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NIETZSCHE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: THEODICY, MORALITY, AND NIHILISM

Stuart Jesson

I provide a Nietzschean reading of the way that moral concerns shape and structure discussion of the problem of evil, through consideration of Nietzsche's account of nihilism and compassion. Although, on this account, *all* theodicy is nihilistic in one sense, in another sense theodicy actually inhibits the fully-fledged nihilism of despair, which "judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist." I go on to apply Nietzsche's account of "devaluation" to moral critique of theodicy. Such critique is rooted in compassion, but in such a way that it is self-undermining: once the "protest" that motivates compassion rules out any appeal to a world that transcends earthly suffering, protest against suffering is revealed as a purely negative posture; this is what one would expect, if compassion were a nihilistic value from the beginning.[1]

Nietzsche's reflections on suffering are some of the most sustained and provocative in modern philosophy and the past three decades have seen a resurgence of Nietzsche scholarship in Anglophone philosophy.[2] Despite this, contemporary debate about the problem of evil within Anglophone philosophy of religion contains very little engagement with Nietzsche and theological engagement with Nietzsche has often focused on other concerns.[3] The relative absence of Nietzsche's voice in these debates may

[1]I am grateful to two anonymous referees for helpful comments on the submitted version of this paper and to participants of the annual Ian Ramsay Centre Conference, held in Oxford 2019, for discussion of an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to express gratitude to several groups of undergraduate students at York St John University for stimulating conversations around these ideas and to Esther McIntosh for enabling the period of research leave during which much of the article was completed.

[2]See, for example: Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*; Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*; Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (eds.), *Nietzsche and Morality*; Jessica Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*; Huddleston, *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*.

[3]In recent decades, theological engagement with Nietzsche has often focused on Nietzsche's influence on post-structuralist/postmodern philosophy, and therefore on his understanding of the connections between truth, power, and perspective. See, e.g. Hovey, *Nietzsche and Theology*; Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology;* Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (esp. part IV). Going further back, there is a rich stream of 20th century

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be an inheritance of the "analytic/Continental" divide, or, it may be simply because it is not easy to insert Nietzsche's ideas into the existing set of argumentative structures that have built up in this area—the "family history" as Marilyn McCord Adams calls it[4]—so as to produce a new argument, refutation, or modification of an existing position. Either way, by way of addressing this lacuna, I aim to give a Nietzschean reading of the way in which moral concerns motivate and shape discussion of the problem of evil.

The claim that moral concerns and assumptions are built into discussion of the problem of evil is not new. Landmark contributions by Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump both have important things to say about the way that theological responses to evil are tied up with distinctively theological conceptions of value.[5] More recently, Toby Betenson has argued persuasively that evaluative claims necessarily structure any statement of the problem of evil, as well as any attempt to respond to it adequately.[6] Similarly, John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have argued for a "normatively relativized argument from evil" on the grounds that atheistic arguments from evil can only hope to be successful relative to a particular conception of perfection. And according to Bishop, it is not just that a successful argument from evil must necessarily be based on ethical assumptions, but on "assumptions over which there is disagreement, and potentially irresolvable disagreement."[7] So, in addition to highlighting the relevance of a "continental" figure to a set of debates within analytic philosophy, I hope that the Nietzschean reading developed below will add to the growing case for the unavoidably moral nature of disagreement within the problem of evil. It should also make some provocative suggestions about what kind of moral disagreement is taking place.

More specifically, I aim to give a plausible Nietzschean account of the emergence of moral critique of theodicy (sometimes known as "moral anti-theodicy"),[8] and of its relationship to defences against the argument from evil, and/or theodicies. It should be said clearly that the discussion below should not be taken as an endorsement of the Nietzschean account; in fact, I think that Nietzsche is wrong in some ways about the nature of

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theological reflection on the broad outlines of Nietzsche's critique of theistic belief, whether this uses Nietzsche's critique as a means of "correcting course" so as to retrieve the affirmative nature of Christian theology (Küng, *Does God Exist?*) or partially appropriates Nietzsche's thought so to articulate the radical depths of a specifically Christian theology of the cross (e.g. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*).

[4]Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 4.

[5]Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, esp. ch. 8, and "Neglected Values, Shrunken Agents, Happy Endings: A Reply to Rogers"; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, esp. pp. 386–402.

[6]See Betenson, "Evaluative Claims within the Problem of Evil."

[7]Bishop, "On the Significance of Assumptions about Divine Goodness and Divine Ontology for 'Logical' Arguments from Evil," 4.

