Another Look at the Problem of Theodicy

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There are at least two kinds of philosophers, those who see the goal of philosophy as making things clear and those who see the goal of philosophy as making things difficult. Some will ask how the second group can be philosophers at all. After all, is not philosophy supposed to clarify matters? Not necessarily. But what good is muddled thinking? None. Muddled thinkers do not count; they are not making things difficult; they just do not know how to make them clear—or they do not have anything to say and think that obfuscation will pass for wit. Among those who see philosophy as making things more difficult are thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysus, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and perhaps Socrates. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 27, Nietzsche explicitly says "It is difficult to be understood [. . .] . I do everything I can to make myself 'difficult to understand.'" Thus, we should beware of those who think they have understood Nietzsche's work, who can lay it out for us neatly, those who do not *continue* to find it difficult to understand. Wryly, Nietzsche speaks of such readers as his friends, and he says, "One does well to concede to them from the start some elbow room and a playground for misunderstandings." It is not unusual for those who read philosophers like Kierkegaard or Nietzsche to become their friends, presuming that they understand them well, at least well enough to make those philosophers' works perfectly clear to us. They presume not only to understand those philosophers better than they understood themselves (something that Kant says we must do—B370/A314), they presume to explain those philosophers better than they explained themselves. Much secondary literature, philosophical, scriptural, and otherwise, embodies the

arrogance of assuming to be able at least to write better than those on whom one comments and perhaps also to think better than they. Unfortunately for such commentators and interpreters, the result is often that they find themselves in the playground of misunderstanding. We may find them amusing, but we should not take them very seriously.[1] Beware of books with titles like *Nietzsche Made Simple* or *Kierkegaard for Dummies*.

It may seem odd at first glance, but the goal of clarity and that of making things more difficult need not be mutually exclusive. Socrates understood that the first step in making things clearer is often to make them more difficult, to help us discover an aporia, a difficulty, a place beyond which it is difficult to pass, in something that we thought we understood clearly. But there are other kinds of clarity than rational clarity. Some philosophers, those I have in mind as wanting to make things more difficult, are not doing so as a propadeutic to clarification.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (and, in a different way, Kant),[2] sometimes raise an aporia without showing us how to get beyond or around it. The point of doing so is to make us think about a problem rather than to ease us along the path through the aporia to its other side. The idea is that thinking about the problem for ourselves is more valuable than simply knowing its solution. Thought in that way, philosophy aims at questions and problems rather than answers and solutions. A philosophical aporia can question us and make us focus on the question, offering us an issue in a way that makes philosophical resolution either impossible or unlikely. I think that the problem of theodicy, the problem of God's justice, can be understood to be that

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[1]The same thing applies, perhaps doubly, to those who profess to be able to reduce the work of contemporary thinkers such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida to several catch phrases.

[2]I am thinking of the antinomies of reason in the first critique.

kind of problem. The importance of the problem lies in its existence as a problem, more than in the answers we might give to it.

As classically formulated, the problem of theodicy is the seeming impossibility of believing four propositions at the same time, four propositions that most religious people believe:

1. God is all-loving.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. God is all-knowing.
4. Evil exists.

The argument is that if God is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing, then the existence of evil is inexplicable, for such a God *could* create a world without evil—he has the power and the knowledge to do so—and he *would* create it, for his love would require that he do so. According to the argument, therefore, the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of evil. For many, the suppressed conclusion is that it is irrational to believe in God if one recognizes the existence of evil, as most people do.

Religious people have responded to the problem in a variety of ways. For example, some, though a minority, have denied the reality of evil. Others have argued that the problem is set up so that it demands that God do what is logically contradictory, so the problem itself is faulty. I believe one could argue that, by definition, embodied beings are necessarily passive as well as active. They can be acted on; to be embodied is to be able to be affected. In technical terms, it is to be *pathetic*, to have things happen to one. But to be pathetic is to suffer in the broad sense of the word (and, for our purposes, suffering is not best defined as "feeling pain" because feeling pain is a species of suffering, of being affected). If an argument from the nature of embodiment were successful, it would show that it is logically contradictory to create a world without creating

suffering and, therefore, evil. On this view, it seems that the three characteristics describing God might continue to be held without contradicting the claim that evil exists because the contradiction between God's character and the existence of evil is derived only if one supposes that God logically could create embodied beings that are not affected, which involves contradiction.

