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A critique of Samuel Shearn's moral critique of theodicies

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Abstract: **In 'Moral critique and defence of theodicy' (2013) Samuel Shearn argues that ambitious theodicies trivialize horrendous suffering in an unacceptable way by reinterpreting evils in a way sufferers do not accept. Against Shearn, the authors of this article will argue that sufferer acceptance should not be used as a criterion for the moral acceptability of what theodicies say about horrendous evils. Also, since theodicy is done in the public square, Shearn does not find it relevant to distinguish between contexts in which it is morally improper to communicate theodicies and those in which it is not. We disagree, and present some arguments as to why making such distinctions is morally relevant. Furthermore Shearn argues that theodicy is self-defeating if it aims to comfort sufferers of horrendous evils. We will critically re-examine the examples used to support his conclusion, and suggest that theodicies do have a comforting function. Finally, Shearn describes the difference between theodicy and anti-theodicy as an aesthetic impasse, rather than a moral issue. Against this, we find good reasons to affirm its predominant moral character.**

Introduction

Religious Studies recently published an article by Samuel Shearn on moral critique of theodicies. In part one he argues that ambitious theodicies trivialize horrendous suffering in an unacceptable way by reinterpreting evils in a way the sufferers do not accept. Against Shearn, the authors of this article will argue that sufferer acceptance should not be used as a criterion for the moral acceptability of

what theodicies say about horrendous evils. We will suggest that it is morally acceptable to search for the truth about the relationship between God and evil even if it can cause suffering to those who have suffered horrendous evils. Morally unacceptable are only those theodicies that describe a particular evil as better than it is, or says that something bad is good. Also, since theodicy is done in the public square, Shearn does not find it relevant to distinguish between contexts in which it is morally improper to communicate theodicies and those in which it is not. We disagree, and will present some arguments why making distinctions between different contexts of communicating theodicies is morally relevant.

In part two, Shearn argues that 'Theodicy, even if it is legitimate as an intellectual enterprise, is self-defeating if it aims to be beneficial to sufferers' (Shearn (2013), 11). As an example, he asks us to think of parents with a child who suffers due to chronic illness with no treatment, and says that 'Even the best news does not give meaning, for the daily struggle with the reality of that suffering engulfs and destroys any seeds of meaning' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Shearn claims that theodicies present God's relationship to sufferers as an *Ich–Es* relationship, since evil is something God allows for a logical reason. Yet sufferers can only be helped by an *Ich–Du* relationship (*ibid.*). For reasons such as these, Shearn concludes that theodicies, in their intellectual detachment from suffering, are self-defeating, and that this 'should advise theodicists that their benevolently minded attempts to provide reasons for God's permission of evil are misguided, and, given their effects on those suffering acutely, harmful' (*ibid.*, 13f.). We will critically re-examine these examples and conclude that theodicies need not be self-defeating when aiming to help sufferers.

In part three, Shearn considers two competing ways of seeing the world: the theodicist who thinks that good outweighs evil in the world, and the anti-theodicist who insists that evil is too bad ever to be overcome. Shearn calls this an aesthetic impasse, rather than a moral issue. Against this, we find good reasons to affirm its predominant moral character.

Part one: trivialization of suffering

In part one of his article Shearn makes two claims. First, he formulates a criterion for when a theodicy trivializes suffering in a morally unacceptable way: 'A person unacceptably trivializes suffering if *she reinterprets horrendous evils in a way the sufferer cannot accept*' (*ibid.*, 4; author's italics). Below, we will present a critique of this criterion, and suggest an alternative one: a theodicy trivializes suffering in a morally unacceptable way if it describes a particular evil as better than it is, or claims that something bad is good.

Second, Shearn claims that it is irrelevant to distinguish between different contexts where theodicies are presented, since theodicy is done in the context of public discourse, and therefore inevitably 'reaches' the sufferers of horrendous

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evil (*ibid.*, 7f.). Against Shearn, we will argue that there is indeed a relevant distinction between those contexts in which it is appropriate to communicate a theodicy and those in which it is not.