[8]For a few examples of such critique, see: Robert Gibbs "Unjustifiable Suffering"; Kivistö and Pihlström, "Theodicies as Failures of Recognition"; D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*; Sarah Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy*; Nick Trakakis, "Theodicy."

theistic belief and inconsistent in his account of compassion. These critical points are not the focus of this paper, however; there are many detailed critical discussions of these and related issues available in the secondary literature. Equally, there are a number of thorough and illuminating discussions of particular claims that seem to be involved in moral critique of theodicy and these raise important questions and problems of their own.[9] The aim here is not to evaluate the argumentative success or failure of any particular position, but to provide a perspective—Nietzsche's—from which the intellectual terrain can be surveyed in a new way. So although I do not endorse the Nietzschean account, I do regard it as an important one, and one to be reckoned with. If the discussion below is successful, it should become clear why this is the case—and such engagement might, I hope, become more likely.

As I hope to show in what follows, the moral, the metaphysical, and the existential are inseparably tied together, on Nietzsche's account. That is, moral values imply metaphysical commitments, and both, in turn, are expressions of underlying existential postures or attitudes. Nietzsche is not always consistent in his account of how these aspects are related, or which, if any, should be understood as fundamental; indeed, Nietzsche's lack of concern for that kind of systematic clarity may be one of the features that explains the absence of his voice is within Anglophone philosophy of religion. But one thing his account *can* do, I think, is to increase our sensitivity to the difficulty of separating one from the other and to stimulate a fresh view of what might be at stake in conceptual disagreement.

In a very general sense, we can say that on the Nietzschean account, the project of theodicy as a whole is nihilistic, simply by virtue of its connection with the idea of transcendence. This would, I think, be apparent to anyone who has read Nietzsche's final works. What is less obvious and more interesting, however, is the way in which a Nietzschean critique can be applied to moral critique of theodicy. From this Nietzschean vantage point, the relationships between theodicy, the moral critique of theodicy, and the argument from evil look strikingly different from the way they tend to be conceived within those respective spheres. In order to demonstrate this, I will first begin by outlining the connection between nihilism and compassion in Nietzsche's thought, before giving a plausible account of the way in which Nietzsche's account of the "devaluation" of the highest values could be applied to moral critique of theodicy.

1. Nihilism and Despair

On the reading of Nietzsche that will perhaps be familiar to some readers, nihilism is understood primarily in terms of the loss of an objective foundation for our values, related to "the death of God." Here the idea is

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[9]See, e.g. Scott, "The Morality of Theodicies"; Simpson, "Moral Antitheodicy"; Shearn, "Moral Critique and Defence of Theodicy"; Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy."

that in the absence of such a foundation for values, or of a goal for life as a whole, one experiences a disorientating loss of direction: "The question 'why?' finds no answer."[10],[11] As the "madman" in the famous parable expresses it, it is as if the horizon has been wiped away and all sense of direction lost: "Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"[12] Nihilism seems to follow from the collapse of the religious worldview, with its characteristic teleology, because if the meaning of life as a whole has historically been found in goals, purposes, or values that are tied—one way or another—to a transcendent realm, then it *may* seem as if there is no longer any way to value life as a whole at all and no longer any purpose that could justify the suffering of life, even in theory.[13] As Nietzsche writes in an unpublished notebook: "*One* interpretation has collapsed, but because it was considered *the* interpretation, it appears as though there is no sense in existence whatsoever, as though everything is *in vain*."[14]

However, Nietzsche's account of nihilism has come under renewed scrutiny in recent scholarship, largely as a result of Bernard Reginster's book, *Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. I will not be able to give a full account of this debate here, but it will be helpful to note one key feature of Reginster's argument which helps to show the relevance of Nietzsche's account of nihilism to discussions of theodicy. According to Reginster, alongside the idea of nihilism, briefly summarized above, as disorientating loss of value, Nietzsche also emphasizes a rather different point. This is that nihilism is a condition of *despair*, the sense that the highest values cannot be *realized:* "in Nietzsche's considered view, nihilism is primarily a claim about the world and our life in it . . . [i]t is the conviction that our highest values cannot be realised in this world, and that there is no other world in which they can."[15] The final clause is crucial here, because it hints at the way in which such despair is linked to the "death of God." Nihilistic despair results from the death of God only if the values that we hold are conceptually tied to, or otherwise dependent on, what

[10]The following abbreviations will be used when citing the works of Nietzsche, in accordance with convention: A (*The Anti-Christ*); BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*); BT (*The Birth of Tragedy*); D (*Daybreak*); EH (*Ecce Homo*); GM (*On the Genealogy of Morals*); GS (*The Gay Science*); TI (*The Twilight of the Idols*); WP (*The Will to Power*); Z (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). Note that numbers are to the original numbered sections/paragraphs in the original texts, not to page numbers. Where these are not numbered sequentially through the whole work, chapter/section numbers or names are used in addition (e.g. GS 276 is to the 276th section of *The Gay Science*, but GM II: 16 is to paragraph 16 of the second essay of the *Genealogy* and TI 'Morality as Anti-Nature': 5 is to paragraph 5 of the section entitled 'Morality as Anti-Nature' in *Twilight of the Idols*).

