

# "ANTI-THEODICY" AND ANTITHEODICIES

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**Abstract.** The article reviews different antitheodicies in response to Toby Betenson's article "Anti-Theodicy". Antitheodicies involve rejecting the position that God or meaning exist only, if evils have justifying morally sufficient reasons. The article builds on Betenson's division into moral and conceptual antitheodicies and his characterization of antitheodicies as a metacritique of the problem of evil. Moral antitheodicies are problematic, as they do not address the key conceptual issues and might end up in question-begging or moralism. Dissolving the problem of evil requires a conceptual antitheodicy that exposes its presuppositions as speculative metaphysics. Religious conceptual antitheodicies help to focus on different ways of sense-making that do not fall into theodicism.

Antitheodicy is an emerging approach to the problem of evil. Toby Betenson describes antitheodicy as a Wittgensteinian metacritique of the presuppositions of the problem in his article "Anti-Theodicy"<sup>1</sup>, which presents an overview of the contemporary antitheodicy discussion. Antitheodicy goes deeper than objecting to particular theodicies and defences like the soul-making theodicy, as it questions the entire framework of discussing the justice of God in terms of offering justifications for evil. Betenson characterizes antitheodicy as arguing "that the ways in which the problem of evil is both presented and solved, and the foundational conceptual and moral assumptions in which such a discussion is grounded, are erroneous."<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, antitheodicy can be defined as a critical rejection of theodicism. Sami Pihlström and Sari Kivistö define theodicies and theodicism: theodicies are justifications for God's choice for creating a world where creatures suffer. They use the word "theodicism" to mean a demand that theism

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1 Toby Betenson: "Anti-Theodicy", *Philosophy Compass* 11 No. 1, 2016. The word "metacritique" comes from J. G. Hamann, who was an important background influence on Wittgenstein's later philosophy. See John Betz: *After Enlightenment* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), esp. 230–257.

2 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 57.

is acceptable only if one can produce a theodicy.<sup>3</sup> Theodicism can also be characterized as the claim that God will only allow evils that are necessary for greater goods, as otherwise He would not have “a morally sufficient reason to permit evil”.<sup>4</sup> Antitheodicy can then be seen as a rejection of the demands for justifications, or rejecting the theodacist demand that if God exists, then all evils have morally sufficient reasons.<sup>5</sup>

Betenson distinguishes moral and conceptual antitheodicies.<sup>6</sup> Moral antitheodicies question either the moral premises of (both atheist and theist) theodacist arguments, or question the language-game of issuing justifications itself. Conceptual antitheodicies object to the theodacist presuppositions about the nature and properties of God. Betenson includes religious antitheodacist traditions under the conceptual challenge.

### MORAL ANTITHEODICIES

Betenson describes the main point of moral antitheodicies and generalizes it into a main claim of antitheodicy in general: “*Theodicies mediate a practice that sanctions evil.*”<sup>7</sup> He lists four types of moral objections against theodicies: theodicies trivialize evil; the attempt to give third-person explanations of evil does not take it morally seriously; theodicies presuppose an instrumentalist consequentialism that takes sufferings to be means to an end; and the inherent Panglossianism of theodicies is a vicious practice that contributes to the evils of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Betenson elaborates on the claim that theodicies trivialize evil by contrasting horrendous evils like the Holocaust with everyday evils like going to the dentist. He then argues that the theodacist practice of weighing between the good and bad consequences of an evil presupposes that the evil is not horrendous. Horrendous evils are incommensurable with goods and therefore cannot be compensated or compared with good consequences. Betenson

3 Sami Pihlström and Sari Kivistö: *Kantian Antitheodicy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

4 Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger: *Reason and Religious Belief* (OUP, 2003).

5 Susan Neiman argues that the principle of sufficient reason is the central presupposition of the entire modern theodicy debate. See *Evil in Modern Thought* (PUP, 2015), esp. 314–328.

