

D. Z. Phillips¹ on God and evil

JOHN HICK

144 Oak Tree Lane, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6HU

Abstract: This is a response to D. Z. Phillips's stringent critique of theodicies, including that suggested by myself. I offer counters to his array of arguments, and point to what I see as a fundamental flaw in his philosophy of religion. He appealed to religious language as used by ordinary religious persons. But his account of the meaning of this language was not that of the ordinary religious believer. He thus claimed, by implication, to know better than they did what they really meant. I conclude that he was a non-realist concerning both religious language and the reality of God.

D. Z. Phillips's book, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*,² deserves a response from the among those of his contemporaries whose work in this area he so severely criticized. He lumped together as 'the theodacists' a variety of contemporaries covering a range of views – Richard Swinburne, Stephen Davis, Alvin Plantinga, Marilyn McCord Adams, Robert Adams, and myself. He might perhaps have said, quite reasonably, that he was more interested in ideas than in dialogue with particular authors. But in treating all these different writers as a collective he was in danger of failing to do justice to individuals. For example, Marilyn Adams criticizes Plantinga's and my arguments,³ and I criticize Plantinga's.⁴ However I cannot speak for the other 'theodacists', although some of the points I make will be endorsed by some of them.

In my own case Phillips used an article and responses to other contributors in Stephen Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil*,⁵ 'remarks' I made at a conference in 1977,⁶ and my students' textbook, *Philosophy of Religion*.⁷ Inevitably, these relatively brief treatments cover only certain aspects of my suggested response to the problem of evil. He seems not to have read the only book I have written on the subject, *Evil and the God of Love*.⁸ He quoted a passage from Richard Swinburne in which Swinburne quotes a sentence from my book, but there is no sign that had read the book himself. This is disappointing in that if Phillips had read my book, he would have found, and

been able to respond to, answers there to some of the objections he made in his own book.

But moving on from this, one principle of my own approach to the problem of evil, within the context of traditional Christian theology, is, as Phillips was aware, that it presupposes 'the principle that virtues that have been formed within the agent as a hard-won deposit of right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation are intrinsically more valuable than ready-made virtues created within her without any effort on her part' (66–67, quoting my article in Davis, 43). Phillips agreed with this, believing that the idea of ready-made virtues is incoherent. But he then claimed that I (as well, he said, as Swinburne) 'suppress or ignore obvious examples of the disastrous effects suffering has had on human beings; the way in which it has marked them' (67), and he proceeded to offer a series of such examples.

Following Rhush Rhees in his discussion of the Holocaust, he was 'referring to people who are falling apart morally in horrific circumstances'. Despite a few individuals who survived intact or were even strengthened, 'would anyone in their right mind say that these showed that the Holocaust was justified?' (70). Of course not; Phillips was here setting up a straw man to knock down. And in alleging that I 'suppress or ignore obvious examples of the disastrous effects suffering has had on human beings' Phillips would have been less than fair, were it not for my supposition that he was unaware of what I have written. In *Evil and the God of Love* I spoke of evils whose

... effect seems to be purely dysteleological and destructive. They can break their victim's spirit and cause him to curse whatever gods there may be. When a child dies of cerebral meningitis, his little personality undeveloped and his life unfulfilled, leaving only an unquenchable aching void in his parents' lives; or when a charming, lively, and intelligent woman suffers from a shrinking of the brain which destroys her personality and leaves her in an asylum, barely able to recognise her nearest relatives, until death comes in middle age as a baneful blessing; or when a child is born so deformed and defective that he can never live a properly human life, but must always be an object of pity to some and revulsion to others ... when such things happen we can see no gain to the soul, whether of the victim or others, but on the contrary only a ruthlessly destructive purpose which is utterly inimical to human values ... Instead of ennobling, affliction may crush the character and wrest from it whatever virtues it possessed. (330–331)⁹

And in my discussion of the Holocaust I asked,

What does that ultimate purpose mean for Auschwitz and Belsen and the other camps in which, between 1942 and 1945, between four and six million Jewish men, women and children were deliberately and scientifically murdered? Was this in any sense willed by God? The answer is obviously no. These events were utterly evil, wicked, devilish and, so far as the human mind can reach, unforgivable; they are wrongs that can never be righted, horrors which will disfigure the universe to the end of time, and in relation to which no condemnation can be strong enough, no revulsion adequate. It would have been better – much much better – if they had never happened. Most certainly God did

not want those who committed these fearful crimes against humanity to act as they did. His purpose for the world was retarded by them and the power of evil within it increased. (361)