[11]*WP 2; GM* III: 28.

[12]*GS* 125.

[13]The best overview of Nietzsche's use of the term "nihilism" that I have come across is Huddleston, "Nietzsche on Nihilism."

[14]*WP* 55.

[15]Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 8.

Nietzsche calls a "true world,"[16] or if the goals towards which we strive *require* the intervention of God.[17] So nihilism emerges after the loss of belief in a transcendent world when the values that are shaped by such belief continue to hold sway once the condition of their possibility is removed; this prompts the recognition that our highest values are *definitively* unrealisable. This, roughly speaking, is what Nietzsche thinks has happened following the Enlightenment.

The idea that nihilism is fundamentally a condition of despair over the unrealizability of values also helps to explain why the idea of revaluation—and the revaluation of suffering, in particular—was so important to Nietzsche. On Nietzsche's account, nihilism is not the only response to the death of God: it is also possible to take it as an opportunity to say an unqualified "yes" to the world as it is or to life as such: to affirm life in its indifference and inhospitality to characteristic human concerns. In Nietzsche's terms this means to welcome all that is "questionable and strange" in existence; in other words, to affirm, rather than lament or protest, suffering.[18] But to do this is only possible through a fundamental revaluation so that one's highest values now "remain faithful to the earth,"[19] which is to say that they are values that *are* realisable in the world as it is.[20]

The need for a revaluation that overcomes nihilistic despair explains why the concept of "will to power" is so central in Nietzsche's thought. By positioning will to power as the highest value *and* as the essence of life,[21] Nietzsche aims to abolish the qualitative gap between ought and is, fact and value, and "man" and world: "[w]e take care not to claim that the world is worth less; indeed, it would seem laughable to us today if man were to aim at inventing values that were supposed to surpass the value of the real world."[22] If power—and the growth in power—is what is valued above all, then one must affirm and even (paradoxically) seek resistance to one's own aims and desires. This, in turn, means that one must learn to value suffering: to have a "thirst for enemies and resistances."[23] The only revaluation that can fully overcome nihilistic despair must involve a justification and even an affirmation of suffering.

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[16]See *TI* "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" for a concise but enigmatic statement of Nietzsche's views on the "true world."

[17]Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 45.

[18]*GM* Preface 5.

[19]Z Prologue 3.

[20]Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 49–51. As Simon May explores, it does not have to follow from this that Nietzsche is committed to finding a way of being reconciled with suffering in all particular cases or that affirmation is the *product* of justification. In fact, according to May, Nietzschean affirmation may in fact involve becoming somewhat indifferent to the task of finding a definitive justification of suffering. "Why Nietzsche is Still in the Morality Game" in *"On the Genealogy of Morality": A Critical Guide*, esp. pp. 86–91.

[21]*A* 2, 6.

[22]*GS* 346.

[23]*GM* I: 13; see also Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 176–7; Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*, 185–6.

To summarize: on Nietzsche's account, nihilism in its fully developed form involves a despair that results from the paralysing internal contradiction between values and reality: "[a] nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist."[24] The nihilist is someone whose sense of reality invites the judgment that values are unrealisable, but whose values invite a negative judgment of reality as a whole.

But how, on Nietzsche's account, did we come to have values that can only be realised given the existence of a "true world"? The penultimate section of his final book gives what seems to be his basic answer: "The concept of the 'beyond,' the 'true world' invented to devalue the only world there is, —to deprive our earthly reality of any goal, reason or task!"[25] So the emergence of other-worldly values—values that are unrealisable in the world as it is—is a manifestation of an underlying hostility towards the world, or towards basic structural features of the world: the fact that desire is structured so as to necessarily involve suffering; the unending and unavoidable struggle between beings; the inevitable triumph of the stronger over the weaker, etc. Regardless of the exact mechanism that best explains how *natural* human tendencies can account for the invention of a transcendent "true-world," one which functions so as to downgrade "the only world there is," the result, as Nietzsche sees it, is that this drains the world of any sense of intrinsic value.[26] And so when, following the "death of God," those other-worldly values are deprived of their supposed source, or the condition of their possibility (the "true world"), this

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[24]*WP* 585.

[25]*EH* IV: 8. See also *A* 15; *TI* 'Morality as Anti-nature': 5; cf. *WP* 12; 579; 585 [A].

