accepting or rejecting a theory. Who maintains that one should reject a theory merely because there is some evidence against it? Nothing in his account of why it is important or practicable to accept some theories when ‘faced with phenomena that make the advocates of the theory a bit uncomfortable’27 supports his distinction between ‘difficulty’ and ‘evidence’. He is using ‘evidence’, or rather ‘evidence against’, as synonymous with ‘evidence that in fact renders a particular theory improbable given what we know’. This is prescriptive, peculiar, and ad hoc.

What van Inwagen means by ‘difficulty’ turns out to be nothing more than evidence that proves to be prima facie evidence. Prima facie evidence is however evidence nonetheless, and empirical arguments from evil seek to show that the evidence from evil is not just prima facie given what we know or have good reason to believe.28 Moreover, it is a gross distortion of the problem of evil to suggest that theists are simply ‘faced with phenomena [evil] that make the advocates of the theory [theism] a bit uncomfortable’.

Van Inwagen misleadingly states another thesis that proves to be innocuous. ‘I argue that – from the point of view of traditional theism – among the states of affairs that have no explanation is the existence of evil: sin and death and disease … I argue also that many particular evils … [the rabies virus]. … have no explanation. (That is: the existence of these things is not a matter of metaphysical necessity; neither God nor any other rational being decreed or willed or brought about their existence.’29) But to say that ‘the existence of these things is not a matter of metaphysical necessity’ is a far cry from suggesting that from the point of view of traditional theism, the existence of evil itself or particular evils ‘have no explanation’. The point of theodicy is to provide justification cum explanation for them.

Van Inwagen says:

[T]hese difficulties do not render … [theists’] beliefs irrational … they can acknowledge the difficulties. … [and] they might go on to offer some speculations about the causes of the phenomena that raise the difficulties … [and about the] reasons God might have for allowing evil. Such speculations need not be (they almost certainly will not be) highly probable on the ‘-ism’ in whose defence they are employed. And they need not be probable on anything that is known to be true, although they should not be improbable on anything that is known to be true. They are to be offered as explanations of the difficult phenomena that are, for all anyone knows, the correct ones. In sum, the way to deal with such difficulties is to construct defences … To show that
Constructing a ‘defence’ that accounts for the facts that raise the difficulty will only suffice to show that an acknowledged difficulty with a theory is not evidence against it if the defence is not improbable. But what empirical arguments seek to establish is the improbability, given what we know, of so-called defences or theodicies. His own defence/theodicy concerning natural evil is a remarkably improbable fantasy against knowledge of science and history.

Van Inwagen appears to be claiming that the theist is committed, a priori, not to allow any evil to count as evidence against theism. One can always construct defences given people’s divergent views about what is improbable. But Ivan’s point, along with Mill and others, is that the evil must count. When faced with the ‘difficulty’ or evidence that evil presents for the theist, why should the strategy of the theist be to construct defences? Neither Ivan nor Job adopted such a strategy and both denied that as far as they could tell, there can be a rational solution to the problem. Their strategy was to existentially take the problem on – to take it seriously.

Van Inwagen’s treatment of natural evil is even more difficult to take seriously than Plantinga’s. In attributing natural evil to the devil, Plantinga reduces natural evil to a type of moral evil. Although the notion of the devil as a person to be reckoned with has faded, it is not difficult to see how it might be regarded seriously in a context in which one believes in angels and exorcisms. But van Inwagen’s story conflicts head-on with science, cosmology and history. He claims that (i) natural events like tornadoes were present even before the Fall, and (ii) for all we know, were and still are, necessarily present given what the laws of nature must be. He claims that (ii) has support from scientists. He couples the plausible assertion that tornadoes and certain viruses are not evil in themselves with the farfetched (implausible) claim that tornadoes etc. resulted in evil only after the Fall. He alleges that due to Man’s separation from God, Man became cognitively impaired in a way that Man was no longer able to avoid tornadoes and killer viruses.