There is another way of understanding the problem itself to be the problem: As usually set forth, the problem of theodicy assumes that God's power is essential to his being; the claim that God is omnipotent is crucial to the problem. That may sound reasonable at first, but it is questionable. Latter-day Saints are hardly alone in seeing in God, not power, but a kind of powerlessness, namely the holding back, allowing, suffering, persuasion, charity, gentleness, and absence of compulsion that is described so eloquently in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-46 and that informs much of the scripture that we share with other Christians. That supposed limitation of power appears to be correlate with his power to save, perhaps the only power essential to his divinity. I take it that this way of understanding God's power is among the reasons why the scriptures show us a very human God rather than an omnipotent one: After dinner, Abraham walks with God's messengers and perhaps with God himself, showing them the way to Sodom, and God bargains with Abraham over the fate of those who live there (Genesis 18). It is one thing to speak of God as all-powerful when we praise him and to mean what we say when we do. It is another to assume that our praise can be parsed directly into logical propositions that we can use to solve theological conundra such as the problem of theodicy. Whatever the case theologically, scriptural assertions of God's power are enriched and, therefore, complicated by instances in which his power is limited and, even more, by the importance he puts on his patience, persuasion, and love.

However, even if the kinds of arguments I have been suggesting are successful, they merely relocate the problem from the question of how one accounts for evil to that of why there is the amount of suffering that there is. One can then take up the problem of theodicy in terms of the quantity of suffering: “Why didn’t God create the world with less suffering in it than he did?” Most answers to this question accord with Leibniz’s answer in some way: this is the best of all possible worlds; if there were more or less evil in the world, the world would be defective. The problem is that Leibniz’s answer, by asserting that the way we find the world is, inexplicably, the way things must be, runs the risk of denying the evil of evil. If I say that the evil of the world is a necessity, then I no longer call it evil. At best, I express my lack of understanding; at worst, I acquiesce to or become complicit in its presence. The only answer that does not go in the direction of denying evil is one that goes in the direction of faith: though we cannot explain the degree of suffering we see in the world, we have to trust God as we confront that suffering. Of course, to say that I do and must trust God is not to answer the question, “Why isn’t there less suffering in the world?” It is to deny that there is an answer for us. This may be the best of all possible worlds, but the claim that it is requires an incredible amount of optimism, an optimism explicable only on the basis of faith and, so, an optimism that begs the question.

If we respond to the problem of theodicy by taking recourse to faith and denying that we can answer it philosophically, we may wish to go even further. We may wish, not only to agree that we cannot answer the problem and, so, must rely on faith, but to object to the problem itself. It would not be unreasonable for a Christian to argue that since even Christ suffered on the cross, with suffering incomparable to any of our own, we have no right to ask why *we* suffer. To do so is impertinent, perhaps impertinent to the point of blasphemy. To complain about my suffering when faced with the suffering of Jesus Christ is, implicitly, to deny the gravity and effect of his

suffering. I have no right to ask why I suffer. Here is another way to put the same point: if Jesus Christ asked the question of God's justice while on the cross—"O God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—we have no right to think that we can avoid the same question. And if he did not receive an answer while in mortality, we have no reason to think that we can.

But thinking about the problem of evil need not be a complaint about *my* suffering. It could be a question about the suffering of others. As the name we have given to the problem suggests, our question is about God's justice as a whole, including his dealings with others. The question is not only a personal complaint, and the scriptures themselves show prophets from Abraham to Joseph Smith sometimes questioning God's justice. In fact, it is not unreasonable to construe their ability to question God's justice as a sign of their righteousness before God. (For example, We see Abraham bargain with God over Sodom immediately after the Lord has described him as someone who will command his children "to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19).) Thus the Christian argument puts me in my place, but it does not dissipate the question of theodicy, for as a general question rather than a complaint, the question may be rooted in Christ-like compassion for our fellows rather than in a demand for a justification of my suffering.

Most Latter-day Saints who have tackled the problem have done so by reformulating the second proposition of the traditional way of putting the problem, namely that God is all-powerful. They do so by redefining what it means to be all-powerful in such a way that the paradox will disappear. In spite of my earlier suggestion of an argument along these lines, I recommend that those interested in pursuing that line of thinking look at the work of David Paulsen and Blake Ostler. They have done a better job than I could of thinking through the arguments and objections involved. I will not try to improve on their work. Instead, I want to

think about this problem in a different way, namely as a problem that makes things more difficult.[3]