[26]Nietzsche does not give one single answer to this question, but all the answers he *does* give have in common that they describe natural drives, instincts, or tendencies (for example: the desire for revenge, the drive to dominate, the enjoyment of cruelty) being first frustrated or blocked, and then complicated and redirected in some way, or gaining a capacity to "invent" or "become creative" (see e.g. *GM* I: 10; GM II: 16). This, of course, is very problematic, and it is not obvious that Nietzsche's attempt to combine a critique of the nihilism of the Judeo-Christian trajectory with a thoroughly naturalistic picture of humanity can succeed. The problem is best articulated with reference to the *Genealogy of Morals*. On the one hand, sometimes Nietzsche emphasizes that religious or moral impulses are the result of a natural transformation of purely natural instincts (e.g. cruelty, the urge to dominate, etc.); but if this is what they are, it is hard to see why one should characterize them as "life-denying" at all (even in their apparent asceticism, ascetic ideals would just express will to power in a particular guise—from a Nietzschean perspective, what could be objectionable about that?!). On the other hand, Nietzsche ends the book by framing the whole trajectory of the "ascetic ideal"—that moves from Platonism and Judaism through Christianity and eventually to Enlightenment humanism—as a response to a prior need, or question, or lack: "His existence on earth had no purpose; 'What is man for, actually?'—was a question without an answer; there was no will for man and earth; behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain 'in vain!'" In which case, the ascetic trajectory is explained by the prior *existential* question; but in this case, what naturalistic account can be given of the emergence of this question? How could the naturalistic instincts to which he appeals generate such a question? A more enigmatic reflection on this problem is found in G 1.

intrinsic hostility towards the world is then unveiled in the fully-fledged nihilism of despair. In such a state, all one has is the discontent with reality that fuelled one's values in the first place, which amounts to the judgment that life is not worth living and that it would be better if the world did not exist at all.

2. Compassion as Nihilism

In the Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, compassion is said to be the paradigmatic example of a "life-denying" value;[27] elsewhere it is described as "the practice of nihilism."[28] Nietzsche also notes that it was "the problem of the value of compassion, and of the morality of compassion" that led him to the questions that the *Genealogy* famously explores: "under what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? and what value do they themselves have?"[29] The broad outlines of Nietzsche's critique of morality as put forward in the *Genealogy* are well known and will not be rehearsed in detail here. But we can briefly outline three features of compassion which mean that it deserves to be called "the practice of nihilism" and has such a central position in his critique of morality: firstly, its alleged origin in benevolent other-centeredness; secondly, its role in undermining the pursuit of higher goals; thirdly, its lament or condemnation of suffering. These three points are related to each other in a particularly important section of *The Gay Science*—"The will to suffer and those who feel compassion"—which provides a useful entry point to Nietzsche's view.

On Nietzsche's account, although compassion appears to be rooted in benevolence, there are good reasons to be suspicious of this alleged other-centeredness. In part, this is because, Nietzsche believes, compassionate people tend to be mistaken about the nature of another's suffering:

> What we most deeply and most personally suffer from is incomprehensible and inaccessible to nearly everyone else; here we are hidden from our nearest, even if we eat from the same pot. But whenever we are *noticed* to be suffering, our suffering is superficially construed; it is the essence of the feeling of compassion that it *strips* the suffering of what is truly personal: our "benefactors" diminish our worth and our will more than our enemies do.[30]

This "intellectual frivolity" frustrates the benevolent aim so that compassion does not tend to actually *do* the other any good.[31] More than this, though, Nietzsche claims that compassion is seductive precisely because it allows us to lose ourselves in the sufferings of others: "our own way is

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[27]*GM* Preface: 3, 5, 6.
[28]*A* 7.
[29]*GM* Preface: 3.
[30]*GS* 338.
[31]For other examples of the way in which compassion is not what it seems, see *D* 113 and 133.

so hard and demanding . . . that we are by no means reluctant to escape from it."[32] Compassion, then, may provide a convenient way to avoid the task of "becoming what one is."[33] So not only is compassion actually less beneficial for the suffering other than we might imagine or hope, it is also less motivated by concern for such suffering than it appears.

These problems are closely linked to the second of the three features noted above: the role of compassion in undermining the pursuit of higher goals. The compassionate tend to judge the suffering of others to be bad based on a superficial interpretation of the immediate and exterior aspects, rather than any deep insight into the interior depths of another's life and its overall trajectory. In doing so, they fail to recognize the ways in which suffering may be integrally related, over the course of a lifetime, to everything that might end up being valuable about a particular life. The way Nietzsche expresses this point is particularly noteworthy for the way it points to a justification for suffering:

> The entire economy of my soul and the balance effected by 'misfortune,' the breaking open of new springs and needs, the healing of old wounds, the shedding of entire periods of the past—all such things that can be involved in misfortune do not concern the dear compassionate one: they want to *help* and have no thought that there is a personal necessity of misfortune; that terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, midnights, adventures, risks, and blunders are as necessary for me and you as their opposites; indeed, to express myself mystically, that the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell.[34]

Insofar as we judge that suffering has in one way or another been essential in our own lives, then the compassionate "drive" to relieve suffering is actually a *failure* to love one's neighbour as one loves oneself because one could not, with hindsight, will one's own life to be completely stripped of suffering.[35]

However, on Nietzsche's account, the primary *reason* that the compassionate fail to recognize the possible value of the suffering of others in this way is because of the third feature noted above: the prior metaphysical stance that grounds their valuation of suffering. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in his view of the implied metaphysical content of compassion:[36] the compassionate "experience suffering and displeasure

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[32]*GS* 338.

