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More on moral critique of theodicies: reply to Robert Simpson

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Abstract: **The article discusses moral critique of theodicies, and suggests the need for several distinctions in order to avoid misunderstanding. It distinguishes between moral critique of concrete theodicies and theodicies in general, and between moral critique of the *content* of theodicies and the *consequences* of theodicies. But there are also different kinds of moral critique of the content and the consequences. After presenting these distinctions, the article responds to Robert Simpson's 'Some moral critique of theodicies is misplaced, but not all'.**

Introduction

There is some disagreement between Robert Simpson and myself concerning moral critique of theodicies, but I suspect that most of the disagreement is merely verbal and not genuine. Since I also believe that there is much misunderstanding going on when it comes to moral critique of theodicies, I will first spend some time clarifying different types of such critique, then I will discuss the criticism raised by Robert Simpson against my article on moral critique of theodicies.[1]

Various types of moral critique of theodicies

I made two distinctions in my first article. The first was between moral critique of concrete theodicies and moral critique of theodicies in general. The second distinction was between moral critique of the content of theodicies and moral critique of the consequences of theodicies. After having read the response given by Robert Simpson I see the need for two more distinctions.

Concerning the content of theodicies, one should distinguish between moral claims made in the theodicies and how different topics (both descriptive and normative) are treated by the theodicist. For example, Richard Swinburne claims

that even if a person lives a short and painful life, that life may be, on balance, good if the person who died was useful for someone else. This is a moral claim which someone might have moral reasons for criticizing. But one could also give a moral critique of some content in a theodicy that was not directly a moral claim about something being good or bad, right or wrong. One example would be the example offered by Simpson, where D. Z. Phillips argues that it is morally insensitive of S. T. Davis to compare the hindsight of Holocaust victims with his own hindsight of an embarrassing episode at high school.

The previous paragraph offered a distinction concerning critique of the *content* of theodicies. But a distinction should also be made concerning the *consequences* of a theodicy. Concerning the consequences of a theodicy, one should distinguish between the consequences of someone *believing* a theodicy, and the consequences of a theodicy being *communicated* in some context. Some instances of moral critique of theodicies focus on what happens when people *believe* a theodicy and understand the world in terms of this theodicy. If the theodicy makes the point that evils serve a greater good, the theodicy may have the consequence that sufferers are silenced or pacified. Other instances of moral critique focus on the inappropriateness of *communicating* a theodicy when comfort and listening is what is required. If a theodicy is given, this may lead to either rage and despair, or silencing and pacification.

Summing up, it may be useful to distinguish between two types of moral critique of the *content* of theodicies and two types of moral critique of the *consequences* of theodicies. And to each of these distinctions, one might add whether it is a critique of theodicies in general or a specific theodicy, and one might also add a comment on the context in which the critique is valid. These distinctions can be combined to give many different kinds of moral critique of theodicies. I will now respond to the arguments made by Robert Simpson in light of these distinctions.

Response to Robert Simpson

Simpson and I agree that a global rejection of theodicies is unwarranted, and so I will leave out that discussion and rather focus on moral critique of concrete theodicies.

Firstly, Simpson claims that I have a narrow understanding of moral critique of theodicies since I define it as moral critique of the consequences of theodicies. Simpson makes the point that instead of this focus on consequences, moral critique of theodicies could be cashed out in deontological terms (a duty to take suffering seriously) or virtue-ethical terms (concerning vices in theodicy discourse) (340).

How should this kind of critique be classified in light of the distinctions introduced above? Some would perhaps argue that making theodicies in general is

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a vice that one ought not to engage in, but it seems that Simpson and I agree that such global critique of theodicies is not any good. The deontological and virtue-ethical examples Simpson offers are then better understood as examples of moral critique of the content of theodicies. This critique could be made directly against moral claims in the theodicy, but is seems most reasonable to interpret Simpson's examples more as a critique of how certain topics are treated in certain theodicies.

In my first article I wrote that I find moral critique of the *content* of theodicies to be useful and relevant, but I decided to focus on the moral critique of *consequences* of theodicies. I delimited the term 'moral critique' for this kind of critique, but I know that there are other kinds of moral critique which are good. This means that I do not reject the kind of deontological and virtue-ethical critique that Simpson brings up, and so I see no real disagreement between Simpson and myself here.

Secondly, concerning moral critique of the consequences of a theodicy, Simpson argues that I chose a bad example to make my point. My example was that it would be question-begging to criticize a theodicy for the consequences of mis-declaring what evil is if you just presuppose some other definition of evil to be right. Against this, Simpson argues that if a theodicy calls good evil, it is morally compromised, regardless of its consequences.

The way Simpson presents it, it becomes a discussion of a moral assumption made in the theodicy, and, as I mentioned, I am not against moral critique of the content of theodicies. My example focused on critique of consequences without discussing the content. But I see that my example was easily misunderstood, and that I should have chosen a better example. Generously, Simpson himself offers a better example, namely the moral critique of theodicies that they have the bad consequence of pacifying people in their fight against evil. And he mentions the common reply by theodicists, that people have misunderstood their theodicy if they conclude that they need not fight against evil.[2]

Thirdly, Simpson discusses the critique that one cannot distinguish between a theoretical and an existential aspect of the problem of evil. He exemplifies the existential challenge of evil with questions like: 'How can I maintain hope and worship given the evils of the world?' Simpson mentions the following critiques: a theoretical reply fails to address the problem, evil is an existential challenge, and to treat it theoretically is to ignore the real problem. According to Simpson, I should offer arguments in favour of maintaining the distinction (342–343).