6 Betenson, “Anti-theodicy”, 57. For conceptual antitheodicies, see “Anti-theodicy”, 62–63.

7 Betenson, “Anti-Theodicy”, 64. Betenson is quoting Nick Trakakis.

8 The list is a condensed version of Betenson’s list of moral antitheodicies (“Anti-Theodicy”, 57–62). Cf. Pihlström and Kivistö: *Kantian Antitheodicy*.

takes an example from D. Z. Phillips, who argues that comparison of the disaster of the Holocaust with the pain of going to the dentist is absurd, unless one has been to a Nazi dentist. Such comparisons are category-mistakes that are insensitive to the seriousness of horrendous evils.<sup>9</sup>

Betenson introduces another moral criticism of theodicism: taking a third-person point of view to suffering is inhuman.<sup>10</sup> Theodacists have to assume a third-person God's eye point of view in their practice of weighing goods and evils and explaining away suffering. One way of developing an antitheodicy is to argue that such a view of suffering detaches one from the suffering person and the suffering itself. The God of theodicism and the theodacist are thus detached from morally correct practices like having empathy for the suffering person, helping him or recognizing his point of view as correct. This criticism forms a core Levinasian transcendental argument from the possibility of a moral point of view in *Kantian Antitheodicy*:

1. A moral point of view is possible only, if we recognize the dignity and the suffering of the suffering person.
2. One can recognize the suffering and dignity of a suffering person only, if one does not give a third-person explanation or justification that would endow it with meaning.
3. The practice of developing theodicies involves giving third-person explanations or justifications that endow first-person suffering with meaning.
4. The practice of developing theodicies cannot recognize the suffering and dignity of a suffering person.
5. The moral point of view is possible only, if the practice of developing theodicies is unsound for moral and transcendental reasons.
6. A moral point of view is possible.
7. The practice of developing theodicies is unsound for moral and transcendental reasons.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 57–58. See Phillips, D.Z.: *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Fortress Press, 2005), 33–44, 77–78.

10 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 58–60.

11 Pihlström and Kivistö, *Kantian Antitheodicy*, 263–264, ch. 6.

Betenson discusses a third moral criticism of theodicies. He argues that balancing goods with evils presupposes a consequentialist calculus for reasons that do not take personal dignity or subjective factors into account. He quotes Phillips who criticizes the soul-making theodicy: evils are supposed to build up character, but having a self-involved instrumental good like character development elevated into the telos of suffering is self-serving. Moreover, such hyper-consequentialism judges everything (including horrendous evils) as a means, so it cannot account for having human dignity as an end. Even theodicies involving compensation to the sufferer cannot evade this objection, because they are trapped in a consequentialist logic of compensation. Thus theodicies cannot account for moral reasons involving dignity and first-person meaningfulness, because they justify evil instrumentally.<sup>12</sup>

Betenson sums up these moral criticisms by pointing out the Panglossianism of theodicist practices.<sup>13</sup> First, he argues that the moral criticisms show that constructing theodicies is itself morally vicious and therefore contributes to the evils of the world. The second criticism involves the claim that explaining away evils is a way of evading responsibility for fighting them.

The second objection goes back to secular writers like Karl Marx and Albert Camus. Neiman argues that Marx's work is in fact an answer to the problem of evil: philosophers like Hegel have attempted to explain the evils of the world with theodicies, but the real goal of philosophy is to change it by addressing evil with human action.<sup>14</sup> Camus takes up this theme in *The Plague* by contrasting the doctor Rieux with the priest Paneloux. Paneloux is a theodicist who gives sermons justifying the plague, which kills him in the end. Rieux is an atheist antitheodicist: he thinks that illnesses might have their benefits, but accepting them is either cowardly or dishonest. The priest does not (want to) see evil, but the doctor rather wants to fight the plague than prove its benefits. Camus is thus defending a Marxist and atheist form of moral antitheodicism: one can either believe in God and explain evil, or reject the belief in God who offers an explanation for evil in order to fight it and thus change the world for the better.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 60–61, Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 49–90. See also Pihlström & Kivistö: *Kantian Antitheodicy*.

13 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 61–62.

14 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 103–109.

15 Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Penguin, 1960).