[33]Refer to the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*.

[34]*GS* 338.

[35]*D* 134, 146. This point is closely connected to the cosmodical impetus of Nietzsche's "doctrine" of eternal recurrence, which I have discussed elsewhere.

[36]For a helpful discussion of Nietzsche's claims that Schopenhauer is the first "admitted atheist" amongst "us Germans" *and* that his philosophy articulates a fundamentally Christian moral perspective, see Janaway, "Schopenhauer's Christian Perspectives" in the *Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*, pp. 351–372. As Janaway points out, Nietzsche's paradoxical description of Schopenhauer helps to understand why he thought that Christianity brings about its own demise through "will to truth." See also *GS* 357.

as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence."[37] On this account, as Reginster says, "[t]o make a virtue out of compassion is in fact to declare that suffering is something that ought to be deplored."[38] And if one comes to deplore suffering *as such*, it means that one has no taste for struggle or resistance which, in turn, means that one is somehow turned against life.[39] So Nietzsche also claims that behind the seeming benevolence of compassion lies a deep hostility to the world as it actually is, a world in which all willing is necessarily accompanied by resistance and in which everything valuable is tied in some way to suffering. On Nietzsche's account, then, to be compassionate is to condemn suffering and to be weary of the willing that leads to suffering.[40] When these two points are combined, we have the idea that for Nietzsche, the drive to elevate benevolent compassion as queen of the virtues is undergirded by a pessimism grounded in an inability to tolerate or value struggle and resistance at all. And this, at its heart, is an "instinctive hatred of reality."[41] It is ultimately indistinguishable from a desire for nothingness: a desire which translates into the judgment that it would be better if there was nothing.[42]

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[37]*GS* 338.

[38]Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life,* 162.

[39]Schopenhauer's account of compassion and its metaphysical implications is given throughout both volumes of *The World as Will and Representation*. However, the easiest point of access is the essay "On the Foundation of Morals" in *Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics,* which outlines both the centrality of compassion in moral life ("compassion is the real moral incentive," p. 234) as well as the metaphysical truths to which it points. On Schopenhauer's account, the feeling of identification with another that characterizes the experience of compassion points towards an unseen unity behind the commonsense division between myself and another (see pp. 264–271). As he puts it at the end of *The World as Will and Representation*: "Sympathy is to be defined as the empirical appearance of the will's metaphysical identity" (WWR II: 602). This means that the intuitive thought that, insofar as I *am* suffering, I necessarily take my own suffering to be bad in some way, links compassion to a thought about the badness of suffering as such, and this, in turn, is linked to a pessimism that takes all willing, striving, desiring to be something to be delivered from, through denial of the "will to life." This is the lens through which Schopenhauer reads Christianity: "That great fundamental truth contained in Christianity as well as in Brahmanism and Buddhism, the need for salvation from an existence given up to suffering and death, and its attainability through denial of the will, hence by a decided opposition to nature, is beyond all comparison the most important truth there can be" (WWR II: 628).

[40]See *Z* I: 3 on this point, where Nietzsche refers to "a poor unknowing weariness that no longer even wants to will: that created all gods and hinterworlds."

[41]*A* 30.

[42]*A* 18. At this point it may be helpful to gesture, briefly, towards an important problem with Nietzsche's account of compassion, although there is not the space to properly develop it here. There seems to be an obvious conflict between two aspects of Nietzsche's critique. As seen above, the bedrock of Nietzsche's opposition to "the ethic of compassion" is his account of the metaphysical pessimism on which he presumes it is based: compassion laments suffering, which means to find existence lacking in some deep sense. However, at times, he is engaged in what has subsequently been termed "unmasking"; that is, to suggest that exercises in compassion are *really* a complicated form of will-to-power (or the "striving for distinction", to use an earlier phrase—see *D* 113). But at first glance it is hard to see how these can both be true at the same time: if compassion really *is* nihilistic in the way that Nietzsche

So the drive to affirm a universal benevolence, the elevation of compassion as a primary virtue, and the steadily increasing opposition to suffering which accompanies both of these has the effect of gradually eroding humanity's capacity for greatness: compassion is a virtue that "makes small."[43] The clearest expression of this point is found in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche condemns all ways of measuring value that are based on pleasure and pain:

> You want, if possible (and no "if possible" is crazier) *to abolish suffering*. And us?—it looks as though we would prefer it to be heightened and made even worse than it has ever been! Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end* !—a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable—that makes their decline into something *desirable*! The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering—don't you know that *this* discipline has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far? The tension that breeds strength into the unhappy soul, its shudder at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, surviving, interpreting, and exploiting unhappiness, and whatever depth, secrecy, whatever masks, spirit, cunning, greatness it has been given:—weren't these the gifts of suffering, of the disciple of great suffering?[44]