Begin our considerations by noticing that the Christian talks about the problem of evil differently than does the philosopher. This difference is not just a matter of taste or style. It has everything to do with the difference between what each kind of discourse does. Sometimes we treat scripture and revelation as if they were simplified scientific explanations of things, but I think that is a mistake, and sometimes a serious one. For it assumes that science is the measure of all discourse. Though religious discourse may offer us explanations, its purpose is not explanatory, but soteriological: it is concerned, not with telling us how the world and the things in the world are (at least not in the way that science does),[4] but with telling us about God's power to save and how we can be saved. Given its purposes, revelation ignores the problem of theodicy, though of course it is not blind to suffering. Christian revelation often reminds us that we must be deeply concerned with suffering, especially with the suffering of others and with our own spiritual suffering. But Christian concern is with the proper, Christ-like response to that suffering, not with explaining its logical compatibility with God's existence. One can even imagine a Christian arguing that, as a speculative rather than a practical problem, the problem of theodicy distracts us from the real problem.

For obvious reasons I am sympathetic to the Christian claim that the philosophical problem of evil and suffering is a distraction. However, since concern for the philosophical

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[3]And I will do so by taking off from some thoughts of Paul Ricoeur in, for example, *Le mal* and of Philippe Nemo, *Job and The Excess of Evil*.

[4]And its explanations are not scientific, not even in a primitive way. For a discussion of how I understand scripture and, therefore, religious discourse, see my "Scripture as Incarnation" and "Myth and Religion."

problem can be a concern for justice, it is not enough to ignore that problem as a distraction. Nevertheless, even if the problem of evil is not merely a distraction, it is also not a purely philosophical, theoretical problem. In the end, it *is* a problem for action, and philosophical speculation has little place among the actions required when we respond concretely to suffering and evil. In spite of that, it does not follow that careful thought is irrelevant or unnecessary, and by "careful thought" I am not just referring to the planning we must do to make our actions fruitful. Careful thought may include the rigorous analyses of rational philosophy.

Philosophy does many things. It has many purposes, including the pleasure of philosophy, a good that does not require that I justify it by showing how it leads to some other good. But among those purposes is that of showing us the limits of reason. When we think of philosophers who are concerned with the limits of reason, perhaps we most often first think of Kant and the first critique. Kant says that knowing the limits of pure reason will remove obstacles that stand in the way of practical reason (Bxxv) and will make it possible to take morality and religion seriously (Bxxx-xxxi). But Kant was neither the first nor the last philosopher to think that we needed to consider the limits of reason. In fact, thinkers such as those I mentioned earlier, those whose goal it is to make things difficult, generally do so as a means of showing the limits of reason.

In the fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysus gave us negative theology, not to demonstrate that we cannot have faith or to attack religion, but to show us the limits of reason when reason tries to talk about God. He believed that by opposing negative theology to affirmative theology, we will discover a third way, the way of revelation. Others, such as Maimonides, have taken a similar approach, and as I read Kierkegaard, he is doing something similar: showing us the limits of reason by making it less philosophically clear how to understand what it means to be a Christian.

For example, I take his claim in *Fear and Trembling* that Abraham can only be understood by means of the absurd to be a claim that we *can* understand Abraham, but not philosophically.[5] Nietzsche was not a Christian, so, unlike Pseudo-Dionysus and Kierkegaard, he does not make things more difficult in order to help open the door to an appropriate relation to God. But his purposes are similar: he wishes to show us the limits of reason so that we can understand human life in more human terms, in terms of life as a whole rather than merely reason. He does not oppose reason. He shows its limits. Similarly, we can understand the problem of theodicy as demonstrating the limits of reason and, therefore, as an aid to humility, reminding us of God's greatness and our own nothingness, something King Benjamin says we must know if we are to be saved (Mosiah 4:5-11).

However, to see the problem as demonstrating the limits of reason is not to reject reason. We can neither reject nor avoid it. We ought not to wish to do so. For reason not only helps us find solutions to problems, it sometimes sharpens the problem. I think the long history of the problem of theodicy is sufficient evidence that we are unlikely to find a solution that puts an end to that problem once and for all. One possible response is to take up the question of theodicy as a free-floating philosophical problem, but if we do, the most we can gain from it is the pleasure of philosophical thought. That is not a good to be ignored. Philosophy is something good in itself—not *the* good, but certainly *a* good. But few who are religious can deal with this issue *only* for its philosophical pleasure. The alternative is that the problem is a goad, a spur, an itch that will not go away, for it challenges our faith even when it points to the need for faith. Perhaps that is how it points to that need, by challenging it.

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[5]For more discussion of this claim, see my "Room to Talk."

