Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 37 | Issue 3 Article 4

7-1-2020

Empirically Skeptical Theism

Todd DeRose

Follow this and additional works at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy

Recommended Citation
DeRose, Todd (2020) "Empirically Skeptical Theism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.
DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2020.37.3.4
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol37/iss3/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

EMPIRICALLY SKEPTICAL THEISM

Todd DeRose

Inspired by Peter van Inwagen's "simulacra model" of the resurrection, I investigate whether it could be reasonable to adopt an analogous approach to the problem of evil. Empirically Skeptical Theism, as I call it, is the hypothesis that God shields our lives from irredeemable evils surreptitiously (just as van Inwagen proposes that God shields our bodies from destruction surreptitiously). I argue that EST compares favorably with traditional skeptical theism and with eschatological theodicies, and that EST does not have the negative moral consequences we might suppose.

1. Introduction: The van Inwagen Strategy

As a Christian physicalist, Peter van Inwagen must find a way to reconcile the following triad of propositions—one philosophical, one empirical, and one theological:

1) "If a man does not simply die but is totally destroyed (as in the case of cremation) then he can never be reconstituted, even as an accomplishment of God."[1]
2) "Men apparently cease to exist: those who are cremated, for example."[2]
3) "One day all or most dead men [including those who apparently cease to exist] will be restored to life by God."[3]

There is, of course, no strict inconsistency here, because (2) states only that there are people who *apparently* cease to exist. So long as one is willing to entertain a certain skeptical doubt about the world—namely the doubt that the appearances reported by (2) are veridical—one need not abandon either the philosophical commitment of (1) or the theological commitment of (3). This is, in fact, exactly what van Inwagen does. He advances the hypothesis that God, through a simple exercise of divine power, shields our bodies from destruction and decay contrary to all appearance: "perhaps at the moment of each man's death, God removes his corpse and replaces it with a simulacrum which is what is burned or rots."[4]

[1]van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," 119.
[2]van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," 121.
[3]van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," 116.
[4]van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," 121.

pp. 323–335 FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY Vol. 37 No. 3 July 2020
doi: 10.37977/faithphil.2020.37.3.4
All rights reserved

My purpose is to investigate whether it would be reasonable for a theist to deploy a parallel strategy in the context of the problem of evil. More specifically, I have in mind the problem of horrors or horrendous evils, construed primarily as an evidential rather than logical problem of evil.[5] Horrors, as I shall use the term, are inscrutable, excessive, or dysteleological evils—evils for which our best current theodicies can provide no plausible explanation or account of their utility. Horrors are evils for which there would appear, even in light of our best current theodicies, to be no sufficient reason for God to allow them to occur.[6]

Evils might qualify as horrors for a variety of reasons, depending on what theodicies we regard as our best. My purposes in this paper do not require me to take a firm position on which theodicies these are, but as we will see I do think that Irenaean or "soul-making" theodicies of the general sort that John Hick articulates—those according to which the evil in the world enables "the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality"[7]—provide the strongest rationale for why God would be motivated to act in the unconventional ways I will discuss. If, for example, we regard soul-making theodicies as our best, then we are most likely to regard as horrors those evils which, in Hick's words, are "so severe as to be self-defeating when considered as soul-making influences" or which "reach far beyond any constructive function of character training."[8] Naturally he has various proposals for dealing with such evils which seem to lie beyond the scope of his theodicy, but the point at this juncture is that even a fairly optimistic theist must find a way to reconcile the following triad of propositions—one philosophical, one empirical, and one theological:

(1) If there is a God, there are no horrors.
(2) There appear to be horrors.
(3) There is a God.

As with van Inwagen's triad of propositions, there is no strict inconsistency here because (2) states only that there *appear* to be horrors (and if we construe premise 1 as an evidential rather than logical claim, as we probably should, there is no *strict* inconsistency at all). Regardless of whether we construe (1) in logical or evidential terms, so long as one is willing to entertain a certain skeptical doubt about the world—namely the doubt

[5]While EST-style maneuvers could in principle be deployed to provide a defense against the logical problem of evil (e.g., by suggesting that *all* apparent evils are illusions maintained by God), this seems to me to involve empirical skepticism of a clearly unacceptable scope.