As to the first point, there are three terms that need to be clarified before we can properly evaluate Shearn's two claims: 'interpret', 'sufferer' and 'accept'. What does it mean to *interpret* evil? Human beings relate to evils in different ways. We can distinguish between attempts to *understand* evil, attempts to *interpret* evil, and *thinking about* evil (Dalferth (2003), 31). Human beings are able to relate meaningfully to a situation when they *understand* it in a particular way in and through a culturally determined interpretive horizon. They *interpret* a situation when they make their understanding explicit in the presence of other available understandings, and they *think* about it when relating critically to different competing interpretations of the situation by offering reasons for preferring a particular one. These distinctions open up a differentiated communicative space where it possible to agree with Shearn that it is morally improper to reinterpret how people understand and interpret horrendous evil, yet to disagree with him that it is always improper to discuss the reasons presented for preferring a particular interpretation (see further below). In other words: it is possible both to accept the first-person perspective of a sufferer of horrendous evil *and* to problematize it when it is presented in the form of a third-person explanation of what the sufferer *thinks* about horrendous evils. It is not simply a question of preferring the one over the other as Shearn puts it (Shearn (2013), 9).

Shearn's examples of theodicies are of the kind that exclusively seek to determine whether evil leads to something good or not, for instance where terminal illness is judged to be good because it improves the gene pool. Yet not all theodicies interpret evil this way. Some theodicies interpret evils by focusing on their cause(s); or on what made evil possible at all; or on how the possibility of evil in the world relates to God. Many theodicies do not claim that God allows evil in order to actualize a higher good, for example dualistic theodicies or process theodicies (e.g. Hygen (1973) and Griffin (1991)). These kinds of interpretations of evil, focused as they are on the metaphysical possibility of evil, are important to consider, because while sufferers of horrendous evils may experience them as a trivialization of their horrendous sufferings, these theodicies may still make claims that the sufferers are in no privileged position to decide whether are true or false.

The next term that needs clarification is 'sufferer'. Does it refer to a single sufferer of horrendous evils or to such sufferers in general? Is a theodicy unacceptable if merely one sufferer of horrendous evils cannot accept it, or is it only unacceptable if all sufferers of horrendous evils reject it? It seems most plausible to interpret Shearn as meaning that it is unacceptable if only a single sufferer of horrendous evils rejects it, since sufferers in general probably have very different understandings of what they have experienced so that no consensus can be reached. Some will think that they have been punished by God; some will think

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that God has an unknown plan behind their suffering; others cannot believe that any God exists. This distinction is relevant when we later on argue that individual sufferers think very differently about horrendous evils, and may well be wrong in their interpretations, which makes it difficult to use the acceptance or rejection by one particular sufferer a criterion of moral acceptability.

The last term to be clarified is 'acceptable'. Does it mean 'to accept as true', or just 'to accept that someone else thinks that it is true'? The most reasonable interpretation seems to be the first, since the alternative does not make sense: what would it mean for sufferers not to accept that others believe that something is true? There will always be numerous people who think that all suffering is caused by bad karma, or that it is destined or predetermined etc., and we have to accept that people hold such claims to be true. The relevance of this distinction becomes apparent below as we move on to argue that individual sufferers may reject the truth of any theodicy whatsoever, making Shearn's criterion of moral acceptability morally over-demanding.

Having now clarified these terms, we are in a better position to understand the criterion formulated by Shearn. When saying 'A person unacceptably trivializes suffering if she reinterprets horrendous evils in a way the sufferer cannot accept' he seems to mean that a person unacceptably trivializes suffering if she interprets horrendous evils in a way that *any* sufferer of horrendous evils cannot accept *as true*. Now, from our conceptual clarifications, several reasons should have become apparent as to why this is too strong a claim. Individual sufferers are often mistaken in their attempts to identify the causes of what they have experienced, and they can certainly be wrong about what made the evils possible (be it physical, biological, psychological, or metaphysical). It thus seems too strict a requirement for acceptable general explanations of evil that particular sufferers should accept it as true.

As indicated above, this does *not* imply that all theodicies are morally unproblematic. As an alternative criterion for moral acceptability of theodicies we suggest the following: *a theodicy is morally unacceptable if it describes a particular evil as better than it is, or says that something bad is good.* This immediately raises the question of what a true interpretation and explanation of good and evil is. That is of course a matter of dispute. People must argue as best they can that their interpretation is right, and that others are wrong, but we do not think that sufferers of horrendous evils should always, and anywhere, be given the final say. They may well be wrong – not about what they feel, but about what is the case. One could, of course, argue that those who have suffered horrendous evils have a kind of knowledge of such evils that those who have not suffered in this way cannot have. This is true, and their descriptions should therefore be given special weight. But there will always be disagreements among sufferers of horrendous evils, and there are many questions concerning interpretations and explanations of such evil(s) where they do not have special competence. For instance, they have

not experienced eternal bliss, and will thus not be able to judge whether that will feel as an acceptable compensation for the horrendous evils suffered in their present lives on earth.