The horror Nietzsche feels at the prospect of a humanity that no longer knows how to "exploit unhappiness" is expressed most vividly in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Zarathustra beholds the "last men" who hop like frogs and proudly and ridiculously say, whilst blinking: "we have discovered happiness!" The nihilism of the "last men" does not consist in a lack of any values, because it is clear that they *do* value happiness, comfort, and so on.[45] But the point in this passage seems to be that their valuing of happiness in this way means that they can no longer see the allure of goals that require exertion or sacrifice: "[o]ne no longer becomes poor and rich: both are too burdensome. Who wants to rule anymore? Who wants to obey anymore? Both are too burdensome."

The idea that the two "siblings"—happiness and misfortune—might somehow "grow up together" is, of course, central to any number of attempts to give an adequate theistic response to the argument from evil. To take one of the most notable recent interventions, Eleonore Stump argues that suffering can be used both negatively and positively: negatively, as a way of "warding off" the very worst that can happen to a person (permanent, willed alienation from God and others); positively, as a way of

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suggests, then it must be genuine, in the sense that it must really contain a protest against the suffering of the other. On the other hand, if compassion is only ever a disguised form of will to power, then it contains no genuine protest against existence and—in this sense, at least—cannot be nihilistic at all, because it is not genuinely motivated by an opposition to the current order of existence.

[43] Z III: "On the virtue that makes small."

[44] *BGE* 225.

[45] Katsafanas, "Fugitive Pleasure and the Meaningful Life," 407.

opening-up a person to be more and more receptive to the very best gift that God can give (permanent, beatific union *with* God).

It is notable, then, that even though the terms of the "scale of value" are completely different, Nietzsche appeals to a similar logic in his critique of what he takes to be the paradigmatically Christian value of compassion. Compassion is dangerous because it both expresses and intensifies our hostility towards reality and inoculates us against the most valuable possibilities in existence, which all involve struggle and overcoming resistance. It should be noted here that this line of attack rests upon Nietzsche's own scale of value: at the far end of that scale stand the noble achievements of somewhat lonely, individual geniuses like Beethoven and Goethe rather than, say, the possibility of genuine solidarity within suffering, or the development of the sophisticated emotional skills involved in successful parenting. Whatever one makes of Nietzsche's values, however, the key point here is that it is, in part, the belief that compassion actually ends up inhibiting the human capacity to make meaningful use of suffering that motivates Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian morality. This intriguing *formal* similarity between Christian theodicy and Nietzsche's "cosmodicy"[46] is explored further below.

3. Transcendence and "The Theodicy Demand"

It seems that theodicies—in the broadest sense—must, in one way or another, appeal to values that have some kind of essential tie to transcendence.[47] In a minimal way, this might be because God's "morally sufficient reasons" are linked to the value of free will, where free will is conceived in libertarian terms and so to something that is not straightforwardly part of the natural order. In more robustly theological accounts, it might be because the supreme good is conceived of *in terms of* union with God, so that God is justified in allowing suffering insofar as it can be understood as "medicine" that that can "ward off" a danger to this supreme good

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[46]For a thorough discussion and evaluation of the different ways of taking Nietzsche to be engaged in something like theodicy, and in further discussion of Simon May's point, above, see Janaway, "On the Very Idea of 'Justifying Suffering.'"

[47]Although note Scott Davison's fascinating attempt to develop a naturalistic theodicy that makes no appeal to transcendence: "A Naturalistic Intrinsic Value Theodicy." In many respects, Davison's account is quite similar to Nietzsche's own "cosmodicy" which aims to say "yes" to "the question in every thing" (*GS* 341). However, on Nietzsche's view, to be really committed to Davison's first two claims—"everything that exists is intrinsically valuable to some degree" and "the universe as a whole is a thing of immense intrinsic value"—one needs to move beyond the belief in "the opposition of values" (*BGE* 2) that still structures his fourth claim: "The evil in the world is offset by the intrinsic values of the creatures affected together with the intrinsic value of the world that comes from its regularity." As Nietzsche sees things, evil cannot be offset by intrinsic value, because it is itself a form of the intrinsic value that pervades everything. This is why, on Nietzsche's account, "affirmation" or "yes-saying" is linked to a kind of transformative trauma and is not merely a case of being a "properly functioning, fully informed valuer," as Davison puts it. See Richardson, *Nietzsche's Values*, ch. 9, for a comprehensive discussion of these issues.

(that is, sin—a "danger" the nature of which can only be articulated with reference to God).[48] On the other hand, the tie could also be eschatological: it might be because "the logic of compensation" requires resurrection and subsequent recognition and reward for the victims of the worst suffering—something only God could bring about.[49] Even the Kantian picture, which officially refuses theodicy, relies on the "postulated" existence of God in order to secure the possibility—and therefore, the conceptual coherence—of the highest good, which is necessarily outside of spatio-temporal experience. In any case, then, it seems that theodicy is necessarily dependent on values that are tied, in some essential way, to transcendence.