While he claims that he regards the creation story of Adam and Eve as a myth, it is hard to see how his account of natural evil can be consistent with what we know about the evolution of the species and history of the earth, etc. Just what aspect of the creation story does van Inwagen regard as a myth if he claims that there actually were people who, before the Fall, were able to avoid harmful killer viruses, landslides and earthquakes? Does the archaeological, geological and evolutionary biological evidence support such claims? Van Inwagen has entered, or has never left, the world of creation science – a world that fails to provide a basis for a plausible theodicy.

Returning to the issue of evidence, van Inwagen says ‘if there is no least amount of evil that would serve whatever purposes an all-powerful and perfectly good being might have in allowing the existence of evil of the kinds and in more or less the amounts that actually exist, then such a being might very well allow particular evils that are individually pointless’. There may be ‘no least amount’ but the significant objection is that qualitatively and/or quantitatively less would suffice for any imaginable purpose God may have. What drives the argument is that far too much evil appears to be otiose. That there may be (is) ‘no least amount’ is irrelevant to empirical arguments which claim that given the kinds and amount of evil that exist, it is implausible to suppose that God exists.

Modal scepticism is ‘the thesis that we are largely ignorant of modal matters that are remote from the concerns of everyday life’. Not only is van Inwagen’s introduction of modal scepticism ad hoc, it is also unfalsifiable; designed to forever do away with the problem of natural evil by claiming that natural evil is the necessary product of necessary laws.
Van Inwagen denies that modal intuitions (beliefs about what is and is not possible) based on introspection are reliable. After all, if we did have reason to believe that the laws of nature could be otherwise than they are – for example, if they could be such that there were never any killer viruses – then it would seem that God could and would have chosen those more congenial alternate laws. Van Inwagen argues we have no such reason:

[W]e have some sort of capacity to know modal truths about familiar matters. I know that it is possible that – there is no intrinsic impossibility in its being the case that – the table that was in a certain position at noon have then been two feet to the left … But I should say that we have no sort of capacity … to know whether, … it is necessary that the laws of physics have the same structure as the actual laws … Philosophers who think they can … determine by some sort of intellectual insight whether they are possible are fooling themselves. … It hardly follows that, because a certain thing cannot be proved to be impossible by a certain method, it is therefore possible in any sense of ‘possible’ whatever.38

Who claims that ‘because a certain thing cannot be proved to be impossible by a certain method, it is therefore possible?’ The general assumption is that if a concept or state of affairs is not logically impossible, then it is logically possible. Van Inwagen says ‘if you think that it would be possible to design a planet, and a universe to contain it, that was both capable of supporting human life and contained no earthquakes or tornadoes, I can only point out that you have never tried’.39 The claim here is that for all we know, it is necessary that the laws of physics have the same structure as the actual laws, and that natural evil necessarily results from these necessary laws. It is an embrace of Leibniz’s ‘best of all possible worlds’ theodicy.40

If God could not create the world with laws of nature other than they in fact are, then the physical evil that results from them does nothing to impugn God’s moral goodness, omnipotence, omniscience. Van Inwagen’s initial argument for modal scepticism consists of the claim that since what we can and cannot conceive of is unclear, conceivability cannot be a guide to possibility. None of the philosophical literature on the modal status of laws of nature is referred to.41

But once the question of ‘possibility’ is distinguished from knowing what is possible or impossible, or the possibility of knowing what is possible, then van Inwagen will have to offer more than the hypothesis of modal scepticism to prove that what we take to be prima facie possible is not really possible, let alone that ‘there is no such thing as logical possibility’. Until we have arguments rather than conjectures to offer on behalf of modal scepticism, arguments that would break down any distinction between nomic and logical necessity, and the relation between logical impossibility and possibility as it is currently ordinarily understood; why accept the view that there cannot be a world much like ours without killer viruses?