Even if we agree that some theodicies are morally unacceptable, we may often be required to discuss at length the theodicy in question before such a conclusion can be drawn. Weighing good against bad on a large scale is a highly complicated matter, and scholars like Swinburne offer many clever arguments that deserve to be discussed before being rejected. The problem of evil is an important existential matter for many people, and thus we think that it should be acceptable also to make ambitious theodicies subjects for discussion even if this may result in a verdict stating that a particular one is morally unacceptable. If deemed morally unacceptable, it should no longer be presented as a solution to the problem of evil.

Having finished our discussion of Shearn's first claim, we are now in a position to consider the second point made in part one of his article. It concerns a distinction, found in an article by Atle Ottesen Søvik, between different contexts of offering theodicies. Shearn rejects this distinction as irrelevant, whereas we will clarify and defend it.

Søvik suggested that when considering the morality of theodicies, there are some contexts where ambitious written theodicies should not be communicated to sufferers of horrendous evil and other contexts where they may be so communicated (Søvik (2008), 481f.). Shearn interprets this as a distinction between theoretical and practical contexts. According to Shearn, this distinction is *irrelevant* because theodicy is done in the context of *public* discourse, and therefore inevitably 'reaches' the sufferers of horrendous evil.[1]

In making the distinction between theoretical and practical contexts, Søvik used the term 'communicate' when speaking of the kind of relating that took place. His idea was not that there is a context in which one can safely do theodicy without it ever being known to people who suffer. Rather, he was concerned with what it is appropriate to say and when. The distinction was made in response to moral critiques of theodicies that say that theodicies are silencing or pacifying sufferers, which is a different kind of moral critique from the topic of trivialization on which Shearn focuses. There are many things which may be acceptable to say in general, yet not to a person in deep sorrow. Even if it is acceptable in general to tell jokes or talk about being happy that we have not experienced such suffering, in such contexts it would obviously be wrong to do so.

We agree with Shearn that an ambitious (written) explanation of evil is morally unacceptable when communicated to sufferers of horrendous evil as something applying to *their particular suffering*. But nothing said about God's relation to evil will be acceptable to sufferers of horrendous evils who cannot believe that there is a God at all in our world of pain. The fact that a general explanation of evil in terms of an ambitious theodicy does not directly address the experiences of particular

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sufferers at least makes it less problematic from a moral point of view than those explanations which do actually address such experiences (as for instance the many TV-evangelists do when explaining a particular earthquake or a typhoon by referring to the extraordinary high amount of sin prevalent in that (part of the) country). When a theodicy is communicated to a person in sorrow, it may well be understood as being applied directly to this concrete instance of evil as the explanation of why that evil happened, whereas most theodicies do not explain why concrete evils happened, but rather discuss general reasons for why certain types of evils happen. The person who applies a theodicy to a concrete event will therefore often say more than what the theodicy says. This may seem like an irrelevant distinction, yet it is not. A theodicy may offer different kinds of general interpretations in light of which a sufferer may find it comforting to interpret his or her own experiences, but this is quite different from another person offering a direct explanation, with which the sufferer might disagree. Think of the difference between reading about fat and jogging and concluding 'I am so fat that I should start jogging', as opposed to being told 'you are so fat that you should start jogging'. What does the difference consist in? In the latter case, another person offers an interpretation of your situation which you may not share and which hurts. In the first case, you consider different interpretive options, and choose the one that applies to your own experience.

When specified like this, we find it useful to distinguish between, on the one hand, a context in which a person in sorrow is being told that a certain theodicy applies as an explanation to his or her concrete suffering, and, on the other, the context of writing theodicies in general. Even if the latter may also be read by sufferers they will most likely reject them if they feel that the theodicy in question is of no relevance to them.

