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EVIL—A RELIGIOUS MYSTERY: A PLEA FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE MODEL OF THEODICY

Louis Dupré

Major problems in modern theodicy derive from a rationalist conception of God—alien to living faith—and from an abstract, theologically neutral definition of good and evil. The alternative model here proposed rests on a more intimate union of finite with infinite Being which, on the one hand, allows the creature a greater autonomy and responsibility, and, on the other hand, enables the Creator to share in the suffering of his creatures and thereby to redeem them.

[To the Memory of Peter Bertocci, a true Christian]

1. The Concrete-Religious Versus the Rationalist-Abstract Approach

Theodicy today enjoys the dubious reputation of a failed experiment. Few outside the small circle of persistent believers in it would grant that it has succeeded in accomplishing what it set out to do. That failure has become more painfully apparent as our sensitivity to, as well as the increased visibility of, evil, both moral and physical, have intensified our questioning. The sheer magnitude of evil which our age has witnessed in death camps, nuclear warfare, internecine tribal or racial conflicts, have lowered our tolerance level for what once was accepted as a necessary part of life. Indeed, the presence of evil has impressed itself more powerfully than the presence of God upon the minds of many of our contemporaries for whom the primary question is no longer how God can tolerate so much evil, but rather how the more tangible reality of evil still allows the possibility of God’s existence. Beyond religious and ideological differences our contemporaries have attained a remarkable agreement that evil “was not meant to be,” that it constitutes an alien invasion into our lives. To an unprecedented degree we feel the need to “justify” the presence of evil in our world. Yet we have lowered or abandoned our expectations to receive an adequate answer to the question Unde malum? from philosophy. Indeed, speculative attempts to reduce the question to a theoretical issue tend to render the reality of evil less rather than more acceptable.

Evil invites philosophical speculation, yet it is the cliff on which philoso-
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Phy suffers shipwreck. By a paradox unique to our time we remain simultaneously aware of both terms of the opposition. Schopenhauer anticipated the paradox when he wrote: “Without doubt it is the knowledge of death, and along with this the consideration of the suffering and misery of life, which gives the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and metaphysical explanation of the world. If our life were endless and painless, it would perhaps occur to no one to ask why the world exists, and is just this kind of world it is.”¹ Two distinct philosophical reactions have emerged. Some contemporary thinkers attempt to repair by one philosophy the damage wrought by another, believing that what has been philosophically misstated can be philosophically corrected. Logicians have endeavored to point out the many non sequiturs that lead to the conclusion—“Hence an omnipotent, omniscient, good God cannot exist.” Rightly. A remedial strategy alone does not suffice, however, particularly not when its authors fail to question the more fundamental anthropomorphic premises which inspired the objections. But even those who succeed in replacing a simplistic conception of God by a philosophically more coherent one, do not dispel our basic doubt whether any kind of autonomous philosophical speculation would be capable of meeting a difficulty born in metaphysical despair. The philosopher may, of course, dismiss such doubts as unreasonable and insist that on his terrain the discussion must be restricted by the clearly defined limits of logical argument.

To be sure, such basic work is needed. But a more fundamental problem remains: theodicy is based upon a concept of religion in which the believer will hardly recognize his or her own. As Kant defined it, theodicy consists in “the defense of the supreme wisdom of the Creator (Urheber) of the world against the charges raised by reason on the basis of what conflicts with a meaningful order (Zweckwidrig) in the world.”² The God hereby presented is not merely “less” than the “Father” whom Jesus revealed or than the God of Israel: He essentially differs from either. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with an attempt to articulate philosophically the dependence of creation on God, while leaving all other aspects out of consideration. If finite being depends on an omnipotent, wise Creator, that dependence is worth investigating. The problem begins, however, when that dependence is conceived exclusively in terms of efficient causality. The link between God and the creature is obviously more intimate than that between an efficient cause (as modern thought conceived of it) and its effect.³ To represent it exclusively in causal terms makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to justify any suffering avoidable in the creation of an all-wise, omnipotent God. The so-called physico-theological argument whereby the mind proves the existence of God on the basis of the cosmos, becomes then inverted into a normative rule that determines the limits of divine action in the world. One of the modes in which God relates to creation comes thereby to function as
the very standard of his activity with respect to the cosmos and all that is in it.

A theodicy based upon such a narrowly conceived, purely causal relation differs, of course, from the older one that rested upon a more inclusive relationship between God and creation. In the following pages I intend to return to that older tradition (medieval and, in part already Platonic) by taking account of other, specifically religious modes of conceiving that relation. Such an approach, though more modest in its claims than the rationalist one tends to be, may in the end prove more religiously appropriate and therefore also more fruitful. As Brian Hebbelthwaite observed: "One has actually to meet religious people, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and see how they in fact confront the world's evil, if one is going to grasp something of the resources of religion for coping with suffering and wrong." It should be clear from the outset: to adopt this approach is not to renege on philosophical theology, but to expand it beyond the rationalist limits within which a purely causal, basically deist philosophy has constrained it. The method of philosophy imposes certain restrictions upon such a use of "dogmatic" material, for unless the philosopher detaches his religious sources from the absolute authority they enjoy within the religious community, philosophy loses its autonomy and becomes transformed into theology. Scripture, theology, and mystical speculation provide models for conveying a concrete content to our relation with a transcendent absolute. They do not replace critical reflection.