For some, faith fails in the face of the challenge that evil presents the believer, but not for most. Most of us continue to believe even as we struggle with the problem. In fact, we struggle with the problem *because* we believe. We struggle only because we have faith. If we find the problem of theodicy to be a real problem rather than only an intellectual game, that is evidence that we have faith. Thus, by continuing to be a problem—by the fact that we seem unable to find any solution to the problem of theodicy that does not merely shift it some place else where it reappears in a new and slightly different guise—the problem of theodicy shows us the limit of reason. The problem of evil and suffering is intractable to our powers of reason. The only thing to which it is tractable is moral and faithful response: action. But the intractability of the problem of theodicy is positive rather than negative. First, it continues to serve as a goad. That it is intractable continues to remind us that evil and suffering are real and that they require our action, that thought is not enough. Second, the rational difficulty of the problem can provide an impetus for recognizing that faith is prior to reason. To paraphrase something that Martin Heidegger said of theology and that Kierkegaard could have said, the problem of theodicy can only render faith more difficult, that is, render it more certain that faithfulness cannot be gained through reason, but only through faith (46). The problem of theodicy continues to be important to believers for two reasons: first, because it points to the ground of our belief by showing a limit of reason; second, because it reminds us that we must not neglect to respond to evil and suffering as Christian faith calls us to respond (and though this is not the place to explore the question, it may be that these two things are really one).

What does it mean to say that the problem of theodicy shows us a limit of reason? That it shows us there are things we cannot think, things that cannot be grasped conceptually. Among other things, faith is a response to that inability, and it is a response that I think must be taken

seriously.[6] But we can also respond to those limits philosophically. The limits of reason are my limits as a thinking thing; they are the limits of the *ego cogito*. As such, they can also be described as the inability of the *ego cogito* to think transcendence, to think what is beyond itself. The *ego cogito* necessarily makes everything relative to itself: every object of consciousness is an object *of* consciousness, an object with respect to consciousness. To be a thinking thing is to represent the world to oneself in thought. Thus, for the *ego cogito*, what-is is what can be represented. But evil cannot be made relative to the ego in that way. Even the evil that I suffer is not an evil relative to my consciousness, for it is not an object of consciousness. It is not a representation. I do not suffer from my concepts of the evil done to me; I suffer from evil itself. Suffering is an affect, not one of my intentional acts. I do not see or represent or think my suffering, I undergo it. I suffer it. It is not suffering because I intend it, even if I can sometimes make it an object of thought.[7] The evil I suffer is suffering because, one might go so far as to say, it intends me. Suffering shows that evil cannot be integrated into the representations of the *ego cogito*. Suffering disrupts the world of the *ego cogito* by bringing into it something that cannot be represented. In fact, to reduce evil to my representations of that evil can itself be evil, as we see in much representation of the Holocaust.

If suffering is an affection—in the way that we can use that term as the noun form of the verb *affect*—then it is not only not a matter of representation, it is also neither deficiency nor chaos. The Augustinian answer to the problem of evil will not work because, ultimately, the

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[6]To repeat, however, I do not think that faith and reason are at odds with one another. See my “Room to Talk.”

[7]And, when I do, that which I intend is different from that which I suffer, which is why such objectification can be helpful in managing pain—or impossible with some pain.

horror of genuine evil is trivialized if evil is only deficiency. Evil aims at someone; deficiency does not. Nor can evil be explained as chaos, for the chaotic can be ordered, at least in principle. The story of Creation is about the ordering of chaos, not the overcoming of evil.[8]

Like every answer to the problem of theodicy, these ways of responding to the problem look for a way to integrate evil into our understanding of the world. But in the end it is evil to do so, to explain evil, to tame it, no longer to be horrified by it. In itself, evil is excessive of the world. It cannot be an object of thought; it is transcendent, though not divinely. The inability of the *ego cogito* to think what transcends itself suggests why the insolubility of the problem, an insolubility generated by the fact that both evil and God are transcendent, can be used as an argument against the existence of God. But that use of the argument begs the question of whether and how we have access to what transcends our minds. Unless we begin by assuming that the representations of the *ego cogito* could give us that access, the failure of reason to find transcendence says little about whether we have access to it. Many have argued—outside of theological questions—that we do, in fact, have such access to transcendence, but not in mental representation. For example, Heidegger has argued that work, and particularly our use of tools, shows that we are self-transcending beings who have contact with the world in the ordinary projects of existence, in the work of our daily lives (*Being and Time*). He has also argued that art shows us the transcendence of things in the world ("The Origin of the Work of Art"). Emmanuel Levinas has argued that our relation to other persons is a relation of transcendence and, in fact, that relation to others, in other words, transcendence, is the ground for the possibility of human consciousness (*Totality and Infinity*). Heidegger argues that in work and art we have access to

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[8]Like deficiency, chaos is not intentional, though moral evil is.

and contact with something that exceeds or overflows our ability to represent it. Levinas argues that we have that contact and access in our relations with other persons. Though they differ in many respects, both of these thinkers argue that there is transcendence and we have access to it—though the *ego cogito* cannot represent it, cannot think it.