Part two: self-defeating theodicies

In part two, Shearn argues that theodicies are self-defeating if they aim to be beneficial to sufferers. For instance, he mentions parents witnessing their child's horrendous suffering due to a chronic illness with no cure and no end in sight (Shearn (2013), 11). As parents ourselves we of course feel anxious and gloomy merely imagining such a scenario. Yet should a theodicist keep silent and not offer contributions to how one might come to see a meaning in such a situation? In considering this question we should distinguish between two different meanings of the term 'meaning' (Puntel (2008), 342f.). It could mean 'a positive goal or purpose', and that seems in accordance with Shearn's use of the term in this example. The suffering of the child serves no positive goal or purpose. But 'meaning' may also be taken in another sense, namely 'coherence', i.e. that something is successfully integrated into a larger consistent interpretive framework, as opposed to an integration of an experience which is inconsistent

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with other claims held to be true. The latter is, more or less, in accordance with how many theodicists use the term. Theodicies are concerned with the problem that suffering makes the belief in a perfectly good and omnipotent God inconsistent. When they search for the meaning of evil this means that they try to find out whether the existence of horrendous evils is consistent with belief in such a God, or not.

The main goal of a theodicy is most often to make it rationally acceptable to believe that there is a God at all in a world of suffering. And while some theodicies will also say that evils serve a positive purpose, many will not, like the least ambitious theodicies Shearn himself mentions. Many theodicies can thus say of this child's suffering that it is meaningless, in the sense that it serves no positive goal or purpose. And yet it may be a comfort to the parents, for instance sometime after the child has died, to come upon a general philosophical argument that makes it rational to believe that a perfectly good God exists, and is powerful enough to let them meet their (now happy) child again. It could be worse for them to have lost their child thinking that it was lost forever since there is no God, than to have lost their child yet finding comfort in the thought that they will meet again because there is a God so willing. Since theodicies make belief in God possible for some, they can also offer comfort to those who accept a particular theodicy as true. While a theodicy, most often, may not offer such comfort while the suffering is at its worst (when emotional support of various kinds is what is needed), a theodicy may offer comfort after a while. The experience (of trivialization) of horrendous evil is not a punctual event. It is often a process in which the content of the experience changes through a process of dialogue with other people/texts. A theodical explanation of evil rejected at first may later be accepted by the very same person. Moreover, a theodicy not intended to explain concrete instances of suffering (in the sense of indicating its positive purpose), may, as a positive side-effect, bring comfort to sufferers who believe in God when they apply it to their particular suffering.

Against this, one could argue that it is the belief in a good and omnipotent God which is comforting, and not the explanation of evil given in a theodicy.[2] We agree that the explanation of why God cannot or will not prevent evil does not offer any direct comfort in and by itself. But this explanation is what makes it coherent – and thus rationally possible – to believe that there is a good and omnipotent God. The theodicy may thus offer comfort indirectly.

Even if this particular case did not make certain kinds of theodicies self-defeating, Shearn also presents other arguments against ambitious theodicies meant to be comforting. He argues that ambitious theodicies present God's relationship to sufferers as an *Ich–Es* relation, since evil is something God allows for a logical reason, but sufferers can only be helped by an *Ich–Du* relationship, since for sufferers of horrendous evils it is only the personal attention and practical help of other people that will provide comfort (Shearn (2013), 11).

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A central – and very difficult – question for theodicies to answer is the following: why would God create at all a world where suffering is possible? In trying to answer this question, theodicies discuss what reasons God might have had for creating the world before creation. At that stage, God is related logically to the possibility of evil, while there were still no human beings to whom to relate. It was only when his creation produced human life forms that God began to relate to other concrete human persons. The point is that describing God's reasons for allowing the possibility of evil before creation (which necessarily must be an *Ich–Es* relationship) does not exclude God having an *Ich–Du* relationship to sufferers after the development of human life forms in the world created by him.

In concluding part two, we thus affirm that Shearn is right that ambitious theodicies may engage in self-defeating attempts at comforting sufferers. Yet we do not think there is warrant for his general conclusion that ambitious public theodicies, in toto, are self-defeating when trying to provide general comfort for sufferers of horrendous evils. Relevant parts of such theodicies can be applicable when required by the individual sufferer.