A further challenge confronting a religiously "inclusive" approach is that the religious sources which direct its search date from a remote past and often present an anthropomorphic image of God which today's educated believer may find hard to take as literal truth. This applies, of course, most obviously to the older books of the Bible, but even the more recent ones of the New Testament create problems of interpretation. A literal reading of some of the historical narratives may considerably add to the difficulties of a philosophical theodicy, rather than reducing them. I must confess that in this respect I find the methods of those Christian philosophers who commendably react against a deist rationalism often seriously wanting in the interpretation of ancient texts. Too many appear unwilling to accept that the meaning of a text lies in the total context. Applied to canonical texts dating from a remote past this principle would appear to require some acquaintance not only with the literary context, but also with the historical one. The meaning of a passage in archaic writings such as the books of the Pentateuch cannot be gathered by the same methods we use for analyzing a modern study of history. To treat an ancient narrative as a critically historical discourse can only set philosophical reflection on the wrong track from the start. One may attempt to extricate oneself from those self-inflicted problems by arguing that none of the improbable assumptions inherent in a literal reading is "demonstrably false." But no discipline known
to me has ever profited from accepting highly unlikely claims as true as long as they cannot be positively demonstrated to be false.

On the opposite side, however, the question arises whether a rationally "edited" reading of ancient sacred texts would not lead us right back to the kind of rationalist theodicy we are trying to avoid. Can we still claim to be more intrinsically religious than rationalists when we leave out what cultural or personal taste finds hard to accept? Which principles enable us to discern the essential, religious message from the anthropomorphic metaphor? This much appears certain: a liberal exegesis has taken critical liberties which would fundamentally obstruct any attempt to base theodicy upon a scriptural idea of God. What then must be the criterion for responsibly reading the Bible as an account of divine action? To eliminate all "anthropomorphism," as the Enlightenment attempted, leaves us with no more than the lifeless skeleton on which deism built its idea of God. Moreover, in the case of the religiously more inclusive model of theodicy here presented, it would in principle deny the most fundamental datum of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem religious anthropology, namely that God has created man in his own image and likeness. Despite these difficulties I do not believe that preserving the biblical principle forces us literally to accept the more primitive metaphors in which this principle has been concretely presented. Among them we count biblical images of God's all too human emotions (jealousy, anger, etc.), his abrupt and by human standards arbitrary decisions and subsequent repentance, his creation of cosmos and persons in the manner of physical fashioning (in Genesis 2, as a potter working with clay). It is not possible to define once and for all at which point representations become unacceptably anthropomorphic. The rational demands of interpretation develop under the impact of new scientific theories about cosmos and person, but also of theological and metaphysical refinement. What to the J writer of Genesis appeared perfectly acceptable may no longer appear so to us. But it seems not unreasonable to generalize that a representation becomes unsatisfactory when even serious believers perceive it as conflicting with the ideas of God, person, and cosmos which centuries of philosophical, theological, and scientific reflection have left us. It would be difficult conclusively to demonstrate the falsehood of such representations, as fundamentalist interpreters challenge us to do. Yet much of what is not demonstrably false may strike an educated believer in our time as improbable beyond falsehood. At least in the area of theodicy little may be gained from the use of canonical texts for the support of representations which believing philosophers would find it hard to accept as literal truth. Even if such representations are no more than highly improbable to the educated, they cease to be useful for the particular task of theodicy which consists in making the idea of God more (rather than less) acceptable in the face of evil.

Finally, and most importantly, we must remind ourselves that not all reli-
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Religious traditions share the same assumptions about the origin and significance of evil, and hence that there is no single "religious answer" to evil. Positions vary from a strong affirmation of evil as an ultimate principle coequal with the good in Manicheism, to a denial of its reality as an illusion in the more radical Buddhist and Vedantic monist schools. Between these two extremes theist responses range from an evil inherent in the finite condition as such, to evil as the sole responsibility of the human race (through the fall and subsequent sins). Evil provokes, of course, the strongest reaction among such monotheists as Jews, Christians, and Moslems who consider all finite being the creation of a free God. Here again the nature and urgency of the crisis have resulted in a variety of responses. Judaism alone presents several models. According to the archaic retaliation model, God inflicts suffering as a punishment for human sin. But, one might wonder, why should humans, created by God, commit sin? Israel never ceased to struggle with this question, and many felt compelled to look in a different direction. One alternative model delays the overcoming of evil till a future time of history. But why should creation have to pass through evil in order to achieve final good? In the face of such major difficulties two different models emerged. The Book of Job concludes that humans are not in a position to question God’s inscrutable decrees, while Deutero-Isaiah, in his description of the suffering servant, equally desisting from seeking the origin of suffering or its future goal, considers suffering itself intrinsically redemptive.