[6]Importantly, I am *not* using Marilyn Adams's more famous definitions of horrendous evils: "Evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason prima facie to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole" (Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 299) or for which "we cannot even conceive of any plausible candidate sort of reason consistent with worthwhile lives for human participants in them" (304).

[7]Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 170.

[8]Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 183.

that the appearances reported by (2) are veridical—one need not abandon either the philosophical commitment of (1) or the theological commitment of (3). This is, in fact, exactly what skeptical theists, in general contrast with theodicists, do. Skeptical theists typically argue that the limits of our cognitive abilities and/or our epistemic vantage point entail that "we are in no position to judge whether there are pointless evils on the basis of inscrutable evils."[9] Some skeptical theists challenge whether we are even entitled to (2) in the first place,[10] but in any case the central claim is that there is something inherently deficient about our ability to properly evaluate the moral status of the evils in question. I shall hereafter refer to any such approach to the problem of evil as *Morally Skeptical Theism*, or MST.

MST questions our ability to know whether the apparent horrors in the world really are pointless or gratuitous, but it does not question whether the particular evil events that appear to occur do in fact occur. In order to preserve a closer parallelism with van Inwagen's approach to resurrection, therefore, I propose a different brand of skeptical theism which I shall term *Empirically Skeptical Theism*, or EST. EST is a family of responses to the problem of evil unified by the hypothesis that God, through a simple exercise of divine power, shields our lives from horrors *contrary to all appearance*. The mechanism(s) by which God accomplishes this feat may vary (just as van Inwagen acknowledges they may vary in the *simulacra* case), and it is not my purpose to settle questions about these details. For illustration, consider the following, keeping in mind that EST can be tailored to suit whatever set of evils our best theodicies are otherwise at a loss to explain: Perhaps at the moment when the suffering a person experiences reaches a point where it can no longer serve any constructive function for soul-making, God temporarily "anesthetizes" him or her while leaving intact the outward appearance (and subsequent memories) of suffering. Perhaps God surreptitiously replaces those who appear to suffer the dissolution of personality or the permanent breaking of spirit with p-zombies. When William Rowe asks us to imagine the prolonged suffering of a fawn trapped in a forest fire, arguing that "an omnipotent being could have easily spared the fawn the intense suffering by quickly ending its life, rather than allowing the fawn to lie in terrible agony for several days,"[11] the empirically skeptical theist replies that perhaps God *did* quickly end its life, leaving in its place a fawn simulacrum which burns and writhes instead. When David Lewis points out that God could permit thought crime without permitting action crime by placing his creatures in a "playpen" that prevents them from harming each other,[12] the EST replies that perhaps we *are* in a playpen—just one whose safeguards are invisible

[9]Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," 3.1. Note that this is simply one construal of the position, namely Dougherty's (who is not himself a skeptical theist). Like EST, MST is best thought of as a *family* of strategies.

[10]See Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," 2.1.

[11]Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 337.

[12]Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" 154.

to us. When David Hume complains (to use Hick's wording) that "God should interfere secretly and on special occasions to prevent exceptional and excessive evils,"[13] the EST agrees wholeheartedly—and suggests that this is exactly what God does.

To the best of my knowledge, there are only two examples of proposals in the spirit of EST to appear in recent literature. The first is from Nick Bostrom. He considers the possibility that the mental lives of simulated beings are abridged by their simulators, who "giv[e] them false memories of the sort of experiences that they would typically have had during the omitted interval."[14] He dismisses as "farfetched" a solution to the problem of evil based on such abridgement, presumably because he only considers one according to which *all* memories of suffering are illusions. The second is from Eleonore Stump. She points out in passing, but does not endorse, the possibility that God prevented children who were the victims of Old Testament massacres from suffering in the process of dying.[15] Like Stump, I will stop short of endorsing any such proposal. I will argue, however, that EST compares favorably with MST and with theodicies which depend on eschatological goods to explain or defeat horrendous evils. Ultimately there are three main options for the conclusion we may draw from my discussion:

(1) EST is absurd, and backfires on the theist. EST is both the *reductio ad absurdum* of the van Inwagen strategy for reconciling empirical and religious beliefs, and a scathing indictment of those alternative theories with which it favorably compares.
(2) EST is improbable, but still a valuable addition to the theodicist's toolbox. EST can be helpfully deployed as a provisional or stopgap measure where other strategies fall short.
(3) EST is probable. In fact, it describes exactly how we should expect God to act if God is interested in maximizing the world's soul-making potential while minimizing unnecessary suffering.