A recent example of the same critique can be found in a book by Claudia Welz, where she writes that 'the problem of theodicy cannot be solved by means of a theodicy … since this problem concerns all dimensions of human existence and *cannot be reduced to* a logical problem of consistency'.[3] I know of no theodicists who claim that evil is a problem which can be *reduced to* a logical problem of consistency, but they still think that they can *select* a theoretical part of the

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problem and look for a theoretical solution to the theoretical problem. Welz does not discuss this possibility.

But to elect to focus on a part of the problem is not to say that it is not connected to other parts as well. For many people, the theoretical problem of whether or not belief in God is inconsistent is a part of a larger existential problem.[4] The reason is that, for them, the theoretical side has to do with whether or not they can believe that there is a God, that they can have hope, motivation to go on, or feel comfort by their faith in God. And so a theoretical theodicy may have practical or existential consequences for how people relate to evil.

I find it obvious that one can present a theoretical problem of evil, without ignoring that there are other and more important problems connected to evil. This is done all the time, so obviously it is possible, and so I'm not even sure what is meant when one claims that the distinction cannot be made. I know of no good arguments against making the distinction, but of course there may be good arguments I have not thought of.

An example may clarify both how I view this critique and other kinds of moral critique. In *How the Mind Works*, Steven Pinker presents a biological discussion of incest.[5] He is able to give a coherent biological answer to questions like why men are more often guilty of incest, and why incest between siblings is very rare. It is not difficult to imagine that someone would morally criticize this and argue that it ignores the real problem, which is to prevent incest from happening. Or someone could argue that it could have the consequence that men could legitimate incest by blaming their genes. To use Pinker's theory to legitimize incest would be a fallacious inference, in the same way as people fallaciously conclude from many theodicies that they need not fight evil.

In a context where incest has happened, and people in sorrow cry 'Why did this happen?', it would of course be inappropriate to answer that it happened partly because of the evolution of genes. But in a theoretical context, it is a theory which offers serious candidates of explanation to puzzling questions, and as such the theory is valuable.

Fourthly, Simpson quotes my claim that propositions in general should not be judged on their possible consequences, but rather it is wrong to use theodical ideas for doing something immoral without the statements themselves being immoral. Against this, Simpson offers the example of a theodicy claiming that God allows evil because He finds it entertaining. This is clearly an immoral claim, according to Simpson (343).

Again, I am not against moral critique of the content of theodicies. Simpson's quotations are taken from a context where I introduce the topic of moral consequences of true propositions. So, what I say in the quotation is meant to be about true propositions only. With this qualification, I suspect that Simpson would not offer the same counter-argument. Otherwise, we would have to presuppose that it was actually true that God allows evils because He finds them entertaining. In that

case it would not be immoral to make the claim, but rather God Himself would be immoral.

Fifthly, Simpson ends his article by presenting what he considers to be two legitimate kinds of moral critique (343–345). The first kind is moral critique of the content of theodicies, and as mentioned now several times, I am also supportive of this kind of critique. The second kind is moral critique as an auxiliary argument in a total case against theodicies. Not only can theodicies be argued to be incoherent or false, but in addition they can be argued to be immoral. This can then serve as another kind of reason against theodicies, in addition to arguments against their coherence or plausibility.

Concerning this latter kind of critique, I have no general objection against it. I am only against moral critique when the arguments are poor, and in this article and the previous I have tried to specify which kinds of moral arguments are poor and which are not.

Let me end by indicating one way that moral critique of the consequences of a theodicy could be argued to count against the truth-value of the theodicy. It would require an extra premise connected to how revelation is understood. But let's say a good case could be made in favour of understanding Christian revelation similarly to how, for example, Keith Ward understands it. That is, God has revealed Himself the way He has in order to make us into better moral beings, for only by making ourselves into better moral persons can we understand revelation properly.[6] If this understanding of revelation is accepted, one could argue against a theodicy with bad moral consequences that it could not be a correct interpretation of revelation, since it contradicts God's intention with revelation.

Conclusion

After this discussion I am still uncertain whether there is any genuine disagreement between Simpson and myself. The conclusion I draw from this is that the topic of moral critique of theodicies is a topic in need of clarification, to which I hope this article can contribute.[7]

Notes

1. See Atle O. Søvik 'Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced', *Religious Studies*, **44** (2008), 479–486; and Robert Simpson 'Some moral critique of theodicy is misplaced, but not all', *Religious Studies*, **45** (2009), 339–346. All in-text references are to the article by Simpson.
2. To criticize a theodicy morally for having the consequence that it silences or pacifies people is an example of moral critique of the consequences of a theodicy. Above, I made a distinction between two kinds of moral critique of consequences of theodicies. The first was moral critique of the consequences of someone *believing* a theodicy, and the other was moral critique of the consequences of a theodicy being *communicated* in some context. The critique of silencing/pacifying could be interpreted as either kind; someone might be pacified as a consequence of believing a theodicy, or someone could be

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criticized for trying to silence someone by offering a theodicy in a certain context. I guess the critique of silencing/pacifying could also be made into a critique of the content of certain kinds of theodicies. Then it would have to be shown that a concrete theodicy in its content treats a topic in a certain way and addresses certain people in a way that constitutes an immoral attempt at silencing or pacifying someone.

3. Claudia Welz *Love's Transcendence and the Problem of Theodicy, Religion in Philosophy and Theology, 30* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2008), v (emphasis added). The claim is repeated on page 5. She defines 'the problem of theodicy' as 'the question of how the theistic belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God is compatible with the experience that there is evil in the world'; *ibid.*, 1.
4. I define the question of whether belief in God is inconsistent as a theoretical problem, since it is a question of truth, and theories aim for truth.
5. Steven Pinker *How the Mind Works* (New York NY: Norton, 1997), 455–460.
6. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 275–276.
7. Thanks to my colleagues Asle Eikrem and Jan-Olav Henriksen for an interesting discussion of some of the topics in this article.