Christianity adopted all four of these models but connected the idea of punishment primarily to Adam’s fall, while grounding the idea of redemptive suffering in the passion and death of Christ. In addition, early theologians combined those scriptural positions with the prevailing philosophical ones (mainly Neoplatonic and Stoic). Thus they adopted the Neoplatonic interpretation according to which evil consists in a lack of being—a privatio boni. As John Hick has shown, this solution, suitable for an order of being in which necessary emanations move down from the One, causes serious difficulties in a universe freely created by God. While the Neoplatonic One is not responsible for all the ills inherent in the lower hypostases that with absolute necessity emanate from it, a free, omnipotent Creator chooses what is to exist. Augustine who was chiefly responsible for establishing this privative conception of evil in the West, attempted to counter the objection by means of a Greek aesthetics of form. Contrast, for him, including the contrast between good and evil, adds to the perfection of the created form. Needless to say, an aesthetic principle of perfection that requires the presence of physical pain and moral evil and that results in the final damnation of most moral agents, hardly corresponds to the Christian idea of God’s goodness or to that of the individual’s responsibility. The God of love preached in the Gospel of salvation here has made room for an Olympian Artist of dramatic form. Nor does one soften that
grim picture much by declaring that the Creator merely *allows* moral evil, as long as one holds God to be capable of freely creating a world that contains less suffering and less moral evil. "One cannot say that God both is blameless in respect of the natural evil in our world, because He alone allows it as something inseparable from the world's good, and that He could, had He wished, have created a better world in which there would have been less natural evil." Augustine obviates any divine obligation to create a better world by the idea of contrast, while he uses the *privatio boni* (hardly suitable for aesthetic contrast) to acquit God from any complicity with the evil needed for that contrast.

2. *Created Autonomy Versus Causal Determinism*

The positions that in the wake of theological and philosophical controversies came to prevail in much of Western thought under the direct or indirect impact of St. Augustine resulted in the following questionable theses.

1. God creates the intelligent agent free, yet predestines him or her to damnation or salvation.

2. The good exists as an independent value prior to the Creator's choice.

3. God remains unaffected by the finite reality.

All of these theses would at a later time and in modified form find their way into the rationalist assumptions of the theodicy formulated in seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy which, to a great extent, is still surviving today. The modern assumptions may be summarized as follows:

1. While the Creator is the efficient cause of creation, the autonomy of the creature is severely restricted. Even the exercise of free will must somehow be determined by the causal impact of an omnipotent, omniscient Creator.

2. Ideals of goodness and value preexist our pursuit of them. The free agent may ratify or reject them, but does not constitute them.

3. The Creator stands entirely outside His creation and remains untouched by suffering and the effects of moral evil.

The alternative model presented in this essay rejects all three of these assumptions in favor of more authentically Christian and, I hope, more coherently philosophical principles. Yet before confronting the two models to one another we need to consider the original theological theses as well as the philosophical assumptions more closely.

The controversy over divine predestination did not reach a critical stage until the sixteenth century, when Calvin denied the exercise of free choice in the order of grace and when Thomists and Molinists initiated their acrimonious dispute *de auxiliis*. For Banez and his Thomist followers, God's position as the absolutely universal cause of creation entailed that He had to be responsible for at least a "negative reprobation" of some, previous to any
personal merits and demerits. God causes no evil, but decides not to cause the good that would prevent evil from occurring. Left to its own fallen and fallible liberty, the finite will without God's efficacious grace inevitably sins. To this determinism Molina and his school, anxious to preserve human responsibility, opposed a free human causality next to, and partly in competition with, divine causality. These conflicting positions share the burden of an impossible task: in one case reconciling total divine causality with human responsibility for evil, in the other, squaring total human responsibility with divine causality.

The second thesis posits the good as an ideal apriori, preceding God's creative act, and thus imposing upon a moral God the obligation to create the universe which approaches this ideal as closely as a finite composition is able to. The same necessity which determines the divine being thereby extends to creation, leaving no room for either divine freedom or finite contingency. Leibniz who formulated the position into a clearly articulated principle, attempted to escape its pantheistic implications by distinguishing between the "absolute" necessity to create the best possible world (which he denied) and the "moral" necessity by which God owed it to his goodness to create the best possible (which he affirmed). In this rationalist scenario, God contemplates the non-existent essences of several possible worlds, after which He decides to create the actual world in accordance with His goodness—though He was not intrinsically forced to do so.9 Even if we leave out of consideration the untenable real distinction between God's goodness and His omnipotence, we must still question Leibniz's interpretation of divine omnipotence. Does it refer to God's power to do "anything at all"? That is hardly meaningful, and Leibniz himself hastens to restrict it to what is logically possible and composable with God's other attributes. If God is supremely good, He is not able to do evil. We should then restrict our definition of omnipotence so as to define God's ability to do anything He wills in accordance with His divine nature. But even then the term "anything He wills" raises further questions. God's "acting" expresses His nature; it serves not, as it does for me, as a means to satisfy particular wants or desires by the attainment of goals that lie outside me. A wide gap separates what I am from what I attempt to attain by means of acts devised to complement my experienced deficiency. None of this applies to God. Nor am I from my own position able to conceive what God's acting implies or does not imply. All I can do is look at the concrete, visible result of that divine action which we call creation. But here precisely theodicy ought to follow a procedure opposite to the one it usually follows when it decrees that the world must conform to those standards of human rationality which it has apriori set up for God. A genuine, religious theodicy begins by accepting creation as it is (including its evil) as a visible expression of God's nature, rather than by dictating a priori what a divine expression must be.
like. As we shall see, such an attitude does not condemn theodicy to blind faith, for it must critically examine what it may learn of the divine nature on the basis of this created expression, and it may conceivably conclude that this created expression fails to meet even minimal human standards of goodness. But it should do so on the basis of the total evidence (including the one provided in the specifically religious experience of faith) rather than of an apriori, narrowly rationalist definition of what God ought to be and therefore ought to do.