My own position is (2), and this is the most that I will defend. As I will explain, I believe that the plausibility of EST crucially depends upon how strong we take our extant theodicies to be. This is because the stronger our extant theodicies are, the more narrowly EST can be deployed. Since I am generally optimistic about the strength of our extant theodicies, I am optimistic that EST can be deployed without, for example, leading to pervasive doubts about the external world.

Lastly, I will consider the charge that EST is not merely implausible but offensive—morally inappropriate to apply within pastoral contexts and perhaps even to entertain in the abstract. While EST may indeed be unsuitable for most pastoral contexts, I will argue that there is precedent for the pastoral use of relevantly similar views in some religious and theological

[13]Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 180.
[14]Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?" 254.
[15]Stump, "The Problem of Evil and the History of Peoples," 183.

traditions. Moreover, a willingness to entertain EST actually bespeaks a greater sensitivity to the moral gravity of horrendous evils than does the willingness to entertain other theistic options.

2. Comparative Degrees of Skepticism

Merely that a theory supposes the world to be quite different than it initially or outwardly appears is not, by itself, a reason to reject that theory. Even in the hard sciences it is now commonplace for us to discover that things are not as they appear, whether in as simple a case as the apparently flat earth turning out to be round or in as complex a case as apparently solid objects turning out to be extremely sparse clouds of micro-physical particles. Contrariety to appearances, therefore, is not all by itself a sufficient objection to EST. That said, there are presumably limits to the amount of empirical skepticism which is admissible in any given context. It is also presumably the case that, all else being equal, we should favor theories which comport with appearances.

Van Inwagen believes that in the case of his resurrection theory, all else is *not* equal. He argues that God would have a vested interest in disguising the preservation of our corpses because of a broader divine interest in keeping the supernatural hidden from human beings.[16] Obviously, the plausibility of this particular argument depends on the plausibility of divine hiddenness having some desirable quality. The point for our purposes, however, is that skeptical hypotheses can be warranted to the extent that we are warranted in supposing that there is an agent who is able to maintain the illusion in question and who would be motivated to do so. Since there is no question of an omnipotent being's ability either to perform the necessary feats for EST or to keep these activities a secret—or at least, no more question than there is for the *simulacra* model or various other kinds of miraculous interventions—all we have to do is supply a plausible motive.

Is it reasonable to think that a benevolent God would be motivated to act in the sorts of ways outlined by EST? Certainly, if for no other reason than that it is a way to limit or even eliminate unnecessary suffering—and this while leaving intact the world's soul-making potential and our responsibility for one another. EST enables us to satisfy Hume's demand that the evils in a world designed for soul-making be "so accurately adjusted as to keep precisely within those bounds in which their utility consists."[17] If it is reasonable to suppose that the world should contain these sorts of safeguards, it is also reasonable to suppose that these safeguards would not be visible to the beings for whose soul-making God created the world. This is because it is highly plausible that the mere appearance of another person suffering would provide the same opportunity for one to respond in praiseworthy or blameworthy ways as would

[16]van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," 121.
[17]Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, 11.11.

an instance of actual suffering, provided one cannot tell the difference. Likewise, at least on many deontological views of ethics, EST does not jeopardize our ordinary moral duties or undermine the moral significance of our choices for the simple reason that we do not know that it is true.[18] As Lewis writes of the aforementioned playpen scenario, "Stalin needn't have known the playpen was there. Insofar as the intrinsic character of Stalin and his evil deeds went, the playpen needn't have made the slightest difference."[19] Furthermore, we need not conclude that God would be an immoral deceiver if he acted in surreptitious ways to reduce suffering: "At worst He misleads us, permitting us to jump rashly to a false conclusion. And maybe not even that. Why shouldn't we be able to figure out that [a given strategy] is a good strategy for God—if indeed it is—and conclude that God may well be following it?"[20] In the case of horrors, just as in science, there are reasonable methods by which we can come to doubt or abandon our common-sense beliefs—and I, for one, would be relieved and grateful (rather than angry and indignant) were I to learn that God acts in the ways EST supposes.

