

# *Some moral critique of theodicy is misplaced, but not all*

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**ABSTRACT:** Several recent critiques of theodicy have incorporated some form of moral objection to the theodical enterprise, in which the critic argues that one ought not to engage in the practice of theodicy. In defending theodical practice against the moral critique, Atle O. Sovik argues that the moral critique (i) begs the question against theodicy, and (ii) misapprehends the implications of the claim that it is inappropriate to espouse a theodicy in certain situations. In this paper I suggest some sympathetic emendations for Sovik's theodical apologetic, but I argue against Sovik's claim that the moral critique of theodicy is altogether irrelevant.

## *Introduction*

Contemporary philosophical theists normally use the term 'theodicy' to refer to the practice of explaining why a perfectly good God might permit the evils we observe in our world. If a plausible theodicy can be provided, then (it is often supposed) this will give theists an adequate reply to arguments which seek to show that the evils in our world constitute evidence against theism. But

recently some writers – many of them theists – have claimed that theodicy is a doomed enterprise. According to these antitheodacists, the problem is not just that the theodicies in the literature to date are inadequate; rather, the problem is that a plausible explanation as to God’s reasons for permitting the evils in our world is impossible. Various arguments to this end have been suggested. Some writers argue that theodicy predicates an incoherent theology. Others reject the distinction between the theoretical and practical problems of evil, which theodicy presupposes. Still others argue that the moral framework which theodical discourse depends upon is inadequate, or at any rate incompatible with religious conceptions of morality. The criticism most often found in the antitheodical literature, however, is that the practice of theodicy itself constitutes a form of moral impropriety. According to those who proffer this criticism - *moral antitheodacists* we might call them – it is morally wrong to engage in the practice theodicy.

In a recent article, Atle O. Sovik has sought to defend theodicy against such moral critiques.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will argue that Sovik’s view about why moral antitheodicy cannot be used to ground a global rejection of theodicy is correct, albeit in need of some augmentation if it is to handle certain aspects of the moral critique. But although I agree with Sovik that the issue of theodicy’s moral propriety is not the right place to begin when we are discussing the viability of theodicy, I do not think that a moral critique of theodicy has no place in the discourse on the problem of evil. Hence in the latter part of this paper I will argue against Sovik’s claim that the moral critique of theodicy is altogether irrelevant.

### *Sovik on moral antitheodicy and begging the question*

Sovik sets out to refute what he calls ‘moral critique of theodicy’, by which he means any critique that rejects theodical practice in general because of its alleged harmful consequences.<sup>2</sup> The first thing to note about Sovik’s view, then, is that it construes the ambit of moral antitheodicy in rather narrow terms. On one hand, Sovik is certainly right to distinguish criticisms of the moral framework that is implicit in theodicies from claims about the moral propriety of theodicy. But having drawn this distinction, Sovik just equates the critique of theodicy’s moral propriety with a consequentialist worry about the practical ramifications of theodicy. This is problematic, because one might think that theodical practice is immoral irrespective of its consequences. For

example, some moral antitheodacists claim that proponents of theodicy betray those individuals in our world who are victims of horrendous suffering. The wrongness of theodicy according to this criticism consists not in its harmful consequences, but in its lack of empathy and compassion for sufferers. The details of this objection could be cashed out in deontological terms (focussing on the theodacist's obligation to take the suffering of others seriously) or in virtue-ethical terms (focussing on the vices that are allegedly evinced in theodicy) but in either case a purely consequentialist account of theodicy's impropriety would not capture the objection's intent.<sup>3</sup>

Moving along, Sovik rejects the consequentialist objection because, he argues, it begs the question against proponents of theodicy. When the antitheodacist says that theodicies wreak harm in our world, Sovik thinks, she just assumes that the claims found in theodicies (claims about evil and goodness, how the former gives rise to the latter, how things will turn out in the long run, and so on) are false; for if the claims of theodicy are true, then consequences which appear to be bad may not be. Sovik illustrates his reply by discussing moral objections to Richard Swinburne's theodicy. On Swinburne's view, all evil is instrumental in the bringing about of greater goods; there is not a single pointless evil in our world.<sup>4</sup> Critics have rebuked Swinburne for the way his account misdeclares the true nature of evil, as though real evil is an illusion.<sup>5</sup> But as Sovik points out, this moral condemnation presupposes that the propositional content of Swinburne's account is false, even though the truth (or plausibility) of that propositional content is precisely what is at issue.<sup>6</sup>

Sovik's argument here requires some clarification and development. For one thing, the example he uses to illustrate his view is not particularly apt. If Swinburne's theodicy does in fact call that which is evil 'good', then it is morally compromised regardless of its practical consequences. Those who critique Swinburne's theodicy on this front do beg the question against Swinburne in a sense, but it does not seem to me that the practical consequences of Swinburne's account is the point at issue.