Returning then to Leibniz's argument, it should be clear that the idea of a divine choice with an antecedent moment of deliberation and a consequent moment of decision, patterned after the model of human persons deliberating about several alternatives, is itself heavily anthropomorphic. Kolakowski puts it well:

“In God Himself essence and existence converge and this implies that His will is identical with His essence. God neither obeys rules which are valid regardless of His will nor produces these rules according to His whims or as the result of deliberating various options; He is those rules. Unlike humans, God never faces alternative possibilities and then freely decides which of them He ought to choose; His decisions are necessary aspects of His Being—and therefore they could not have been different from what they are; yet they are free in the sense that no superior powers, no norms of validity independent of God, bind Him. He is what He does, decides, orders. Consequently we may say neither that the definitions of what is good and true precede God,...nor that He precedes them.”

In addition to these intra-divine difficulties of God “choosing” the best possible world, there are others inherent in the very concept of “best possible world.” Bergson pointed them out and dismissed the entire idea in a few lapidary sentences.

“I can, at a stretch, represent something in my mind when I hear of the sum-total of existing things, but in the sum-total of the non-existent I can see nothing but a string of words. So that here again the objection is based on a pseudo-idea, a verbal entity. But we can go further still: the objection arises from a whole series of arguments implying a radical defect of method. A certain representation is built up a priori, and it is taken for granted that this is the idea of God; from thence are deduced the characteristics that the world ought to show; and if the world does not actually show them, we are told that God does not exist.”

One imposes no undue restrictions upon divine perfection by declaring God unable to achieve what conflicts with the nature of the finite. But finite being is intrinsically imperfect and any attempt to measure its perfection depends itself on finite, hence intrinsically, imperfect norms. Thus the idea of the best possible world imposes upon the Creator a subjective, human standard.

The most serious problems begin when modern theodicy attempts to square
the idea of a perfect Creator with the creation of free agents capable of perpetrating moral evil and inflicting suffering upon other creatures. On this issue the modern assumption leads to the most questionable conclusions. Both theodicy's adversaries and advocates hold a concept of freedom that from the start sets the discussion on the wrong track. Thus Antony Flew argues that for an action to be free it suffices that it not be compelled—which, for him, entails not that it is unpredictable, but that the person nevertheless could have acted differently had he chosen to do so. From these premises he concludes that an omnipotent Creator could have created persons who would always (or more often) have acted rightly.\textsuperscript{12} J. L. Mackie concurs: human beings could have been so constituted as freely to choose the good. The idea of a God who could not control men's actions leads to what he calls the "paradox of omnipotence."\textsuperscript{13} How the idea of a will determined always to choose the good remains compatible with freedom escapes me. Nor do I see how in a theory of predetermined freedom evil could avoid being ultimately attributable to God.\textsuperscript{14} Yet the most questionable concept appears to be that of a finite freedom created with a built-in resistance to evil. Freedom is far more than the power to say \textit{yes} or \textit{no} to divinely pre-established values with or without a divine impulse toward one or the other. Its signal characteristic consists not in the power to ratify pre-established values but in the ability to create them. Freedom can tolerate contingency and an extremely restricted field of operation. But to interfere with its creative power is to replace freedom by causality. Creativity constitutes its very essence. Both theists and atheists admit freedom to be "given," but it is not given in the way of causal determination. Even a wholly pre-established order of values reduces its scope. Most of us agree on that point when it comes to humanly induced unconscious conditioning (including hypnosis), such as B. F. Skinner proposes for the improvement of society as a whole. But the same objection holds true for any divine "conditioning." Even a divinely pre-established order leaves man none but a negative creativity (as Sartre perceived). Yet, strangely enough, this inauthentic, reduced freedom of choice, the very same one the secular critics of theodicy reject in predestinationist theologies, is the one they propose as the only one compatible with the existence of a good God.

God creates neither values nor strong or weak inclinations to choose them; He creates creators who depend on a divine source for the exercise of their creative spontaneity, but not for its determination. Nor need such a theory result in the kind of atheism it has entailed in some existentialist philosophies. For an essential part of the free agent's creative project consists in practically recognizing his overall \textit{dependence}. Failure to do so deprives us of an absolute in determining the hierarchy of values, while forcing us to elevate relative values into absolutes. Now, a freedom responsible for creating its own values remains intrinsically and irrevocably able to erect false absolutes and even to
invert the creative impulse into an annihilating power. Genuine freedom is endowed with a capacity unlimited for evil as well as for good. In creating free agents God has released a power which may turn against Himself. In Berdiaev's words: "Evil presupposes freedom and there is no freedom without the freedom of evil, that is to say, there is no freedom in the state of compulsory good." Leibniz understood this better than some of his followers.