However, this same point also means that theodicies are also vulnerable to one particular line of attack: that they ask us to relativize our judgment of what counts as bad for a person in view of some higher good (which, even if it is not completely beyond our understanding as *per* sceptical theism, cannot be perceived clearly from an earthly perspective). In a discussion of this issue, Eleonore Stump persuasively argues that this objection really amounts to an objection to *any* theistic response to the argument from evil: the theist can only respond if they are willing to propose a significant relativization of what counts as bad for a person. This is because some kinds of evil—those that are typically the real sticking point in any discussion of the problem—necessarily rule out the kind of earthly flourishing to which we might appeal in order to justify some kinds of suffering or renunciation. Stump writes:

> If there is only *one realm* within which to consider benefits for a person, then it does seem difficult, or even impossible, to find anything that a person would (or could) care about more than his flourishing or his heart's desires. For this reason, if we insist that there be some response to the challenge of the argument from evil that does not make mention of the afterlife, in my view we consign such a response to failure.[50]

It is important to note that Stump is not simply pointing out that Christian response to suffering must involve appeal to higher goods: this would be true of any justification of even the most mundane suffering. Rather, her point is that the nature of some sufferings means that the task of justification necessarily involves introducing a sharp division between "realms" such that the goods to which one appeals are now situated beyond death. If there was "only one realm" in which a person could flourish, then those lives which are ruined—in Stump's terms, those in which flourishing is *obviously* thwarted, and hearts *definitely* broken—could never be counted as good on the whole, however hard one tried to find a perspective from which they could be seen to be necessarily tied to some global good. But as Charles Taylor points out, moves like this involve the

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[48]Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 392–3.

[49]Adams, "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation and the Problem of Evil."

[50]Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 419–20, italics mine.

risk of appearing to "downgrade" earthly life by means of an appeal to a transcendent realm that somehow counts for more than the earthly realm. The need to avoid or mitigate this kind of risk has been a distinctive concern of much modern theology and ethical thought, given an increased concern with ordinary human flourishing, as Taylor points out.[51]

Stump's point could be expressed in Nietzschean terms by saying that theodicies necessarily assume that there is a "true world" in which the highest values are rooted or in which they could be realized; without an appeal to such a true world, theodicies would stall as soon as they faced the most serious suffering. So, theodicies necessarily make appeal to ideas which *could* be seen to downgrade the value of earthly life: this risk goes with the territory, so to speak. From a Nietzschean perspective, though, this is not at all surprising because on his account the "downgrading" is actually the unconscious aim of the values on which theodicies are based. In other words, Nietzsche thinks that the downgrading is built in from the start.

Crucially, for Nietzsche, the dominance of compassion within the Christian worldview is linked to this "downgrading" because, as he sees it, embedded in the lament of compassion is a judgment about the badness of life—life that necessarily implies resistance, cruelty, competition, suffering, etc. However, on Nietzsche's account, when compassion first comes to prominence as part of Judeo-Christian morality, it is held in check by other values which prioritize the eternity destiny of the individual soul: a sense of "the one thing needful." And as Nietzsche sees it, compassion becomes somehow more dangerously nihilistic in its journey from Christian to secular morality as it begins to leave behind this sense of "the one thing needful." In this account of the nihilistic progression of "our values," an important role is played by the internal tensions that emerge within the Christian worldview in modernity; a "magnificent tension of the spirit," as he calls it in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*.[52] We find another reference to this tension in an important section of the earlier book *Daybreak*, where Nietzsche reflects on the "echo of Christianity in morality":

> That men today feel the sympathetic, disinterested, generally useful social actions to be the *moral* actions— this is perhaps the most general effect and conversion which Christianity has produced in Europe: although it was not its intention nor contained in its teaching. But it was the *residuum* of Christian states of mind left when the very much antithetical, strictly egoistic fundamental belief in the "one thing needful,"[53] in the absolute importance

[51]See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 626. This dilemma is central to his discussion of the "cross-pressures" that structure contemporary ethical reflection.

[52]A plausible reading of this passage is in terms of the tension that follows the attempt to retain Christian values in the absence of Christian metaphysical or eschatological framework. See Leiter, "On the Death of God and the Death of Morality," 386–8 on this point.

[53]This phrase was clearly important for Nietzsche; it appears in *The Gay Science* as the heading for a section—referenced above—which describes the process of "giving style to one's character" (*GS* 290).