The closeness of moral antitheodicies to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism and secular humanism raises a strong objection to moral antitheodicies.<sup>16</sup> Are they antitheodicies or meta-theodicies that offer just more moralistic reasons for "condemning the architect"?<sup>17</sup> Betenson briefly discusses the question when answering the claim that moral antitheodicies are question-begging. He admits that antitheodicy presupposes the moral claim that there are horrendous evils that cannot be justified.<sup>18</sup> The moral case against theodicy could well be made in terms of Wittgenstein's claim that language-games become pointless if the necessary conditions for their functional relationships do not hold.<sup>19</sup> The language-games for constructing theodicies are morally pointless, because the process of weighing goods against horrendous evils from a third-person perspective cannot be morally justified.

However, if this is the case, then even God cannot justifiably weigh goods against evils in this way. Then He doesn't have a morally valid sufficient reason for creating this kind of world. This is however consistent with atheistic theodicism: there are no first-order justifications for horrendous evils, and God does not exist because He would not have a justification for creating such a world. Alternatively, one can consider the case where God has sufficient reason for horrific evils like the Holocaust after all.<sup>20</sup> The same moral arguments might still be made against the language-game of theodicy, even though theodicy would end up giving justifiable reasons with its own criteria that also happen to determine the real moral reasons and meanings for the evil events in the world. In such a case, moral antitheodicies would amount to moralism, as their moral reasons would be detached from the system of reasons that exists in the world in question.

Both cases raise the problem that moral antitheodicies sidestep the key premise of theodicism: that God's decisions to create are bound to the principle of sufficient reason. It could be that theodicy is immoral, but this is compatible with the claims that God does not exist and He creates a meaningful

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16 See also Leo Perdue: *Wisdom in Revolt* (Almond Press, 1991).

17 The phrase comes from Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 113–202.

18 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 60.

19 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, §142.

20 To avoid begging the question against moral antitheodicians, the world does not need to be morally possible (i.e. have the same moral truths). It is sufficient if it is logically or metaphysically possible to work as a thought-experiment.

world only if everything happens with a moral reason. It could also be that God has reasons for horrendous evils, in which case protest antitheodicies would be question-begging moralism. Moral antitheodicy shows at most that attempts to find sufficient reasons for evils are immoral, not that searching for sufficient reasons and connecting them with God is mistaken at the outset.

Moral antitheodicies thus fail to dissolve the link between God, meanings and sufficient reasons. At worst, they amount to a moralistic condemnation to theodicies and probably God as well. Betenson's account inherits this problem. He distinguishes between antitheodicies that reject the problem of evil and ones arguing that religious beliefs founded on theodicism are immoral, and opts for the latter criticism. It looks like a metacritique of the speculative metaphysics underlying theodicism is required for a successful antitheodicy.<sup>21</sup>

### CONCEPTUAL ANTITHEODICIES

Betenson identifies another approach to antitheodicy: showing that the conceptual assumptions of theodicy are mistaken.<sup>22</sup> Betenson offers two examples of such arguments, both from Phillips. The first involves focusing on God's weighing of reasons for horrible evils. God can either allow a horrible evil without thinking it through, or alternatively think it through and commit Himself to it despite its monstrosity. In the first case, He does not pay enough attention to the consequences of His choices. In the second case, He is involved in the evil and can be blamed for it. In either case, He is not perfectly good. The second objection is directed against anthropomorphism: theodicism presupposes that God is an ordinary agent making choices according to sufficient reasons. However, God's being is His active presence and faithfulness that "cannot (...) be subject to morally sufficient reasons that explain their presence on some occasions and their absence on others."<sup>23</sup> The latter argument is the key claim of Biblical antitheodicy, which Betenson lists under conceptual approaches.

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21 Gwen Griffith-Dickson has expressed similar views about the key role of metaphysical assumptions for antitheodicy. Private conversation, 9.3.2018..

22 Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy", 62–63.

23 Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 151, 33–44, 148–151.