Even accepting that soul-making theodicy provides a plausible motive for God to act in these ways *given* that we perceive horrors, we might still wonder why there should be even the *appearance* of horrors if the non-horrific evil in the world is more than enough to give us the opportunities for moral choices and soul-making growth that God supposedly wants. Unless there is something special about our human response to apparently horrific evil as opposed to apparently non-horrific evil, the mere appearance of horrors is still mysterious. As it happens, I think that there *is* something special about how we choose to respond in the face of apparent horrors. This is because I, like Hick, am inclined to think that the greatest kinds of spiritual growth come from contending not merely with the presence of evil but with the *specter of nihilism*. Humanity, Ralph Emerson has told us, is won by continuing to fight on in the face of certain defeat; and it is only Faust's decision to strive to live a moral life *in spite of believing that he will be damned* which develops his character in the way necessary to prevent his damnation. To this point, Hick writes:

> The mystery of dysteleological suffering is a real mystery, impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind. It challenges Christian faith with its utterly baffling, alien, destructive meaninglessness. And yet at the same time, detached theological reflection can note that this very irrationality and this lack of ethical meaning contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur and in which loving sympathy and

[18]John Pittard has pointed out to me that taking EST seriously could have some consequences "at the margins" of moral decision-making, e.g., slightly inclining the priorities of medical researchers away from trying to cure the most horrific diseases and towards trying to cure the only moderately horrific diseases instead (if and when we are unable to do both). This is a bullet I am prepared to bite.

[19]Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" 154.

[20]Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" 162–163.

> compassionate self-sacrifice can take place. Thus, paradoxically, the failure of theism to solve all mysteries becomes part of its case.[21]

To return to the point that there are limits to the amount of empirical skepticism admissible in any given context, I agree. It would be profoundly misguided, for example, to use EST against the logical problem of evil by supposing that no evil ever occurs at all or to use it against the basic evidential problem of evil by casting widespread doubt on the existence of other sentient creatures. This is why I have chosen to focus on EST's application to a narrow range of the most horrendous evils; skepticism should not be allowed to multiply unnecessarily. Is even such a limited skepticism as this profoundly misguided? Perhaps; I cannot presume here to determine precisely what it is that governs the limits of philosophically acceptable empirical skepticism. Even so, I can endeavor to show that EST requires *no more* skepticism than some of the alternative responses to the problem of horrors.

Consider the eschatological dimension of many theodicies. Hick, for example, thinks that any soul-making theodicy "must be eschatological in its ultimate bearings"[22] and include, in Trakakis's words, "a universalist eschatology that extends the soul-making process beyond the grave."[23] Marilyn Adams also embraces a universalist eschatology, one in which God ensures that each and every evil a person experiences in life will be "defeated" in a future state of beatific union with God by being incorporated organically into a life which is a great good for that person on the whole. Richard Swinburne and Eleonore Stump, though not universalists, still rely heavily on the great goodness and/or justice of a future eschatological state to help offset and/or explain the evils of the present world, as do many others. All these philosophers recognize that there just is not any reasonable hope of reconciling evil in all its forms with the existence of God unless the world is different in important ways from how it appears. This is because any hope we might have for future universal justice and redemption of evils goes beyond the experienced order of nature. In our experience, evils (whether horrendous or not) appear to be left unredeemed all the time; as the Psalmist laments (73:1–14), the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. More to the point, it is contrary to the experienced order of nature that people continue to exist after death, which is a requirement if they are to partake in any of the transcendent and redeeming goods that a religious believer might suppose will obtain in a future state. Adams may be absolutely right that "the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely non-transcendent goods or ills a person might experience,"[24] but believing that such good will ever come to pass requires significant empirical skepticism. As I hope

---

[21]Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 187.
[22]Hick, "Soul Making and Suffering," 173.
[23]Trakakis, "Theodicy: The Solution or Part of the Problem?" 166.
[24]Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 306.

is clear, I am not suggesting that religious beliefs in life after death cannot be justified in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary. My point is simply that religious beliefs in life after death conflict with appearances in the same way EST does, and so whatever evidence we might be able to muster for life after death on the basis of the existence and goodness of God should also function as evidence for EST. After all, it would be no more difficult for an omnipotent and omniscient being to surreptitiously prevent horrors than it would be for such a being to ensure the immortality and future bliss of human beings.