So let's try to clarify the consequentialist critique and make sense of Sovik's response to it. According to moral antitheodacists such as Terrence Tilley and Robert Mesle, theodicies tacitly sanction an acceptance of suffering and injustice, and thus they reinforce oppressive social structures. In other words, when theodicies posit evil as something that is ultimately for the good, they deter individuals and societies at large from working to overcome the sources of evil in our world. Theodicies tell us to tolerate suffering, these critics say, when we should oppose it.<sup>7</sup> In responding to such claims, theodacists would generally agree that the passive acceptance of evil is a further evil in

itself, and that the encouragement of this way of thinking constitutes a harmful consequence for a discourse practice.<sup>8</sup> It does not seem to me, therefore, that moral antitheodicy begs the question against theodicy by proposing standards of harm and benefit that theodicists reject. Where the consequentialist objection does beg the question against theodicy, I think, is in its presumption that destructive consequences like those described here are an *inevitable* result of theodicy. Maybe theodicy does sometimes lead to the problems these critics identify, but this can be explained in any number of ways. Perhaps the theodicies that have been devised so far are wrong, but there is a right theodicy out there that is yet to be devised and disseminated. Perhaps there already exists a right theodicy, but the wrong ones are more widely disseminated. In any case, it seems reasonable for the theodicist to suppose that if a plausible theodicy is in the offing, it will not only explain why there is evil in the world, but will also encourage a right moral orientation in our practical response to earthly evils. The consequentialist critique, however, rules this possibility out. As long as theodicies are espoused, the critique says, harmful consequences will follow. Of course theodicists might just be mistaken. It might be that there isn't any plausible explanation for a perfectly good God's permission of evil, and thus it might be that the hope of a theodicy which supports a righteous response to suffering is in vain. But in order to show that this is the case, critics of theodicy must focus on the propositional content of theodicies, not the moral content. I think this is what Sovik has in mind when he says that the moral critique begs the question against theodicy. In seeking to rebut this critique, Sovik emphasises the relevance of the truth (or what it is reasonable to believe to be true) in relation to moral judgements. On Sovik's view, if one is trying to determine whether or not theodicy is a viable enterprise 'one must enter the debate about what is true... one cannot just presuppose something else to be true, and then dismiss [theodicy] as immoral on that basis'.<sup>9</sup>

### *The relevance of context*

As well as begging the question, Sovik thinks the moral critique of theodicy puts too much emphasis on the impropriety of espousing a theodicy in certain contexts. For Sovik, just because it would be an awful blunder to offer a theodicy as consolation to someone mourning the death of a family member, it does not follow that it is always and everywhere wrong to espouse a

theodicy. There are at least some cases, Sovik says, when questions like ‘why did this happen?’ or ‘where was God?’ are posited as theoretical questions and are asked by someone in the hope of finding a plausible theoretical answer. If the theist decides not to respond to theoretical questions of this kind for fear that her views may be hurtful or insensitive when considered in other contexts, then, Sovik suggests, she might as well stop talking altogether.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted on this issue that the distinction Sovik recognises between theoretical questions about evil on one hand, and practical or existential questions about evil on the other, is one that some antitheodacists explicitly reject. The reason for their doing so is not, as Sovik says, simply a worry that the theoretical answers might be recalled by someone during a practical crisis and somehow worsen their situation. Rather, for antitheodacists like Kenneth Surin, purely theoretical replies to the problem of evil just fail to address the problem. On Surin’s view, evil is not merely a fact about the world that theists have to explain; rather, evil is by its nature an existential challenge. The important questions for Surin, then, are practical ones: e.g. how can someone maintain hope and worship God given this world’s evils. To treat evil as data and nothing more, Surin would say, is to ignore the real problem it gives rise to.<sup>11</sup> Theodacists in general reject Surin’s approach (and their reasons for doing so may seem reasonable enough<sup>12</sup>) but my point is just that the moral critique in this instance hinges on a separate issue, namely, whether or not the distinction between the practical and theoretical problems of evil is a legitimate one. If the moral critique asserts without argument that the distinction is spurious, then defenders of theodicy like Sovik can respond in kind. But in so far as he aims to rebut the moral critique, a theodical apologist like Sovik should at least acknowledge the relevant dispute, if not go on to provide a brief indication as to why he believes that the practical/theoretical distinction should be maintained in discussions of the problem of evil.