Van Inwagen’s assumption that we do not know ‘how we know’ something is possible even in everyday matters, seems false. We know that it is possible for the table to be two feet to the left of where it is because (like Hume) we can see that there is no contradiction in supposing it. At other times we ‘compare’ ideas or examine whether beliefs we hold may entail or imply something that could not possibly be the case. Van Inwagen has not shown that the way we determine everyday modal matters is different in kind from how we do so in speculative, non-everyday matters.

Note that, given Mill’s view on equivocation, Ivan’s moral scepticism is impervious to modal scepticism. Even granting modal scepticism, one would still not be able to regard certain states of affairs as ‘good’. Even if God necessarily had to create a world, if he was to create at all, in which laws of nature and human failing resulted in evil; then we would still have to assert that the state of affairs we now call evil, we would still call evil – and that whatever else God may be, God could not without equivocation be called ‘good’. 350
R.M. Adams on love and the problem of evil

Let’s examine one additional, albeit partial, theodicy – that of R.M. Adams – that illustrates the three principal points of this chapter: (i) recent theodicies are terribly immoral; (ii) such theodicies are slight variations on well-established and soundly refuted theodicies designed to deflect, if not resolve, the problem of evil; and (iii) contemporary theodicists have sought (unsuccessfully) to make their solutions immune from any possible criticism (i.e., unfalsifiable).

Consider the following two principles formulated by Adams.42

\[(R)\] If a state of affairs \(q\) is a necessary condition for a state of affairs \(p\), then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) regret that \(p\), one ought not rationally to regret that \(q\).

\[(R^*)\] If a state of affairs \(q\) is a necessary condition for a state of affairs \(p\), then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) wish, all things considered, that not-\(p\), one ought not rationally to wish, all things considered, that not-\(q\).

Adams rightfully rejects \(R\). If killing is necessary for my existence and I do not regret my existence, this does not mean that I ought not or do not regret the killing. Adams is glad he exists while regretting World War I which was, let us assume, a causally necessary condition for his existence. We can rationally regret evils that were causally necessary to bring about \(p\) without regretting \(p\).

Adams contrasts cases of conditionally favorable attitudes (for example, I would like the job provided I did not have to hurt others to get it), with those where we (allegedly) have an ‘unconditionally’ favorable attitude towards some state of affairs, such as one’s existence, and where that state of affairs is causally necessarily connected to some prior evil. In these cases, is it rational to regret the bad state of affairs that we suppose is necessarily connected to that to which we have the unconditionally favorable attitude? Supposing it is rational to regret the bad in such cases, is it also rational to wish that the bad never happened? (See \(R^*\).)

Adams does not distinguish between causal or nomic (law-like) necessity and logical necessity, even though, if they were distinguished, different responses to the questions posed may be in order. It might, for example, make sense to wish for \(x\) where \(x\) is nomically impossible, but logically possible. What one might be obliquely wishing for in such a case is that the causal link be severed: that the laws of nature did not operate as they ordinarily do.

Here then is an essential part of Adams’s theodicy: we should have an unconditionally favorable attitude towards the existence of those we love, even towards those whose existence is necessarily (causally) connected to prior bad events. Contrary to \(R\), we should have an attitude of regret towards the bad things necessary for our own or a loved one’s existence. However, on the basis of \(R^*\), which Adams accepts, ‘one ought not rationally to wish, all things considered [my emphasis], that not-\(q\)’ (e.g., that World War I did not happen), but instead to assume an attitude of ‘ambivalence’ towards it.

The significant question in such a case is, supposing such necessary causal connections, should one ever adopt such ‘unconditional’ attitudes? Does love really demand it? I love \(Y\) very much – but not so much (I hope) that I would be willing to say that \(Y\) should exist even if the cost of it is untold misery. No love should be ‘unconditional’ in these ways. The argument from evil claims that it is highly improbable or impossible to suppose such connections between good and evil are logically necessary – that things could not be different, even if they are causally necessary in the circumstances. A theistic God could and would have seen to it, could see to it, that causal conditions were other than they in fact were.