Part three: ways of seeing the world

In part three of his article Shearn discusses whether anti-theodicy implies moral pessimism. He considers Ivan Karamazov's claim that all of the world's happiness cannot justify the torture of an innocent child. When a theodicist thinks that good outweighs evil in the world and the anti-theodicist holds that evil is too bad ever to be overcome, Shearn calls this an aesthetic impasse, instead of just being a moral issue (*ibid*., 14, 16).

We would like to suggest another way of seeing this. Keith Ward discusses the possibility of weighing good against evil, and finds that – while it is difficult – there are certainly cases where a minor evil can be outweighed by a great(er) good (Ward (1996), 220). We agree with Ward, and also with his claim that the only possibility for us to experience eternal happiness with God is by first becoming who we are in this world where suffering is possible (Ward (2007), 57f.). If this is right, it means that the only possibility for us to experience eternal happiness is by first living a life where suffering is possible. Should a perfectly good and almighty God have created humans under that condition? God could not have asked us before we came into existence, so he had to make the decision for us. When he made his decision, God was in a situation similar to that people find themselves in when deciding whether to have children or not; the children might suffer horrendously, yet hopefully they will have a life where great goods outweigh their experiences of evils. God knows that he can offer eternal happiness as a compensation for horrendous suffering, but the possibility of such suffering is a metaphysical possibility God himself has not chosen, according to Ward

(*ibid.*, 27f.). God has only chosen to actualize our kind of world, which is a kind of world where the future is indeterminate, and where horrendous suffering is possible.

Is this an aesthetic matter? It is unclear what Shearn means by 'aesthetic'.[3] To the authors of this article the scenario in which these decisions are made has a predominant ethical dimension. A consideration is made concerning whether or not it was good of God to create our world the way it is. A choice about what to do when the alternative outcomes have different positive and negative consequences is clearly a moral choice. When deciding whether it was morally good for God to create the world, the problem is of course that nobody has experienced eternal happiness, and thus we cannot know whether sufferers of horrendous evils will find that it was worth it if it was the only possibility they had to experience eternal happiness.[4] But we find it plausible that God may know it well enough to be justified in making this decision for us – a decision we could not make ourselves.[5]

Even if it is the task of theodical discourse to consider whether God's choice of creation was moral or immoral, we do think that Shearn makes a relevant point when saying that people's aesthetic stance influences them when they evaluate the world as good or bad. Yet, even so, we want to emphasize more strongly the moral aspect.

Conclusion

The experience of horrendous sufferers must be given great weight when considering what to say to them when the topic is their particular suffering. However, context and perspective matters. Presenting a theodicy is not always the morally right thing to do. Yet, in so far as the theoretical problem is not taken to be the only, perfect, solution to the moral, existential, and therapeutic problems, doing ambitious theodicy in the public domain is not immoral as such. For some at some point, the problem of evil becomes a part of the moral, existential, and therapeutic problem. Thus if there is a perfectly good God, there is reason to believe that a true theodicy can be comforting for some sufferers of horrendous evil. We should therefore continue to discuss controversial descriptions and explanations of good and evil with the aim of finding the best possible answers.

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Notes

1. We started with the claim that theodicies do inherently trivialize suffering because theodicy entails the reinterpretation of suffering which a sufferer cannot accept. We upheld this conclusion against several objections . . . Søvik suggests that theodicy, not being intended for practical contexts, should not be blamed when it is misused there. However, since theodicy is done in public, the theoretical/practical distinction is not relevant. (Shearn (2013), 7f.)
2. We thank an anonymous referee for these objections.
3. If we understand aesthetics in a wide sense as concerned with what is beautiful/ugly, it contains an implicit relation to the question of truth and goodness. In so far as beauty/ugliness are dimensions of reality, we could always ask whether an aesthetic statement is true (i.e. if it is part of the real world), or whether it is something we should realize in the world (e.g. how the founder of the futurist movement Filippo Tommasso Marinetti, in his manifesto for the colonial war in Ethiopia, defended war *as such* because of its aesthetic qualities; see Walter Benjamin's quotation of Marinetti in Benjamin (2008), 41f.)
4. We here presuppose that God offers everyone a real informed choice of eternal happiness. For a detailed defence of such a view, see Swinburne (1998), 198; Ward (2007), 34, and (2008), 143; Søvik (2011), 194.
5. While this claim may seem unfalsifiable, it is not so when supported by other arguments in a coherent (i.e. consistent, optimally informed, and coherent) system of claims.