The real issue concerning freedom is not whether it deserved to be created, but whether God's necessary being is compossible with such an unrestricted creaturely autonomy as freedom requires. Since that issue obviously falls outside the limits of theodicy, we need not enter into it. Nor is it a problem for theodicy to solve whether there may exist spiritual beings endowed with a clearer sense of freedom's potential and therefore less inclined to pervert its creative autonomy (e.g., angels). Its own question concerns the compatibility of free agents as we know them with the existence of a good and wise Creator. Moreover, theodicy should be concerned only with the compatibility of the world as it is, not with the possibility of proving the existence of God on the basis of this world's perfection. Symptomatic for the confusion that often occurs between the two is that many modern treatises of theodicy begin with a discussion of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Whatever Hume's intention may have been, he did not write an anti-theodicy, that is, a refutation of any possibility to defend the idea of God in the face of evil in creation. The Dialogues deflate the exaggerated claims of a natural theology which on the basis of a purely philosophical speculation concerning order and purpose in the world concludes to the existence of God. Even on those terms we should beware of overstating the case. Does Philo, the most skeptical of the three participants in the dialogue, after having invalidated all arguments presented in favor of a benevolent Providence, not concede in the end: "In many views of the universe and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them." One may, of course, dismiss this statement as the expression of a thorough skepticism whereby Philo, after having first invalidated the arguments of the other interlocutants, in the end scuttles his own. But we may also read this as a sincere attempt to attain "synoptically," that is, by an immediate, total impression, what analytic inference withholds. If this reading is correct, an "illative sense" would provide what analysis alone fails to supply, namely, certitude concerning the existence of an intelligent Designer who may be infinitely perfect and good (though these attributes cannot be established by natural reason alone).

The implications of Hume's argument so understood would be less constractive for philosophical theodicy than much contemporary fideism which,
rightly dissatisfied with the rationalist theodicy, prefers to leave the justification of God in the face of evil entirely to faith. The philosopher cannot remain satisfied with such a total abdication of reason: the presence of evil must be shown not to exclude the idea of a good Creator. Nor will the philosopher be satisfied with defining "divine goodness" by standards that have nothing in common with our human conception of goodness, an equivocality that, as John Stuart Mill pointed out, would merely result in "an incomprehensible attribute of an incomprehensible substance."18 The philosopher rightly insists that the idea of an omnipotent, good God be shown to be compatible with the actual existence of evil. Reason modestly yet legitimately demands only to perceive how an open conflict between a good God and an evil world is not inevitable.

Even that modest goal philosophy cannot meet unless it adequately answers the objection of God's supreme indifference to the suffering of his creatures. To do so becomes nearly impossible for one who accepts the third of the Augustinian theses, especially after it became combined with the idea of the Creator as efficient cause in the modern sense. But even medieval scholasticism in denying any real relation between God and the world had placed itself in an unfavorable position for defending the Creator against the charge of supreme indifference. For such a defense to be effective philosophy would have to accept that the sufferings of creation, including the suffering caused by human evil, affect the Creator himself. A number of philosophical systems broadly comprehended under the general name of "process philosophy" have attempted to justify such a divine participation in finite processes. Despite essential disagreements concerning the relation between the finite and the infinite, divine personhood, the role and ultimate destiny of human individuals, all these systems share Whitehead's overall vision of the real as a creative process, whereby God comes to be with his creation rather than above it. In Whitehead's terms: "He shares with every new creation its actual world."19 Indeed, only through the creative process does God attain that full actuality to which Whitehead refers as God's "consequent" nature. Rather than being an unchanging, transcendent Prime Mover, God is the actual entity from which each creative development in time "receives that initial aim from which its self-causation starts."20 Various philosophers have interpreted this divine participation in various ways, ranging from an impersonal "creative event," the source of all human good (Wieman), to a creative personalism (Brightman). But only when the idea of a personal God is preserved can process philosophy contribute toward making the monotheist position with respect to evil more acceptable.

Peter Bertocci in *The Goodness of God* shows a clear appreciation of the importance of safeguarding this personal character and bases his argument on the premise that a creative force resulting in human persons must itself
be personal. But such a Creator-Person need not be conceived as self-sufficient, uninhibited by restraints other than those He imposes upon Himself. If personhood reaches its highest realization in interpersonal communication, then the perfection of the divine Creator would likewise be enhanced, rather than weakened, in responding to persons. Furthermore, such a divine Person exposes himself to risks analogous to those run by humans in their attempts to create good—what Bertocci calls “creative insecurity.”

“Insecurity inheres in the very nature of being a person whose actual freedom of personal choice is involved in the pursuit of truth and goodness. Intrinsic to the good for persons is the insecurity that can become creative, because values are compenetrating, and because persons themselves can choose orchestration-within-pattern as they change and grow.”

Bertocci supports this bold application of the personalist principle to the Absolute by an even more daring thesis. As he reads it, the insecurity of the creative act expresses a fundamental uncertainty in the very nature of the Creator-Person. A refractory element, not a “flaw” in the divine or an impediment imposed upon the divine, but the essential passivity inherent in the very act whereby the Absolute gives birth to the relative, prevents the Creator from achieving His goals without at the same time having to allow the possible intrusion of suffering and evil.