It may perhaps be objected that there is an important difference between theories which go *against* the experienced order of nature and those which merely go *beyond* the experienced order of nature. Perhaps it is one thing for appearances to be mistaken, and quite another for appearances to be merely unrepresentative of the entire universe. I accept that this is an important distinction (e.g., when a scientist happens to collect an unrepresentative sample), but I do not think that it applies when comparing EST to eschatological theodicies. While this may be a matter of dispute, I follow van Inwagen in being committed to the proposition "people apparently cease to exist," and I see this proposition as a perceptual datum on a par with "there appear to be horrors." For those unwilling to follow me in asserting that "people apparently cease to exist" I will simply point out that there have been contemporary philosophers of religion willing to entertain other responses to evil which *plainly* go against the experienced order of nature. I am here thinking especially of Alvin Plantinga entertaining the theory that natural disasters are attributable to demonic activity.[25]

Consider second how the empirical skepticism of EST compares to the moral skepticism of MST. The latter holds that we have reason to doubt the reliability of our moral perceptions; we are in no position to judge whether horrendous evils are or could be justified as part of God's plans. Such moral skepticism, Stewart Sutherland thinks, is a grave form of skepticism indeed—one which, he argues, is too great a price to pay. He writes,

> The defeat of horrendous evil requires a significant qualification of the initial moral perceptions and commitments which lead to the classification of evils as horrendous evils. That is to say, the individual must in the end come to the view that viewed in a proper light horrendous evils are not so bad after all.[26]

He goes on to ask whether it is reasonable to think that a benevolent God would willfully behave in ways that undermine the integrity of our human moral perceptions, and the intuitive answer is no.[27] His arguments are here directed at Marilyn Adams's theodicy—which is not an example of MST because Adams thinks Christians have at least some idea of how

---

[25]See Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 58.

[26]Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 317.

[27]I would here add that, in my own opinion, God willfully deceives us more on the MST hypothesis (if only by lies of omission) than on the EST hypothesis.

God could defeat even the worst of evils—but they apply equally to MST. This is because Sutherland's indignation is based on the fact that *whatever* it is that God may do to defeat horrendous evil, for us to even be able to recognize it as a successful defeat of horrendous evil would require a radical shift in our moral perceptions to take place.

Could our moral perceptions really be as flawed as MST requires? The answer, I think, is yes. Like Lewis, "I myself think that a false value judgement, however preposterous, is possibly true."[28] That is not, however, the relevant question. The relevant question is whether it could ever be *more* reasonable to believe that our moral perceptions are as flawed as MST requires than to believe that our empirical judgements are as flawed as EST requires. The answer to this question, I think, is no. As confident as I may be in the reliability of my empirical judgements, I find myself more certain that allowing a child to be tortured is unjustifiable than that a child ever actually experiences the torture it appears to. There is more room for doubt in our sense perceptions of horrors than in our moral perceptions of horrors, and thus the skepticism of EST is to be preferred to the skepticism of MST. To those who think moral perceptions are inherently less reliable than sense perceptions, Robert Adams writes the following:

> It may be suggested that the epistemological status of moral beliefs is so far inferior to that of physical beliefs, for example, that any moral belief found to entail the existence of an otherwise unknown object ought simply to be abandoned. But in spite of the general uneasiness about morality that pervades our culture, most of us do hold many moral beliefs with almost the highest degree of confidence. So long as we think it reasonable to argue at all from grounds that are not absolutely certain, there is no clear reason why such confident beliefs, in ethics as in other fields, should not be accepted as premises in arguing for the existence of anything that is required for the most satisfactory theory of their subject matter.[29]

If one should remain unconvinced that EST involves less skepticism than MST, so be it. They are not mutually exclusive strategies, because the doubt about the existence of horrors stemming from moral skepticism and empirical skepticism is cumulative. The morally skeptical theist can still welcome EST as an adjunct and complementary strategy.

Rowan Williams writes that "Perhaps it is time for philosophers of religion to look away from theodicy—not to appeal blandly to the mysterious purposes of God, not to appeal to any putative justification at all, but to put the question of how we remain faithful to human ways of seeing suffering."[30] I do not share Williams's pessimism about the value of theodicy. As I see it, the more evils for which our theodicies can provide a plausible explanation (i.e., the smaller the number of horrors there are), the less skepticism EST requires and the more plausible it becomes. I do agree,

---

[28]Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" 152.
[29]Adams, "Moral Arguments for God's Existence," 232.
[30]Williams, "Redeeming Sorrows," 147.

however, that we should remain as faithful as possible to human ways of seeing suffering, even as we work to improve our theodicies. Fortunately, EST is consistent with this objective. While the morally skeptical theist says, "for all we know, our moral perceptions will change dramatically once we see the world from God's point of view," the empirically skeptical theist says, "for all we know, *they won't even have to*."