So I do not ignore or suppress the reality of horrendous evil. But my suggestion is not that each particular evil, least of all this one, produces its own specific 'soul-making' benefit, as Phillips apparently assumed. It is this false assumption that raises the question of whether the Holocaust was justified. But justified for whom? It was humans exercising their free will who committed this monstrous evil. Obviously, the Nazis were not justified in doing this. Nor were all the other mass murderers – Stalin, Pol Pot, and others throughout history – justified in doing what they did. Nor indeed were all the other wicked deeds done by human beings in all ages and today. So was Phillips asking: 'Was God justified in not intervening to stop it?' As I pointed out, if it had been right for God to have intervened to override human free will in order to prevent some particular evil, it would have been right for Him to intervene to prevent every other major evil back to the beginning of human history. Phillips's answer to this was that:

Apparently, on Hick's view, if God tries to do something of the kind envisaged, he has to do everything. ... [Otherwise] he would have to decide where to draw the line. Doing so may confront God with all sorts of dilemmas, but so what? But who would accept the following defence, 'I can't save everyone, so I'll save no one'? (107).

This might at first sight suggest that Phillips believed in the possibility of miraculous divine interventions, and thought that God should have intervened selectively. But of course Phillips did not. His point is that 'This is simply a consequence of treating God as a moral agent like ourselves' (107). God is a moral being, and God acts in creation, but He is not an agent (on my view) within our human arena. But this misses the point under discussion, which is not whether God is a moral agent but whether miraculous interventions, however numerous or few, would be compatible with having created free beings in a world requiring continual moral choices.

But, more fundamentally, Phillips thought that the Holocaust undermines the supreme value to humanity of free will. He offered a poor argument:

As a result [of seeing free will as a good in itself], any bad choices made by [humans], no matter what their consequences, are justified by the greater good of the free will that makes it possible for us to have choices at all. In this way, even the Holocaust can be justified. One wonders what has happened to philosophy, if it can lead one to say that, horrendous though it was, the Holocaust is justified as a result of the greater good of the free will of those who perpetrated it. (177)

But it is not the free will of those who perpetrated the Holocaust that is being appealed to, but the free will of everyone, including Phillips. Free will is essential to human personal existence. There would be no humanity without the free will of us all. Phillips was committed to denying God's justification for creating the

human race. For he accepted the impossibility of God creating genuinely free beings who can be guaranteed never to go wrong (97–98).

This takes us back to the argument of my book as a whole: if God intends to create genuinely good *free* creatures, a ready-made ‘goodness’ being either impossible or valueless, then it is to be expected – as the early Christian thinker Irenaeus proposed – that humans were not (as the main tradition holds) created as good free beings who then sinfully fell, but as imperfect and immature beings, able, by the exercise of their own freedom, gradually to grow towards their future perfection beyond this world. Developing this, I asked what kind of environment would make this possible, and suggested that

... in order for man [this was before the general use of inclusive language] to be endowed with the freedom in relation to God that is essential if he is to come to his Creator in uncompelled faith and love, he must be initially set at an epistemic ‘distance’ from that Creator. This entails his immersion in an apparently autonomous environment which presents itself to him *etsi deus non daretur*, ‘as if there were no God’. (323)

It must be a world operating according to its own laws, which are not designed for human comfort, and which involves occasions of pain and suffering, problems and challenges, and the ability to help or hurt others. It follows that, in words of Phillips, ‘disasters of natural or moral kinds strike us without rhyme or reason’, for they arise, in the case of natural disasters from the impartial order of nature, and in the case of moral evils from the misuse of human free will. Phillips says that ‘When I say that ours is a world in which disasters of natural or moral kinds strike us without rhyme or reason ... some theodiscists look at me in amazement’ (82). I wonder whom he was referring to.

Concerning the idea of epistemic distance Phillips asked, ‘Is it not clear that the distance between God and human beings is *not epistemic but spiritual?*’ (166). But these are different sides of the same coin. It is our spiritual lack that constitutes God at a distance in the dimension of human awareness; and it is by spiritual change that this ‘distance’ is overcome. Phillips cites those, such as one of the psalmists, for whom ‘God’s presence seems overwhelmingly evident’ (165). There certainly are people who enjoy a very powerful sense of God’s presence, and they have come to this by a spiritual development that has eroded the epistemic distance in which, in varying degrees, most of us still live.