3. A Passive, Suffering God

In this section I intend to show that such an idea of a God who renders Himself passive in the act of creation presents a more solid, as well as a more concretely religious basis for theodicy than a first cause untouched by the suffering of creation and unmoved by the effects of moral evil. The doctrine of the passion and death of Christ lends indirect, though strong, support to this position, as it rests upon the very notion of God who suffers and dies. But in all three monotheist faiths mystical and theosophical traditions have held that with creation some passivity enters God’s very essence. For infinite, perfect Being to give rise to being other than itself means not adding to itself (as St. Thomas already clearly stated: non datur plus esse), but causing an emptiness within its own fullness wherein “otherness” can subsist. Only through an “annihilation” (Blondel) of infinite Being can the finite be another being. Though finite being must remain within the infinite, perfect Being from which it draws its entire sustenance, as other it assumes a certain independence. By allowing it to be in its own right infinite Being ceases to wield unlimited power over it, and comes to stand in a relation that is no longer exclusively active.

Now philosophers who adopt Aristotle’s definition of God as pure act tend to exclude passivity from God as incommensurable with divine perfection. Yet if we understand pure act as the opposite of passivity, it becomes itself
imperfect. For to “act,” as opposed to being acted upon, means to “re-act” to events and circumstances in a manner that forces the acting subject to go out toward the other than itself in order to return to itself in a different manner. Obviously, this kind of acting wherein the agent thus loses himself in order to find himself anew does not apply to God as He is in Himself. Resting within itself a perfect, infinite Being as such cannot be called active any more than passive, as Nicholas of Cusa showed in his theory of the divine coincidence of opposites. In creation, however, the two moments of activity and passivity simultaneously emerge. Though the act of creation requires itself no external support and in this respect may be called entirely “active,” in the very “otherness” of the created being, God places Himself in a position where He is forced to react and thereby to relate passively as well as actively. Aristotelians avoid this conclusion by asserting that God has no real relation to the world. But such a claim, intelligible enough within Aristotle’s theory of an uncreated cosmos, makes little sense within a creationist theology.

On the other side, to introduce passivity in God and autonomy in the creature is not sufficient for solving the problem of theodicy. Indeed, even the deist with his remote, laissez-faire God implicitly or explicitly holds that, once having created the world, God leaves all initiative to the creatures, restricting his own activity to preservation and support. If there were no further divine intervention, the issue would, once again, be reduced to the simple dilemma we have rejected in the first part: Either the world is as good as it can possibly be, and to be so, however imperfect, is better than not to be. In that case God is justified. Or the world could have been better than it is, and then we must conclude that an omnipotent, wise, and good God did not create it. For the believer, the “passivity” of the Creator is of a very different nature. Rather than creating and then leaving creation to its own devices, God never stops reacting to the creature’s initiative. Monotheist theologies have expressed the interaction between God and creation in several ways. Christians affirm this ever renewed divine action by saying that God redeems what He has created. Unfortunately, in theodicy believers often use the concept of redemption for stopping the gaps of ignorance that remain after they have depleted their supply of rational justifications for suffering and evil. Thus they end up yielding to the duplicity which Mill denounced, by calling “good” in an invisible order (that, in a future world, may become manifest) what by ordinary standards cannot but count as “bad.” Rather than whitewashing evil by such an argumentum ex ignorantia—as irrefutable as it is unprovable—the believer should, from the start, admit that this world contains a great deal of unexplainable suffering, that creatures endowed with a free will remain perfectly capable of causing unqualified evil and often avail themselves of this possibility. Rather than using the term “redemption” to make suffering and evil vanish into an invisible realm of goodness, the
Christian philosopher ought to show, what the ordinary faithful have always maintained, namely that in his redemptive action God reacts to real suffering and real evil. To be effective in theodicy the idea of redemption must be integrated with that of creation as one continuous, active relation of God to His creatures. Such a view, contrary to the deist’s, envisions divine activity as an open-ended, ever renewed dialogue with creation. At each moment of time God creatively responds to the conditions shaped by His creatures in the preceding moment. A divine response then counteracts existing evil by constantly presenting us with new occasions for the accomplishment of good or the redemption of evil. Without having to interfere with the creature’s autonomy. God’s response provides ever novel opportunities for converting evil into goodness. Christian writers have consistently upheld this divine ability to restore creation to new innocence. Thus Jacques Maritain suggestively argues:

"Each time that a free creature undoes for its part the work that God makes, God remakes to that extent—for the better—this work and leads it to higher ends. Because of the presence of evil on earth, everything on earth, from the beginning to the end of time, is in perpetual recasting."  

To be sure, the ways in which God actively counteracts evil in a creation increasingly threatened by it, cannot be “justified” on the basis of an abstract concept of human nature. Theology may inform us that God offers ever new opportunities for converting past evil into future goodness. It may show how, in a condition antagonistic to good, such a reversal must necessarily take the form of a struggle, an agon. According to Christian doctrine, God himself had to provide both the means and the model of this conversion by suffering and dying under the power of evil. But in thus linking the mystery of evil to the even greater mystery of redemption we have decidedly left the domain of philosophy and introduced considerations not available to a purely philosophical reflection on reality as it is universally manifest.

The admission of dogmatic doctrines into a universal, philosophical reflection ought to be justified more thoroughly than this essay allows. Here I mention only one critically significant reason that forces us to admit them at least to some extent. The very standards by which we measure what does and what does not count as “good” depend upon the acceptance or rejection of an intrinsically religious hierarchization of values. Any attempt to erect a system of values upon a religiously neutral basis, common to believers and unbelievers, fails precisely in the area where theodicy matters most, namely, in deciding what must count as definitive evil. In a recent essay Marilyn McCord Adams has shown how ontological commitments affect descriptions of values. Moral theories that omit any reference to a transcendent norm differ from value systems ruled by a relation to transcendent Being. More specifically, varying ontological commitments “widen or narrow the range of options for defeating evil with good.”