3. The Pastoral Objection to Empirically Skeptical Theism

A potential problem for my proposal is that it appears to be a truly spectacular violation of the principles of pastoral applicability and moral sensitivity for theodicy articulated by Irving Greenberg, Kenneth Surin, Nick Trakakis, and others.[31] These principles are best summarized in Greenberg's assertion that "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children,"[32] and in Surin's assertion that the "incapacity to acknowledge that a particular reality is mind-stopping betokens an irremissible moral blindness."[33] Would EST be credible in the presence of burning children? At least *prima facie*, it would be not only incredible but offensive, amounting to a denialism of the worst kind. Only imagine, for example, the reaction one would likely meet if one were to tell victims of post-traumatic stress disorder that they merely *seem to remember* their original traumas.

The point is well-taken, insofar as we would generally do well to avoid appealing to EST in pastoral settings. However, against the charge that EST is morally insensitive in the manner Surin describes, I must protest. An incapacity to acknowledge that a particular reality is mind-stopping might betoken an irremissible moral blindness, but this is exactly what EST *does* acknowledge. The reality in question is so mind-stopping, so inexplicable in human ethical terms, that the empirically skeptical theist would rather trust that God is working behind the scenes to ensure that things are not as bad as they seem than accept the evils as they appear and attempt to rationalize them as part of a divine plan. What response from a theist is there, I ask, which could demonstrate a *greater* sensitivity to the overwhelming gravity of the world's most horrendous evils?

Furthermore, I observe that there are responses to evil in extant religious and theological traditions that seem (at least from my perspective) to be relevantly similar to EST with respect to their pastoral significance (though not, of course, with respect to their philosophical content). In particular, there are texts within various eastern religious traditions which appear to me to make quite a lot of the idea that suffering is in an important sense an illusion or grounded in an illusion (e.g., the illusion of self).[34] I claim no

---

[31]E.g., David Bentley Hart: "words we would not utter to ease another's grief we ought not to speak to satisfy our own sense of piety" (Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 99).

[32]Trakakis, "Theodicy," 161.

[33]Trakakis, "Theodicy," 174.

[34]See, for example, Buddha's four noble truths, the *Zhuangzi* (ch. 2), and *The Bhagavad Gita* 2.14–15, 2.38, 6.32, 12.13, 12.18, 14.24–25.

expertise whatsoever in these traditions, but such treatments of suffering have not, so far as I am aware, proven to undermine pastoral care.

Finally, I think it is incumbent upon Greenberg et al. to show why—more exactly—philosophical approaches to the problem of evil must always and everywhere be constrained by how emotionally distressed people are likely to react to them. Epicurus famously wrote "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man," yet the truth does not always comfort—nor should it. As van Inwagen writes,

> If a child dies on the operating table in what was supposed to be a routine operation and a board of medical enquiry finds that the death was due to some factor that the surgeon could not have anticipated and that the surgeon was not at fault, that finding will be of no comfort to the child's parents. But it is not the purpose of a board of medical enquiry to comfort anyone; the purpose of a board of medical enquiry is, by examining the facts of the matter, to determine whether anyone was at fault.[35]

In just the same way, it is not always the purpose of philosophy of religion to help people find meaning in suffering. I sincerely hope and believe that in some cases it does, and obviously philosophy of religion is a discipline which can be conducted in a great diversity of ways by different people. In my own capacity as a theodicist, however, I am first and foremost God's lawyer—not God's ambassador.

4. Conclusion: A Division of Labor

Van Inwagen states that the proposition that the world contains vast amounts of horrendous evil "is not open to reasonable doubt."[36] Why he should think that the reality of horrendous evils is not open to reasonable doubt when the reality of cremated bodies *is* open to reasonable doubt is not clear. Illusions of both kinds would be equally easy for an omnipotent and omniscient being to maintain, and soul-making theodicy provides at least as strong a rationale for God maintaining the illusion of horrendous evils as van Inwagen provides for God maintaining the illusion of human beings ceasing to exist. If van Inwagen's strategy for resurrection is warranted in the absence of a better alternative, then EST should be warranted, *mutatis mutandis*, in the absence of a better alternative.