Adams appears to implicitly endorse van Inwagen’s modal scepticism and then assumes that, for all we know, separating the evil (World War I) from the good (his beloved’s existence) is
not possible. We are then told that given an ‘all things considered’ perspective towards a good that is necessarily connected to a prior bad state of affairs, our attitude towards them considered together should be one of ambivalence. He does not question whether morally speaking we ever should have such unconditional attitudes, or even whether we do. Nor does he question whether God could have achieved the good without the bad, assuming, like Leibniz and van Inwagen, that it is (causally and/or logically) impossible. This partial theodicy is therefore question-begging. But more importantly, it is perverse.

Adams says that principle \( R^* \) is ‘much more plausible than \( (R) \):

As I understand \( (R^*) \), indeed, it seems to be a condition of coherence in wishing. For I take it that \textit{wishing}, \textit{all things considered}, that not-\( q \) is wishing away \( q \) and everything of which \( q \) is a necessary condition, and not wishing, all things considered, that not-\( p \) is not wishing away either \( p \) or any of its necessary conditions. In these terms we can frame our main issue: is it important, for the fullness of love, not to wish, all things considered, that the beloved not have existed?\(^{43}\)

Adams asks ‘Is it not monstrous to regard our individual existences as more important than the horrors of that conflict [World War I]?\(^{44}\) If by ‘unconditional’ or ‘all things considered’ one is saying that our individual existences are worth a World War, then the answer is, Yes. The fullness of love, as Adams describes it, is a horrifically selfish love – and something all too often acted upon.

If \( q \) (the murder of millions) is a necessary condition of \( p \) (my existence), then ‘all things considered’ I likely would, and certainly should, rationally wish that not-\( p \). This is because \( p \) would entail the prior occurrence of \( q \), which is the event I wish not to have happened. This does not entail that I could not or should not therefore regret the state of affairs of my not existing, nor does it entail my wishing or ‘having to wish’ to not exist, or my regretting the fact that the \( q \) and \( p \) are necessarily linked and wishing they were not. By ‘all things considered’, Adams does not mean all things considered. The ‘unconditional’ pushes all else aside.

\( R^* \) is not a condition of coherence in wishing. Wishing, \textit{all things considered}, that not-\( q \) (that World War I did not occur) is not the same as wishing away \( q \) and everything of which \( q \) is a necessary condition. Wishing is not constrained by causal (nomic) necessity. I can imagine Adams absent World War I, and I can imagine Helen Keller – as Adams claims not to be able to – with 20/20 vision and superb hearing.\(^{45}\) Imagination, rather than causal possibility, is a necessary condition of wishing, and imagination is not even governed by logical, let alone causal, necessity. Wishing can ignore any such alleged causally necessary connections between bad and good.

What exactly is it that Adams is pondering with regard to the fact that good comes from evil? For Adams, it illustrates how God works in mysterious ways. Great goods result from evils in ways we do not always know of and perhaps cannot conceive. This is a default (‘for all we know’) theodicy; one that resolves the alleged problem of evil by writing a blank cheque. It does not address the empirical argument from evil but ignores it.

Adams has a ‘horse and carriage’ theodicy. Evil and the good go together like ‘a horse and carriage’. You can’t have one without the other. But that things could have been different, that the causal connections Adams sees as inviolable are not so, is what believers and non-believers alike have for the most part believed.

‘All-things-considered’ evaluations involve taking an attitude towards, or setting a value on, complexes that include both goods and evils. This is the kind of evaluation Adams thinks we should take to evils generally or at least to those from which a good, like one’s own existence, comes. But why not ‘evaluate each event in itself, rejoicing and regretting without regard to the causal connections’ – which is in fact what we generally do? There is no ambivalence nested
in this response. Adams, however, appears to presuppose some kind of ‘all things considered’ event ontology (and corresponding attitude ascription) that bundles conceptually distinct events on the basis of often quite remote causal connectedness, and insists that only a single attitude is appropriate. Adams’s, ontology claims that causally linked events should not properly be regarded as distinct. The view is reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards’s (1703–58) claim that punishing Adam and Eve’s progeny for Adam’s transgressions is not immoral because God views Adam and his descendants as a single person. God’s view of personal identity is different from our own.