Returning to the idea of a challenging world as an environment for person-making, I offered a number of supporting considerations. For example,

... the capacity for love would never be developed, except in a very limited sense of the word, in a world in which there was no such thing as suffering. The most mature and valuable form of love in human life is the love between a man and a woman upon which the family is built. [Or, I would add today, love between two people of the same sex]. This love is not merely a physical or romantic enjoyment of each other, although that is where it begins and should always be an element within it. But it can grow into something more than this, namely a joint facing of the task of creating a home together and the bearing of

one another's burdens through all the length of a lifetime. Such love expresses itself most fully in mutual giving and helping and sharing in times of difficulty. And it is hard to see how such love could ever be developed in human life, in this its deepest and most valuable form of mutual caring and sharing, except in an environment that has much in common with our own world. (325–326)

Phillips might seem to be asking, was God justified in creating finite free beings in the first place. But as we shall see, Phillips did not in fact believe either in creation or in an objectively real God. His chapters in criticism of Christian responses to the problem of evil were intended to move us into the fundamentally different way of thinking expounded in his later chapters.

I will come to that. But it is an essential element of my approach, as of several others of 'the theodacists', that the creative process continues beyond this life. (Hence my slogan, 'No theodicy without eschatology'.) This is not as Phillips suggests, like 'the small print in advertisement material, an addendum is added to the story: there's a second instalment – we are to live again after death' (83). So far from being an addendum, it is an essential part of the structure of the theodicy. Phillips assumes that the person-making process should show that it works in this present life alone: it 'simply does not work in the very life it was supposed to be designed for' (84). It does to some extent: this life, for all its horrors, does produce people who can be properly described as in varying degrees saintly, and very many do grow spiritually in the course of their lives. But, I added, 'we have not become fully human by the time we die. If, then, God's purpose of the perfecting of human beings is ever to be fulfilled it must ... take place through a continued development within some further environment in which God places us' (347).

But this is not the 'compensation or redemption after death' that Phillips objects to. Redemption, in its usual sense of salvation through Christ's atoning death, suggests the idea, currently popular idea among many Christian theologians, that non-Christians will encounter Christ after death and will then have the opportunity denied them in this life of responding to him. But this is not an idea with which I have any sympathy. And the idea of compensation is likewise unacceptable. In *Evil and the God of Love* I emphasized the contrast between what I have proposed, versus

... the view that the promised joys of heaven are to be related to man's earthly travails as a compensation or reward. This suggests a divine dispensation equitably proportioning compensation to injury, so that the more an individual has suffered beyond his desert the more intense and prolonged will be the heavenly bliss that he experiences. ... As distinct from such a book-keeping view, what is being suggested here, so far as men's suffering are concerned, is that these sufferings – which for some people are immense and for others relatively slight – will in the end lead to the enjoyment of a common good which will be unending and therefore unlimited, and which will be seen by its participants as justifying all that has been endured on the way to it. The 'good eschaton' will not be a reward or a compensation proportioned to each individual's trials, but an

infinite good that would render worthwhile *any* finite suffering endured in the course of attaining it. (340–341)

But of course Phillips did not believe in any kind of life after death: ‘I do not think that that notion of life after death does make sense’ (85). In chapter 11 he reiterates the position of his earlier *Death and Immortality*.¹⁰

My suggestion, as I have said, is that the divine purpose of the world is soul-making or person-making. Phillips says that this suggestion ‘suffers from a fatal objection’. This is that ‘*To make the development of one’s character an aim is to ensure that the development will not take place*’ (57). I think that this is generally (though not invariably) correct; but it is not an objection. However, Phillips later recognizes that the suggestion is not that character development is *our* aim, but God’s aim in creation. But he maintains (a) that ‘if God’s reasons are confused and morally objectionable, this would have the unhappy consequence ... of making God inferior to human beings’ (57). But why should we suppose God to be confused? The development in question is not God’s nature but ours. (b) Nevertheless, Phillips said, if we accept the Irenaean theodicy and ‘understand the evils in these terms, this will obviously determine what we think we are doing when we respond to them, namely, that we are developing our characters’ (58), so that the original objection will return. No; if we accept the Irenaean theodicy we should face adversity without losing our faith in God, and combat – rather than accept – the causes of adversity, so far as we can, as they affect both ourselves and others; for it is by seeking to overcome evil that we grow morally. (Phillips notes this on 267). The basic question is whether the entire person-making process, in this life and beyond, will ultimately have a fully justifying value to all; and the belief that it will can only be a sustaining belief to us now. One could say of this faith, as Phillips did on a different basis, that ‘It does not depend on life’s events taking one course rather than another, since it sustains the believer no matter what course it takes’ (186).