As I stated in my introduction, I believe that EST, while unlikely, should be taken seriously as a useful tool when other strategies fall short. More specifically, I believe that taking EST seriously enables an interesting division of labor, one which has implications for how we structure our inquiry into theodicy: EST and theodicy should, so to speak, divide and conquer. Rather than make the most inscrutable horrors their highest priority, theodicists should make the most *frequent* or *recurrent* horrors their highest priority. This is because it is no more

---

[35]van Inwagen, "The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils," 77.

[36]van Inwagen, "The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils," 67.

difficult for God to surreptitiously prevent the most horrific instance of evil in the world than to surreptitiously prevent the stubbing of one's toe. The total amount of empirical skepticism EST requires, therefore, depends less on the *magnitude* of the evils our best theodicies are at a loss on their own to explain and more on the *number* of evils our best theodicies are at a loss on their own to explain.[37] EST would be eminently reasonable if, for example, there were only a single apparent instance of evil that had so far withstood our theodicies. Faced with only one remaining horror, I think many philosophers of religion would be tempted to adopt (at least provisionally) a skeptical hypothesis about it. In short, the job of EST should be to relieve the pressure on theodicy to explain the magnitude of evils in the world while the job of theodicy should be to relieve the pressure on EST to explain the number of evils in the world. The relationship is synergistic, and each should attend to the task for which it is best equipped.

I tentatively suggest, given the division of labor that I have just described, that the evils of trauma and PTSD ought—if they are not already—to be among the theodicists's highest priorities. EST does not necessarily involve the kind of anaesthetization and subsequent manipulation of memory that I described in my introduction, but this is certainly a simple model and one which might satisfy a "principle of minimal interference" for evil-limiting divine interventions.[38] On this model, however, cases where the memory of a horror is itself a horror—as is plausibly the case with at least some flashbacks or other traumatic memories—pose a particular challenge. We are free in principle, of course, to simply reapply EST-style maneuvers to each of the recurrent horrific episodes. However, doing so could multiply dramatically the number of events about which we have to be skeptical. The plausibility of EST increases if the theodicist can help the empirically skeptical theist avoid having to redeploy it in this way.[39]

The Ohio State University

References

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1989. "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 63: 297–323.

---

[37]I do not mean to be assuming that the skeptical costs of a theory are a function *only* of the number of token events about which the theory requires us to be skeptical, but I am assuming that at least *ceteris paribus* the skeptical costs of a theory decline as this number declines.

[38]The interference on this model is even more minimal if we think that phenomenal states do not supervene on physical states. I owe this point to Alexander Pruss.

[39]I would like to thank Keith DeRose and John Pittard for their invaluable contributions at various stages of this paper's development, as well as Dylan Flint, Mark Murphy, and two anonymous referees for their probing questions and helpful suggestions during the final stages of revision.

Adams, Robert Merrihew. 2010. "Moral Arguments for God's Existence." In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reinchenbach, and David Basinger (Oxford University Press), 231–239.

Bostrum, Nick. 2003. "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?" *Philosophical Quarterly* 53.211: 243–255.

Dougherty, Trent. 2014. "Skeptical Theism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/skeptical-theism/.

Hart, David Bentley. 2005. *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).

Hick, John. 1991. "Soul-Making and Suffering." In *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Adams (Oxford University Press), 168–188.

Hume, David. 2008. *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*. Edited by J. Gaskin (Oxford University Press).

Lewis, David. 1993. "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" *Philosophical Papers* 22: 149–172.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).

Rowe, William. 1979. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 335–341.

Stump, Eleonore. 2013. "The Problem of Evil and the History of Peoples: Think Amalek." In *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, edited by Michael Bergmann *et al*. (Oxford University Press), 179–197.

Sutherland, Stewart. 1989. "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volumes* 63: 297–323.

Trakakis, Nick. 2008. "Theodicy: The Solution to the Problem of Evil, or Part of the Problem?" *Sophia* 47: 161–191.

van Inwagen, Peter. 2001. "The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils." *American Catholic Philosophical Association Proceedings* 74: 65–80.

van Inwagen, Peter. 1978. "The Possibility of Resurrection." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9: 114–121.

Williams, Rowan. 1996. "Redeeming Sorrows." In *Religion and Morality*, edited by D. Z. Phillips (Macmillan), 132–148.