Metz refutes Adams by pointing out that ‘wishes’ do not ‘track relations of possibility and necessity’. He is right, but his critique, as well as that of Samantha Vice, does not touch the moral objection to Adams’s argument, which astonishingly claims that ‘love’ would prevent us from rationally wishing horrors like World War I never happened. There is such a thing as ‘sick love’, and the kind of love Adams describes is an instance of it.

**Conclusion**

Theodicies that claim genocide may be morally permissible and comprehensible from a theistic point of view, are as radical as those the West condemns. Are the philosophers discussed here saying anything very different from those at ‘illiberal’ Islamic or Jewish universities about God’s goodness in relation to the world?

But the moral objection is only part of it. I have also cited a lack of ‘seriousness’ on the part of contemporary theodicy. Ivan is serious. Job is serious. Van Inwagen and the others are not; but why? The chapter began with the claim that there is no aspect of human life more central to religion than that of suffering; and that religion’s task is in no small part to address that problem in ways that are of concern to the believer. By refusing to acknowledge that there is an existential as well as a logical dimension to the problem, contemporary analytic theodicy fails.

The situation reminds one of Kierkegaard’s story of the ‘knight of faith’ who turns out to be not the priest or person in church every Sunday, but the one you would least expect – the paradigm of this-worldliness – the ‘tax-collector’. Kierkegaard claimed that the pagan, or simple farmer who has never even heard of Christ, can be more ‘in the truth’, more ‘inward’ and ‘subjective’, than those who make religion a business (for example, the sanctimonious and allegedly devout clergy). With regard to suffering, it is the religious rank and file that have found ways, not always successful, and not once and for all; but ones that take Job and Ivan at their word. By contrast, the theodicies we have just looked at are anaemic and pale logical incarnations of a problem the religious neither face nor care about.

While ‘the problem of evil’ was once worth pursuing, that particular ship has sailed. On that ship were theologians, poets, novelists, dramatists, artists, and many philosophers. William Rowe may have been the last up the gangway. But the problem of evil is now a mug’s game (‘a futile or unprofitable endeavor’). Evil remains religiously and existentially problematic. For the religious, it should at times test faith along with an understanding of scripture. As an intellectual problem, however, it has been exhausted and resolved. Reiteration after reiteration; old wine in still old or slightly newer bottles, does not constitute philosophical advance. Become a student of the problem of evil if you must, but all you will find are anachronisms, alongside a new generation of apologists digging in their heels.