In his advocacy of a ‘purifying atheism’ Phillips sought to show that ‘certain ways of talking, which seemed to make sense, in fact have no application: talk of God’s covenant with his people in terms of a contract; talk of God as an agent among agents; and talk of God as pure consciousness’ (158). But none of this is required by theism. A divine covenant is a distinctively Jewish idea, not shared by Islam, and only sometimes within Christianity. Again the idea, which Phillips rejects, of God as an agent among agents is misformulated. God acts in creation, whether initially or continuously, but this is not the act of an agent among agents. Together with a number of other Christian writers I do not hold that God sometimes intervenes miraculously in the world.

As to the idea of God as pure consciousness, I once sought to clarify Phillips’s position at a 1975 conference by saying, ‘I take it that [Phillips] denies the existence of an all-powerful and limitlessly loving God. I take it, that is, that he denies that in addition to the many human consciousnesses there is another

consciousness which is the consciousness of God'.¹¹ Phillips rejected the question because 'The notion of consciousness being invoked is a philosophical chimera. If this is so, it cannot be attributed, meaningfully, to either human beings or God' (152). His reason for this, in the next sentence, is that 'If consciousness is the essence of a person, one would expect it, at the very least, to be the guarantor of that person's identity' (152), and he proceeds to question whether consciousness can guarantee a person's identity. But this is irrelevant to the question whether God is conscious and whether God's consciousness is distinct from the consciousness of each human being. Whether consciousness constitutes the essence of a person, guaranteeing our identity, is a separate issue. Phillips's arguments go at a tangent to the point in question. Again, he attacks 'the primacy of consciousness' (153, 154). But the question of whether God exists and is conscious does not involve any doctrine of the primacy of consciousness.

Again, Phillips claimed that 'this conception of a person without a body is meaningless' (156). The issue centres on a possible post-mortem state – which Phillips did not believe to be possible. However among the philosophers who argue for its possibility are H. D. Lewis,¹² H. H. Price,¹³ and Richard Swinburne.¹⁴ Phillips's total dismissal of the idea was only justified on a materialist, or physicalist, presupposition.

What Phillips meant by the reality of God has been a matter of contention for many years. I believe that he was a non-realist concerning the objective reality of God and that he advocated a non-realist use of religious language. He strenuously denied this. I wrote that 'I understand Phillips as saying, or rather implying, that the concept, or idea, or picture of an objectively real God is a very powerful concept which, although unsubstantiated, is nevertheless central to a whole coherent way of thinking, imagining and living, which is the religious form of life'.¹⁵

In *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* he returned to the issue. He said, 'What I *am* saying is that it is by looking at the application of religious concepts that we find what it means to speak of an objectively real God who is at a distance from human beings' (167). He says that 'the trouble with the notion of God as "an additional consciousness to all human consciousnesses"' is precisely that it has not been given, or been shown to have, any coherent application' (168). By this he presumably meant that, as he argued earlier, the notion of a disembodied consciousness is incoherent. And yet we address God in prayer, confession, praise, as One who hears us. Intending to avoid this conclusion, Phillips referred to our addressing God as our creator, saying that 'In order to say that God is our creator, who existed before the mountains were brought forth, or the earth was made, we would have to participate in the religious form in which this confession has any sense We would be confessing God as our creator' (171). True; but would it not be implicit in our confession that our creator is a conscious power? Does not the believer, in this confession, assume that his/her creator is a

purposeful conscious being? For the same believers pray to their creator, believing that He can hear them.