Heidegger and Levinas are not arguing that there are special super-rational powers by which we have access to the transcendent. For them, the relation to the transcendent is not something occult or mystic. Rather, both argue that there are many experiences of what exceeds representation, of transcendence. They argue that what we think of as ordinary experience has, at its foundation, relation to what is transcendent, whether that is another person (Levinas) or the entities that surround us in our daily lives and in art (Heidegger). The problem of theodicy reminds us that the fact of suffering also constitutes evidence for transcendence, evidence that requires neither argument nor concept, only experience, the experience of suffering. As an exercise of the *ego cogito*, the problem of theodicy gives the lie to the *ego cogito*'s implicit claim that it can integrate everything. In its insolubility, the problem points to the inability of the *ego cogito* to make everything relative to itself. Thus, the problem of theodicy points our response to evil away from the *ego cogito*, and its search for solutions, and toward other ways of dealing with the problem.

The problem of theodicy reminds us that the response to evil ought to be concrete struggle, not abstract thought. Our horror in response to transcendent evil is one with our eschatological hope for the good, and that hope makes no sense apart from the fight against evil. The battle against evil is not one of Nietzschean resentment in which we are defined by our opposition to evil. The battle against evil is not so much a battle *against* anything as it is a battle *for* justice. It is a concrete expression of the desire for the good, a good that, ultimately, cannot be

had in human history, but that must be worked for nonetheless. Christian hope for the final good is the work of waiting for and expecting what cannot be had in merely human history, namely final justice, the apocalypse. However, the hopeful waiting and expectation of Christianity are not quietism. They require that one work to bring about that which one hopes for, knowing that, at best, one brings it about only provisionally and that intemperate confidence in one's ability to bring about justice is at the heart of such phenomena as racism and nationalism.[9]

Thus, as I understand it, the problem of theodicy serves a critical function. Evil cannot be integrated into our understanding of the world; the recognition of evil shows us the limit of understanding. By pointing at the non-integratibility of evil, the problem of theodicy shows us that evil is, indeed, a horror. But the problem can reveal that horror only if no solution to it is finally satisfactory. As I said in my criticism of Leibniz, any solution to the problem of evil, any integration of it into a rational theology, amounts to an argument that there is, in fact, no real evil and that stoicism rather than horror ought to be our response to suffering. It follows that if a theodicy solves the problem of evil, then it justifies Satan. Only if the problem of theodicy is genuinely a problem—only if all solutions ultimately fail—can we continue to know that evil is genuinely evil.

I hope it is not too much of a conceit to suggest that thinking about the problem of theodicy has a relation to the struggle for justice that is similar to the relation of prayer to that struggle: for the Christian philosopher, the problem of theodicy is a kind of prayer.[10] To pray is to

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[9]The resolve of Christian labor for justice must be both temperate and tempered. See my "Philosophy and Transcendence."

[10]For a discussion of the phenomenology of prayer, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, "The Wounded Word." I think that Chrétien pays insufficient attention to the fact that much prayer is petitionary and that the believer hopes that the requests of his petitions will be granted, but in

turn oneself toward God in response to his call. The believer who approaches the problem of theodicy also turns herself toward God, responding to the question of God's justice as to a call. At the same time, because her intellectual powers fail in responding to that call, the believer recognizes her own weakness, a recognition requisite to prayer. And as every prayer ought, in responding to the problem of theodicy, the believer praises God's goodness, and his wisdom, power, and sovereignty. Those are, after all, the attributes that give rise to the question that calls to the believer for response. Without those attributes, there is no problem of evil, only evil. Finally, as is also true of prayer, to deal with the problem of theodicy is to be concerned for others beside oneself. Just as one always prays in community with others who pray, even when one prays only for oneself—"our Father" rather than "my Father" in the Lord's Prayer—as a general rather than a specific problem, the problem of theodicy is a concern for others as well as oneself. In that problem, prayer and thinking come together. Because it continues to remain a problem, the problem of theodicy allows us to continue the prayerful thought of belief.

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spite of that his description of prayer is very helpful.

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