Perhaps the sharpest conceptual antitheodicy in recent philosophy has been written by Bas van Fraassen.<sup>24</sup> He argues that theodicy arises out of 17<sup>th</sup> century speculative metaphysics. Early modern philosophers defined God to be omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent to make His activity transparent to reason. In effect, God is made to be transparent to reason because He is taken to be an ideal agent who has an unlimited power to choose states of affairs according to the principle of sufficient reason. However, such a God has nothing to do with the Biblical God of Isaac, Abraham and Jacob, and is instead a metaphysically constructed idol. The theodicy God is a creation of speculative metaphysics, which creates a shadowy ersatz reality and a series of insoluble and self-inflicted puzzles with its abstract conceptual models that are not connected in any way with the real world through experience and definite linguistic practices.

van Fraassen's claims receive strong support from Susan Neiman. She argues that the problem of evil is a key motivating problem in modern philosophy: how can the world be meaningful and intelligible, when there seems to be so much pointless evil? The problem of evil connects religion, metaphysics and ethics. The distinction between natural and moral evil emerged in the modern debate, which faces thinkers trying to make evil intelligible against those who do not. Moreover, attempts to explain evil and insistence that it cannot be explained are ultimately moved by moral concerns.<sup>25</sup> The conceptual gaps of modern philosophy lead to the problem. Facts and values as well as facts and meanings are taken to be separate and conceptually opposite, and they have to be unified by an appeal to the principle of sufficient reason. Such a unification reduces the facts of the world to morally sufficient reasons, but the appearances of horrendous evils make it seem that there are no such reasons.<sup>26</sup> Leibniz' theodicy is a model for a unification of facts and reasons on the basis of an omnipotent God who acts according to the principle of

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24 Bas van Fraassen: "Against Analytic Metaphysics", in *The Empirical Stance* (Yale Univ. Press, 2002). van Fraassen's position also sums up the metacritical focus of meta-metaphysical antitheodicy. Cf. J. G. Hamann: Briefwechsel 5. Ed. Arthur Henkel (Insel-Verlag, 1965), 272, Hamann: *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 205–218.

25 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, esp. 1–13, 27. Neiman's argument that a denial of a good world order is dependent on moral concerns strengthens the claim that moral antitheodicy amounts to moralistic protest atheism in the end.

26 For the insolubility of problems caused by conceptual gaps in modern philosophy, see Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *Johan Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (de Gruyter, 1995), 12–15.

sufficient reason. The approach is built around two key presuppositions: God is constrained by the choice of essences He can choose, and His choices aim for the best.<sup>27</sup>

Conceptual antitheodicy then involves rejecting the Leibnizian picture presupposed by metaphysical theism and theodicism. The debate between Immanuel Kant and Hamann in the 1750s offers starting-points for conceptual antitheodicies that build around the idea that the Leibnizian presuppositions of linking the world of facts with the world of meanings and values through the principle of sufficient reason are speculative metaphysics. Both build on a critique of metaphysics to ground a conceptual antitheodicy.

In his Theodicy Essay, Kant presents an argument that theodicies are groundless speculative metaphysics.<sup>28</sup> Kant uses his doctrine of transcendental idealism to locate Job's sufferings in the world of experience, and divine wisdom in the moral world that can only be accessed through reason. Since Kant's transcendental idealism entails that rational concepts can only be objectively used of the world of experience, relating evils like Job's suffering to the moral order of the world with theodicies or atheist arguments necessarily oversteps the limits of reason. Kant concludes by arguing that Job's comforters are just trying to flatter God, while Job reveals His will through sincere and honest behavior. Kant's antitheodicy then rests on his meta-metaphysical theory of transcendental idealism to show that attempts to unify facts with values through the principle of sufficient reason ends up in speculative metaphysics. Thus Kant takes up the need for a critique of speculative metaphysics for a successful antitheodicy.

Kantian antitheodicy can also be used as a metatheory for moral antitheodicies. If antitheodicies rest ultimately on metaphysical and axiological premises, such a grounding allows the moral antitheodicy to avoid some of the problems of question-begging and moralism by appealing to Kant's Copernican turn to defend a humanistic perspective in ethics and metaphysics.<sup>29</sup>

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27 G. W. Leibniz: "On the Ultimate Origination of Things", in *Philosophical Essays*. Eds. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Hackett, 1989).

28 Immanuel Kant: *Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*, AA 8, 255–275. See also Pihlström and Kivistö, *Kantian Antitheodicy*, ch. 2, Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Meiner, 1998).