Regardless of his view on the practical/theoretical distinction, Sovik’s reply to the contextual objection could still be tempered somewhat. Sovik believes ‘we cannot judge a proposition in general on its possible consequences’, because possible consequences are too vague.<sup>13</sup> So even if a theodicy *T* nearly always leads to harmful consequences, that is not by itself reason enough to abandon *T* on moral grounds. ‘What is morally wrong’ Sovik says, ‘is to use [theodical] ideas for doing something immoral, but the statements themselves are not immoral’.<sup>14</sup> But surely this depends to some extent on what *T* has to say. Even if the issue of plausibility is prior to the question of propriety, there are clearly some theodicies that are morally indefensible no matter what context they are put forward in, and no matter

how carefully they are related. For instance, what if I were to say that God is justified in allowing natural disasters because he finds them to be entertaining? The problem with a theodicy that invokes such a claim is not just that it is false or highly implausible. The problem rather, is that the central claim is positively amoral. Commonly espoused theodicies may not be as ludicrous as the one I have suggested here, but then some moral antitheodacists think the difference between my example and those in the literature is one of degree rather than kind. At any rate, if someone presented my theodicy of natural disasters in all seriousness, I'm certain Sovik would not want to say that the ideas themselves are not immoral, just the use of those ideas to do something wrong. In contrast to Sovik's approach, then, I think that defenders of theodicy should join with the moral antitheodacist in saying that *some* theodicies are so obscene or insensitive that they are a wrong to espouse in every context. For even if this point is granted, the moral critique of theodicy will still have to somehow establish that all theodicies are always inappropriate, if it purports to substantiate a global rejection of theodical practice. Sovik says that just because it is immoral to espouse a true (or plausible) theodicy in certain situations, it is not always wrong to advocate that view. He may be right, but the defender of theodicy can offer a more modest claim: just because some theodicies are wrong to espouse in any given context, this does not mean that all theodicies are always inappropriate in the same way.

### *Legitimate uses for the moral critique of theodicy*

In arguing that the theodical enterprise fails because theodicies have harmful effects, proponents of the moral critique implicitly rule out the possibility that there is a theodicy whose claims about God and evil are plausible. The moral critic may think that some theodicies are morally indefensible, but she cannot proceed with a global rejection of theodicy by assuming that every possible theodicy is similarly defective. It seems, then, that a moral critique of theodicy cannot substantiate a total dismissal of theodicy's viability. But is Sovik right to say, in light of this conclusion, that the moral critique is irrelevant in relation to the problem of evil?<sup>15</sup> Contra Sovik, I think moral objections to theodicy can play a significant role in this discourse.

Firstly, the moral critique draws attention to the possibility that theodicies are conceptually (or otherwise) dubious. When we read the theodicies propounded by Hick, Swinburne, Stump, and others, we see a

disquietingly positive attitude towards suffering. All of these writers want to say that evil is real, and that it is genuinely *evil*, but then all of them want to say that it would be bad (in some sense) if God were to prevent the evils in our world. We might say, then, that theodicies involve a 'proxy endorsement' of the evils in our world. Now, just because this proxy endorsement of evil is at odds with prevailing attitudes about evil (e.g. most of us think that a world without acute Leukemia would be better than the one we live in) the critic cannot dismiss theodicies on this basis alone; for she cannot just assume that the claims upon which theodicy's proxy endorsement of evil is based (e.g. claims concerning God's will, the afterlife, the history of humankind, and so on) are false. But what the critic can do, and perhaps what she ought to do, is adopt a strongly critical stance towards the propositions and/or philosophical assumptions upon which theodical discourse is predicated. For if an acceptance of these propositions and assumptions steers the theodacist towards a view that undermines our usual unreflective value judgements (e.g. a world without acute Leukemia would be a better world than the one we live in) then it is reasonable enough for the critic to suspect that either the propositions or the assumptions (or both) are untenable.<sup>16</sup> The critique of theodicy which she goes on to develop cannot simply insist that the foundations of theodicy fail; rather, it must explain in what way the relevant propositions and/or assumptions are untenable. But even so, the epistemic value of the moral critique remains. Even if the antitheodacist ultimately rejects theodicy because she sees in it a meta-ethical or theological incoherence, it may be that the foremost factor in her coming to regard theodical practice as a doomed enterprise was its moral contentiousness.

The second legitimate purpose that the moral critique can serve, in my view, is to provide an auxiliary argument in a non-moral global critique of theodicy. Thus, to continue an example from the previous paragraph, suppose the critic aims to show that theodicies in general fail because they predicate an incoherent theology. Having argued her point, the critic might note that in addition to conceptual problems that arise from theodicy's view of God, theodicy also unavoidably involves some kind of proxy endorsement of evil. So, the critic might argue, if someone offers a theodicy in reply to the problem of evil, then he not only tells an incoherent story about God, he also tells a story whose dubious moral calibre could only be defended if it were the case that his incoherent story about God was both coherent and plausible. Clearly in an argument like this the moral critique will be secondary to the theological critique, but that does not mean it will be entirely irrelevant, as Sovik suggests. It is one thing for the critic to claim that the theodacist offers an erroneous

account, but it is quite another thing, I think, if the critic purports to say that the theodist's account is both erroneous *and* morally unacceptable because of its erroneousness.