The believer, not satisfied with
exclusively immanent goods may value an intimate sense of God’s presence, acquired through much pain and suffering, more highly than a satisfaction of immediate needs. But different value systems result in different judgments concerning standards of good and evil. In his evaluation of what constitutes unnecessary evil and what constitutes ultimate goodness, the believer often fundamentally disagrees with the nonbeliever. Diametrically opposed attitudes concerning the desirability of terminating an unwanted pregnancy become intelligible only if we take this fundamental disagreement on values into account. To recognize major differences in the perception of what in the final analysis constitutes evil need not result in the kind of verbal equivocity on good and evil denounced by J. S. Mill. Yet it should caution us against deciding prematurely what must count as unredeemably evil and what as unconditionally good. Once we introduce value judgments based on factors that fall beyond the range of a “common” appraisal of what benefits or harms human nature, we admit intrinsically private factors that make a universal philosophical theodicy, identical for believers and unbelievers, impossible.

Instead of continuing to attempt such an impossible enterprise, the believing philosopher should not hesitate to include the redemptive vision of his faith in his speculation. From that broadened perspective the experience of evil and suffering, however burdensome, can never lead to a final conclusion concerning life’s balance of good and evil. Nor is such a position based upon a purely fideist anticipation of future well-being. For the believer may actually experience suffering itself as redemptive, that is, as endowed with more than a merely negative meaning. “Grace and nature not being two closed worlds, but two worlds open to one another and in mutual communication, it might happen that the greater progress (of the wheat over that of the cockle) would occur more in the order of grace than in that of nature.” To refer to different modes of experiencing is not to advance an unsupported claim, but merely to assert what eminent psychologists, beginning with William James, have persistently asserted.

The distinction here proposed finds unambiguous theological support in the doctrine of redemptive suffering which, for Jews, Christians, and Moslems transforms the meaninglessness of suffering and evil into different patterns of meaning and goodness. In its most radical form, expressed in the New Testament theology of Christ’s passion and death, the mystery of redemptive suffering allows God himself to participate in human distress. No writer has pursued the theme of suffering redemptive through God’s participation in it further than Dostoevskii. Essays on theodicy routinely refer to Ivan Karamazov’s charge against a God who tolerates unredeemable suffering—the pain of innocent children and animals who lack the capacity to learn from pain. Usually they fail to mention Alyosha’s later reply. Alyosha admits the full scandal of innocent pain and, even as his brother, refuses to accept it. But
he assumes this scandal into the even greater one of God's own suffering. When, dying on the cross, Christ feels abandoned by his Father, the tragic conflict enters God's own Being. In this intra-divine theologia crucis God is set against God, as in Goethe's dark saying: *Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse.* ("No one against God but God himself.") In Christ God assumes all human suffering and takes upon Himself the burden of compensating for all moral evil. In addition, as the legend of the Grand Inquisitor suggests, He faces the failure of a salvation that surpasses the capacity for acceptance of most of those to whom it is offered. This greater scandal does not "justify" evil, but it makes God a participant in our pain, as Christian theologies have consistently implied, and mystical and theosophical ones have explicitly stated.

Gnostic and theosophical doctrines in the three monotheist religions have, in an even more daring way than Christian orthodoxy, introduced the mystery of evil into God's inner life. In contrast to orthodox beliefs, they attribute the possibility of evil (though not its actuality) to an intradivine multiplicity the harmony of which became disturbed by an unknown cause. The resulting conflict gave birth to that realm of unrest and disharmony which is the physical universe. Variously formulated in Jewish, Christian, and pagan myths during the first centuries of our era, this gnostic doctrine found its most radical expression in kaballah mysticism, as it developed between the thirteenth century (the Zohar) and the sixteenth century (Isaac Luria). The German theosophist Jacob Boehme attempted to incorporate it in Lutheran theology by presenting the intradivine conflict as an opposition between God's wrath and God's mercy. We hear a final major echo of it in Blake's *Prophetic Books* according to which a fragmentation of the divine harmony has caused an intra-divine conflict resulting in the creation of the physical universe.

We may of course dismiss such daring speculations as unworthy of philosophical attention. But before doing so we ought to consider that major philosophers, beginning with Plato, have persistently turned to ancient mythical and religious interpretations that trace the origin of good and evil to a single transcendent source. Even some modern philosophers have attempted to trace the opposition between good and evil to a separation of complementaries harmoniously united in the Absolute. Thus in Karl Jaspers's memorable treatment of "The Law of the Day and the Passion for the Night," night and day appear as two complementary elements within the Absolute: intelligible but limited clarity and dark desire of the infinite. The diurnal law "regulates our existence, demands clarity, consistency, and loyalty, binds us to reason and to the idea, to the One and to ourselves." The night functions as the negative desire to transcend finitude, limit, temporality. Though irreducible to the law of the day, the passion for the night is an equally essential constituent of human existence. In mythical (and highly controversial) language such reflections on complementarity within the Absolute articulate
what I have described as the “passivity” that enters infinite Being when it
gives birth to the finite. Orthodox monotheist theologies have never accepted
the gnostic equation of creation with the fall. Nor do they accept conflicts
“within” the Godhead to account for the existence of evil in creation. Rightly,
because the gnostic myths and their theosophical interpretations result in
theological inconsistencies as well as in morally problematic positions. But
the underlying assumption that the possibility of evil cannot be explained
unless we trace it back to the divine act of creation itself rests on a profound
insight, no more irrational than God’s own participation in human suffering.