29 See Pihlström and Kivistö, *Kantian Antitheodicy*, ch. 6, Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.



Kant's antitheodicy builds on the antitheodicy arguments Hamann sent him in a letter at the end of 1759.<sup>30</sup> Hamann responds to the pre-critical Kant's theodicism by posing a dilemma: one is either operating with a philosophical concept of God, or with the God of Christian theology. Working with the philosophical concept of God is speculative metaphysics: one would have to have both total knowledge of the world and a priori knowledge of the nature and intentions of God to justify God in a theodicy manner. Both claims overstep the limits of human reason. The project of theodicism is thus hubris, and Hamann uses the images of a blind man staring at the sun and a mob of theodicyists flattering God. Hamann links speculative metaphysics and other confusions of reason like theodicism with abuse of language, as language is "the centerpoint of reason's misunderstanding with itself."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, van Fraassen's claim that theodicy involves just a priori word games captures well the spirit of Hamann's critique.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, working with the Biblical concept of God leads to an antitheodicy based on Biblical grammar: philosophy investigates language-use like theology investigates how the word "God" is used in the Bible.<sup>33</sup> Leo Perdue and N.T. Wright present interesting conceptual antitheodicies building on the stories of the Bible.<sup>34</sup> Perdue points out that Biblical creation theology offers four metaphors of divine activity: God upholds life, orders the world with his Word, crafts an ordered world and fights against evil. These metaphors can however get out of gear.<sup>35</sup> Job's friends construct either divine command theories or theodicies. Bildad argues that God's power is absolute, so Job has no right to complain. Eliphaz constructs a Leibnizian theodicism out of Deuteronomy's theory of retribution: if Job is suffering, then he must have sinned and the suffering has a sufficient reason. Job constructs first an atheistic theodicism and then an all-out secular humanism from his sufferings. God is unjust, because Job's sufferings do not have a sufficient reason,

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30 Hamann: *Briefwechsel 1*. Ed. Ziesemer, Walther and Henkel, Arthur. (Insel-Verlag, 1955), 450–453. See also Frederick Beiser: *The Fate of Reason* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).

31 Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 99, 211.

32 See van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 1–30.

33 See Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 22, Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, §373.

34 Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, N. T. Wright: *Evil and the Justice of God* (SPCK, 2006).

35 Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, §132.

and therefore human activity must replace God's saving role and religious explanations of the world. In the end, God reveals all of these approaches to be confusions, as the storyline of battle against evil forms the background for the other mythical models: "justice is not a static principle inherent in the structure of creation, but rather a dynamic force which must be continuously established and aggressively maintained by means of victory over evil".<sup>36</sup> Thus there is evil without sufficient reasons, but God and human beings can and will defeat it. Wright takes up a similar point: the Biblical stories do not point to a static order of sufficient reasons, but tells a story of God's plans and actions in fighting evil and laying groundwork for a new creation.

Biblical grammar offers thus a model of sense-making that calls both theodicism and moralistic secularism into serious question. Other religious traditions and humanistic approaches have their own ways of responding to evil and finding meaning in the world and locating humans in it.<sup>37</sup> Religious conceptual antitheodicies can shift the emphasis of the antitheodicy debate into a debate on broader issues of sense-making by focusing on different ways of understanding the place of humans in the world.

## CONCLUSION

Anti-theodicy is a promising emerging approach to the problem of evil. Betenson has distinguished two different streams: moral and conceptual antitheodicies. Moral antitheodicy is deeply problematic, because it does not dissolve the key link between God, morally sufficient reasons and the meaningfulness of the world and thus might end up as moralizing about God and the world order. Dissolving the link requires exposing the speculative metaphysics behind the problem of evil by developing a conceptual antitheodicy on the lines of Hamann, Kant and van Fraassen. Such meta-metaphysical anti-theodicies also open new ways to discuss the link of theodacist metaphysics, ethics and religion by e.g. pointing out the dependence of metaphysics on the moral point of view or by describing the concept of God by building grammars of religious stories that explicitly reject theodicism.

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<sup>36</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 221.

<sup>37</sup> See Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *Human and Divine* (Duckworth, 2000). For the problem of evil as a problem of meaning, see Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.

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