## Conclusion

Despite my qualified endorsement of Sovik's reply to the moral critique of theodicy (or at least, the consequentialist aspects of that critique), I do not think that theodicy is theism's best hope for a sound reply to the evidential argument from evil. Rather, as I said in the introduction, I agree with Sovik in so far as I think that the issue of theodicy's moral propriety is not the right thing to focus on when one purports to offer a global critique of theodicy. Of course, the difficulties that arise for the moral critique do not rule out the possibility of there being another (more successful) global critique of theodicy in the offing, and while I have not offered any argument here to suggest that this is the case, nor gone beyond any general suggestions as to the issues that such a critique could focus on, I hope to have shown that unless one dismisses the possibility of such a critique (and thus begs the question in favour of the viability of theodicy) one cannot assert the total irrelevance of the moral critique in this debate.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Atle O. Sovik 'Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced', *Religious Studies*, **44** (2008), 1-6. In the notes for this paper Sovik provides a useful list of references in which some form of the moral critique of theodicy can be found. Two recent papers could be added to Sovik's list: Marcus C. Felderhof 'Evil: Theodicy or resistance?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, **57** (2004), 397-412; and C. Robert Mesle 'Suffering, meaning and the welfare of children: What do theodicies do?', *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, **25** (2004), 247-64.

<sup>2</sup> Sovik 'Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced', 1.

<sup>3</sup> A further example from D.Z. Phillips's critique of theodicy may be useful in order to show how a purely consequentialist understanding of the moral critique can misrepresent some aspects of that critique. In *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, Phillips criticises an example used by the theodist Stephen T. Davis to illustrate his view about how people who suffer terribly in this life may regard their earthly suffering from a post-mortem perspective. According to Davis, those who suffer now will one day view their suffering the way he (Davis) views a major embarrassment he experienced as a high-school student. At the time, Davis says, his embarrassment felt unbearably bad, but now he sees that his ordeal



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was not so terrible. Phillips takes issue with this example, not because he thinks that it will (or could) have harmful consequences, but rather because he thinks it trivializes evil and suffering. In his use of an example like this, Phillips says, Davis ‘fails to take the Holocaust seriously’. If one just thinks of the moral critique in terms of worries about the practical consequences of espousing a theodicy, I think one will fail to grasp the animus of Phillips’s objection here. See Stephen T. Davis ‘Free will and evil’ in Stephen T. Davis (ed.) *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 84-85; D. Z. Phillips *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 39.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), particularly chapter 13, 237-58.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see Swinburne and Phillips’s debate in Stuart C. Brown (ed.) *Reason and Religion*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Sovik ‘Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced’, 2.

<sup>7</sup> See Terrence W. Tilley *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 244-47; Mesle ‘Suffering, meaning and the welfare of children’, 259.

<sup>8</sup> Such attitudes are evident in John Hick and Stephen Davis’s replies to Robert Mesle’s moral critique of theodicy. See John Hick ‘Response to Mesle’, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 25 (2004), 265-69; Stephen T. Davis ‘Truth and action in theodicy: A reply to C. Robert Mesle’, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 25 (2004), 270-75.

<sup>9</sup> Sovik ‘Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced’, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> A concise version of this argument is given in Kenneth Surin ‘Theodicy?’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 76 (1983), 225-47.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see David O’Connor ‘In defence of theoretical theodicy’, *Modern Theology*, 5 (1988), 61-74. According to O’Connor, theistic belief has a cognitive dimension that can be properly distinguished from its practical dimensions. The distinction of a theoretical problem of evil from the practical problem of evil, O’Connor argues, is justified since the cognitive aspect of theism calls for an explicitly theoretical response to arguments from evil.

<sup>13</sup> Sovik ‘Why almost all moral critique of theodicies is misplaced’, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> When I say that theodicies are at odds with prevailing attitudes about evil, or that they undermine our usual unreflective value judgements, I am not suggesting (as some critics have) that theodicies undermine our motivation to (e.g.) try to cure diseases, or prevent acts of evil being perpetrated against others. A rather unsophisticated theodicy might be seen to undermine such imperatives, but generally speaking theodicists are careful to include in their accounts some explanation as to why humans still have an obligation to try to prevent evil, even though God is justified in permitting evil. Hick and Davis both address this issue in response to Mesle’s criticisms. See Hick ‘Response to Mesle’; Davis, ‘Truth and action in theodicy’.