Still, the philosopher cannot but wonder, what such theosophical specula-
tions contribute to the kind of strictly rational reflection he or she is commit-
ted to. Passivity in God and otherness in the creature neither explain the actual
origin of physical evil nor do they justify its existence. Neither do gnostic or
theosophical doctrines provide the philosopher with such an explanation or
justification. It would be unreasonable to expect from them rational explana-
tions which reason itself has been powerless to provide. Theosophical doc-
trines do not reduce the “mysteriousness” of evil. If anything, they deepen it. What they may accomplish, however, is to extend the boundaries within
which theology and the philosophy that has followed its lead conceive of that
mystery. While the traditional theistic position has attributed the source of
evil entirely to the creature—either as a result of sin or as an inevitable effect
of finitude, theosophical doctrines force us to consider also the divine act of
creation itself and the momentous transition it constitutes in Being from the
one to the many. This very transition entails the possibility of opposition (and
suffering!) not only among differently disposed and variously oriented crea-
tures, but even within each single living organism with its own multiplicity
of tendencies, drives, and instincts.

Theosophical doctrines, however, tend to go beyond tracing the mere pos-
sibility of physical evil to the creative act. Most of them attribute the actuality
of evil to a mysterious darkness within God’s nature. Here philosophy can
and should not follow them. Claims of a revelation, altogether inaccessible
to reason, have no legitimate place in philosophy. Any appeal to a “secret”
knowledge restricted to a special enlightenment of few, remains in principle
incompatible with the public goals and universal methods of philosophical
reflection. Nor could such privileged enlightenment constitute an additional
source of positive knowledge for the theistic philosopher. Gnostic speculation
can do no more than open up perspectives different from the ones traditionally
considered and invite the philosopher to explore them within his/her own
discipline. In the case of physical evil it draws attention to the divine creative
act itself. Such a reorientation of the philosophical attention may be highly
useful for the conception of new, more fruitful models in defining the issue.
Specifically, in theodicy, it may force us to think of the creative act as being
more complex than a simple divine *fiat*. Since the purview of this article limits it to a critique of traditional approaches and a suggestion of an alternative model for theodicy, this is not the proper place to develop its philosophical consequences. But it appears that a philosophical theology of the process type would be better equipped to accommodate the inherent ambiguity of the creative act with respect to physical evil than one of the traditional type which too absolutely separates the Creator from His creation.

**Conclusion**

The theologically inclusive model of theodicy here defended requires the concrete religious context of faith for any rational reflection on a mystery that attains its full poignancy only within religion itself. As Hegel once remarked, only in actual worship are believers capable of overcoming evil. It differs from those philosophical theodiceses which allege to be based upon a rational, but in fact rationalist, idea of God, far removed from living faith, if not in actual conflict with it. Theological inclusiveness does not force us to abandon the rational methods and goals of philosophy. True enough, on the cross philosophy suffers shipwreck, believers and unbelievers unanimously declare. But that does not dispense the believing philosopher from the task of showing that, within a concrete, *theological context*, belief in a good God is *compatible* with the existence of evil. In addition, the philosopher must examine whether the theological theses which form the context for the believer's concrete evaluation of what must count as a good or an evil remain in conformity with reason. Interpretations of Jesus's redemptive suffering as a satisfaction exacted by an angry God or a ransom paid to the devil do not satisfy that demand. But no such objections can be raised against the central Christian idea of God uniting Himself to finite nature and descending in person into the abyss of human suffering and moral evil. In taking account of the mystery of evil and redemption, as faith presents it and as the believer, to a greater or lesser extent, actually *experiences* it, the Christian philosopher admits a complexity of the issue which the rationalist ignores. In giving birth to the finite, God himself inevitably assumes a certain passivity in regard to the autonomy of finite being, a passivity that may render Him vulnerable and that indeed, according to the Christian mystery of the Incarnation, has induced Him personally to share the very suffering of finite being.32

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**NOTES**

1. Arthur Schopenhauer: *The World as Will and Representation*. Supplemental Ch. XVII (added to Section 15).
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3. I have developed this point in “Transcendence et objectivisme” in Archivio di Filosofia (Rome) 1977, pp. 265-72.


6. As Eleanore Stump does in “The Problem of Evil,” Faith and Philosophy 2 (1985), pp. 392-423, where she makes the highly dubious claim concerning the Cain and Abel story in Genesis: “To the extent to which Christians are committed to accepting the Bible as the revealed word of God, to that extent they are committed to accepting this story as veridical also” (413). “Veridical” here stands for historically true.


17. I owe the comparison with Newman’s “illative sense” (which was undoubtedly influenced by Hume) to my student, Steven Fields.


20. Ibid., p. 374.


30. “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence. From the contraries spring what the religious call good and evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; evil is the active springing from energy.” William Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (beginning).


32. My special thanks to William Alston and Alvin Plantinga for their kind, constructive, and incisive criticism.