**Notes**


2 Most notable among relatively recent arguments is Rowe’s empirical argument – also called the ‘evidential’, ‘probabilistic’, and ‘inductive’ argument. See Rowe (1986, 1988).
4 Ninian Smart (1961) argues that the world would have to be almost incomprehensibly different if it contained no evils, or rather no evils of a particular kind. Smart’s essay is the earliest modern precursor I know of to Tabensky’s (2009) concern with the non-religious positive function of evil.
5 See van Inwagen (1998b). See also the recent collection of essays on the problem of evil in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, volume 70, 2011. Each of the three principal points focused on in this chapter is amply illustrated across the five essays in this collection. Bishop’s (2011) claim that the logical argument is dead, reiterated in Hall’s (2011) editorial preface, is argued against in this chapter and in Levine (2000).
6 See, for example, McCloskey’s discussion of the view that evil is necessary for us to recognize, understand, or appreciate goodness. This epistemological theme is also taken up in Tabensky (2009). It is a favorite with students: ‘Without evil there would be no way of knowing what is good’, etc.
7 Feodor Dostoyevsky (1964: 16).
9 See van Inwagen (1998a).
13 Ibid. 409.
14 Ibid.
15 There are reasons for this. First, philosophy of religion is of little interest to most analytic philosophers. Second, if the morally pernicious views discussed here are representative, and the field is dominated by those who hold them, then it is unlikely that the criticisms levelled in this chapter would be seen as having merit.
16 For a psychoanalytic account of the prejudices that underlie violence and that can help explain such claims, see Young-Breuhl (1996, 2004). For arguments concerning intrinsic connections between some religious belief and violence, see Pataki (2007).
18 Swinburne 1995: 87.
20 Ibid. 121–22.
21 Kai Nielsen (1973: 38–41) argues that the idea of God having created man for a purpose (e.g., fellowship with God) is ‘offensive in that it involves treating man as a kind of tool or artefact. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose’. Nielsen seems to me to be mistaken since the idea is that in creating humans with such a purpose and in fulfilling such a purpose humans would be fulfilling their own good ends as well. But van Inwagen’s account is different. In his theodicy people really are tools. There is no identification between their ends and the ends of others they unwillingly serve.
22 Karl Barth 1933: 350.
23 Peter van Inwagen 1995a: 120, n14.
24 Peter van Inwagen 1995b: 66–95, 70n6.
25 Ibid. 92–95.
26 Ibid. 93.
27 Ibid. 93.
28 Rowe (1986: 227) says, ‘It is one thing to argue that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of the theistic God and quite another thing to argue that the world contains evils that render the existence of the theistic God unlikely. The former is the logical argument from evil; the latter is the empirical argument from evil.’
31 Van Inwagen (1995a: 106) claims that his account of natural evil being a result of the Fall is a kind of ‘just-so story’. Is it a just-so story or is it an actual historical event? On van Inwagen’s account the two are not incompatible. ‘Dennett’s just-so stories are tales told to illustrate possibility, tales told against a background that may be described as the standard model of evolution. My just-so story is of a similar sort, but the “background” is provided by what I have described as “the data of Christian revelation”’ (see van Inwagen 1995a: 106 n.7). Van Inwagen is claiming that it is ‘not improbable’ that this is what
happened given the ‘data’ of revelation. What are the grounds for believing that before rebelling against God, Adam and Eve or our ancestors knew how to avoid earthquakes and killer viruses?

34 Van Inwagen says, ‘To allay the possible curiosity of some readers, I will mention that I regard the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis as a myth, in the sense that, in my view, it is not a story that has come down to us via a long historical chain of tellings and retellings that originated with the testimony of participants in the events it describes. In my view, the rebellion of creatures against God happened far too long ago for any historical memory of it to have survived to the present day’ (van Inwagen 1995a: 100n.4).
35 Van Inwagen disclaimers appear somewhat less remarkable after reading his account of natural evil. He says (1995a: 97) ‘I do not claim to be the first human being in history to have fathomed God’s purposes. Nor do I claim to be the recipient of a special revelation from God; I do not claim to be a prophet whom God has charged with the task of disseminating an explanation of His ways. The method of this essay is simply philosophical reflection on the data of Christian revelation – or, more exactly, on what one tradition holds (in my view, correctly) to be the data of Christian revelation’. Van Inwagen is not specific about the ‘data of Christian revelation’ or tradition he is referring to. See Levine (1998) for a critique of Wolterstorff (1995)’s account of Locke’s ‘wax-nose’ problem and biblical interpretation.
40 Leibniz (1710). The idea that this is ‘the best of all possible worlds’ was satirized by Voltaire in *Candide, ou l’Optimiste* (1767), which was banned for blasphemy.
42 Adams (2009: 8–11).
44 It seems unlikely that World War I is necessary causally or otherwise for Adams’s existence. Adams’s ancestor might have moved to Philadelphia on grounds that didn’t involve World War I or the mustard gas. He might have come across a lovely print by Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) of early morning rowers on the Schuylkill River – one that moved him in such a way that he felt he had to live on its banks. Why didn’t God see to it that his ancestor came across that print?
45 See Parfit’s (1984) answers, also odd, to the questions and kinds of cases Adams is here concerned with.
46 Metz (2009: 40); Vice (2009).
47 Kierkegaard (1968: 49–50).