I repeat that Phillips insisted, as his central position, that the meaning of religious language is to be found in its religious use, and he cited among examples of the first-order use of religious language: 'O Jehovah, my God, thou art very great' (Psalm 104.1). There are hundreds of other examples in the Bible of humans addressing God: 'Save me, O God! ... O God thou knowest my folly (Psalm 69.1 and 5); 'Our Father who art in heaven ... Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts' (Matthew 6.9 and 11); 'Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee' (John 16.1). Who would address God without believing that God is conscious of them as they speak to him? Phillips does not suppose, any more than the rest of us do, that God is an *embodied* consciousness. If, then God is conscious of God's creation, God is, *inter alia*, a non-embodied consciousness. If we did not believe that God is not aware of us, would we pray to God? Is it not implicit in first-order religious language that the religious person believes that God is conscious, not embodied, able to hear human prayer? But all this Phillips has declared to be impossible – except as an idea in the religious person's mind and a term in their language. This is non-realism in relation both to the reality of God and to the proper use of religious language.

This non-realism is evident throughout the later part of Phillips's book. He uses the language of traditional faith, but clearly intends it in a non-realist sense. As one of many examples, he says that, when someone is in deep suffering, 'God is with them if love of God [i.e. their love of God] has not been rendered pointless for them' (197). However, the God in question is not an objectively real being, but the idea of God to which they cling throughout their suffering. Some of us would have preferred Phillips to be explicit in his religious non-realism, as is his contemporary, Don Cupitt, in such books as *Taking Leave of God*.¹⁶

In the end, Phillips was implying that religious people don't mean what they say, but that he knows differently and better than them what they must mean. This constitutes a fundamental flaw in his philosophy of religion: he both appealed to and yet contradicted the use of religious language by devout religious people. He based his case on the actual use of religious language by religious people, within their form of life, but rejected their own understanding of what they are doing.

Finally, what I have been discussing is the Irenaean theodicy, formed within orthodox Christian theology; and *Evil and the God of Love*, as well as the writings from which Phillips quoted, belong in that context. But in my later writings, particularly *An Interpretation of Religion*,¹⁷ I have, as a philosopher of religion, gone beyond the confines of Christian theology. In the course of this I have set theodicies, including the Irenaean, in a new context. This does not affect the structure of the Irenaean theodicy, but its status and function. But this is not the subject of the present article.¹⁸

Notes

1. As I completed the first draft of this article on 25 July 2006, I learned that Dewi Phillips had suddenly died a few hours earlier. He was a long-time personal friend as well as a philosophical opponent. The work of this distinguished and influential philosopher will continue to be discussed and debated long after his death.
2. D. Z. Phillips *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004).
3. In Marilyn McCord Adams *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).
4. In my *Evil and the God of Love* (London: PalgraveMacmillan and Louisville KY: Westminster Press, 2nd edn, 1985), 365–371.
5. Stephen Davis (ed.) *Encountering Evil* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981, 2nd edn, 2001), but with the original articles unchanged.
6. In Stuart Brown (ed.) *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1977).
7. John Hick *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 3rd edn, 1983).
8. Hick *Evil and the God of Love* 1st edn, 1966, 2nd edn 1977, reissued 1985, 3rd edn 2007; Barry Whitney *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil, 1960–1990* (New York NY and London: Garland, 1993) lists forty-five critical discussions of it, and there have been quite a number since.
9. Hick *Evil and the God of Love*. My quotations are from the 2nd edn. The text is the same but the page numbering different in the 1st edn.
10. D. Z. Phillips *God and Immortality* (London: Macmillan and New York NY: St Martin's Press, 1970).
11. Hick 'Remarks', in Brown *Reason and Religion*, 122.
12. H. D. Lewis *The Elusive Mind* (London: Allen & Unwin, and New York NY: Humanities Press, 1969), ch. 16.
13. H. H. Price in Frank Dilley (ed.) *Philosophical Interactions with Parapsychology* (London: Macmillan and New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), ch. 12.
14. Richard Swinburne *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), ch. 8.
15. Hick 'Critique of D. Z. Phillips', in Davis *Encountering Evil*, 162.
16. Don Cupitt *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980).
17. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, and New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1st edn 1989, 2nd edn, with a response to critics, 2004).
18. Readers may also be interested to look at William Hasker's 'D. Z. Phillips' problems with evil and with God', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 61 (2007), pp. 151–160, and D. Z. Phillips's response, 'William Hasker's avoidance of the problems of evil and God (or: on looking outside the igloo)', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 62 (2007), 33–42.