> of eternal *personal* salvation, together with the dogmas upon which it rested, gradually retreated and the subsidiary belief in "love," in "love of one's neighbour," in concert with the tremendous practical effect of ecclesiastical charity, was thereby pushed into the foreground. The more one liberated oneself from the dogmas, the more one sought as it were *justification* of this liberation in a cult of philanthropy: not to fall short of the Christian ideal in this, but where possible to outdo it, was a secret spur with all French freethinkers from Voltaire up to Auguste Comte: and the latter did in fact, with his moral formula *vivre pour autrui*, outchristian Christianity.[54]

So, on one hand, Christianity bequeaths to the world the set of values that prescribe "sympathetic, disinterested, generally socially useful actions": the absolute priority of benevolence. On the other hand, Christianity contained something apparently in tension with this: the concern for salvation, or the "one thing needful." Insofar as one affirms "the one thing needful," one has a goal that could justify suffering, sacrifice, exertion, etc. But once this conviction drops out of the picture there is nothing to hold the impulse of the "cult of philanthropy" in check: there will be no limits on the obligation to "live for others." In an age when compassion becomes the dominant value, not only will there be no longer any way to justify the imposition or toleration of suffering; there will also be no easy way to justify limiting one's obligation to attend to the suffering of others.

So, we can begin to see more clearly why a Nietzschean reading of theodicy might be ambiguous, rather than resoundingly negative, despite the outright condemnation of all appeals to a "true world." By definition, theodicies aim to hold onto something that Nietzsche thinks is essential if lives that are worth living are to be lived at all: the justification of suffering. Insofar as theodicy proposes certain goals as supremely worthwhile (holiness, salvation, eternal life, etc.), it is still able to motivate the energetic and difficult pursuit of such goals which, in turn, provide a way of ordering and directing life ("My formula for greatness: a yes, a no, a straight line, a goal!")[55] even if those goals themselves are "life-denying" in some deep sense.

So, we can now see why Nietzsche thought that the decoupling of the compassionate impetus from the affirmation of transcendent goals would be a deepening of the nihilism implicit in Christianity. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in the view that suffering inevitably outweighs pleasure in life and that most of this suffering cannot be justified or explained with reference to any purely natural goods that might be aimed at.[56] So Nietzsche takes it that if one can only admit basically hedonistic values, and yet at the same time still tries to contemplate life honestly, the result will inevitably be "a sense of ultimate futility that is motivationally

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[54] *D* 132. The basic point that this passage makes is repeated, in a slightly different way, in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. See especially 649–51.

[55] *A* 1.

[56] Katsafanas, "Fugitive Pleasure and the Meaningful Life," 398.

debilitating," as Tamsin Shaw explains in an illuminating discussion on Nietzsche and Weber:

> When we act in accordance with our values, we are adopting a picture of the way the world should be and aiming to shape the world to fit this picture. And in doing so, since predicted pain and pleasure have to be factored into our practical reasoning, we are necessarily operating with a sense of how much suffering is justified by what ends. Once our sense of these norms for justified suffering is engaged, we are bound to acknowledge that we are suffering too much, that no ends we are likely to achieve can possibly justify the misery that most people experience in the course of a human life. And this thought is a paralyzing one so far as our practical calculations are concerned.[57]

If we are to avoid this paralysis, we must meet what Shaw describes as "the theodicy demand," a "necessary psychological anchor for all our motivations."[58] That is, we must have some account of why it makes sense to continue to pursue goals that will inevitably increase our suffering (insofar as they increase resistance to our will).[59] On Nietzsche's account, traditional Christianity still retains this capacity, because it posits a goal—the salvation of the soul—that outweighs any amount of earthly suffering; it still understands the value of a "long compulsion," or an "obedience in one direction for a long time."[60] In contrast, the liberal, humanist values that descend from it do not, which is why, on his view, they pose such a unique danger.[61] So, on a Nietzschean account, theodicies might be *implicitly* nihilistic in their invocation of a "true world," and the values that are rooted there, but they do at least allow us to retain the capacity to order our lives—to affirm some kinds of suffering in view of a higher goal.

4. Devaluation and Protest

We have seen that Nietzsche takes nihilism to be an internally conflicted condition of despair, whereby one's sense of reality invites the judgment that values are unrealisable, whilst one's values invite a negative judgment of reality as a whole. We have also seen that compassion is taken to be a paradigmatic instance of a nihilistic value. In his final, unfinished writings, Nietzsche also claimed—primarily when discussing the "will to truth"—that the highest values "devalue themselves"; that is, they are self-undermining in a particular way. A brief sketch of how this striking claim might apply to moral critique of theodicy will conclude this paper and help to clarify the kind of challenge that Nietzsche's thought may pose to such critique.

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[57]Shaw, "The 'Last Man' Problem," 350.
[58]Shaw, "The 'Last Man' Problem," 352.
[59]See Katsafanas, "Fugitive Pleasure and the Meaningful Life," 407.
[60]*BGE* 188.
[61]*D* 132; *GS* 377.

As Nietzsche sees it, something about the highest values helps to guarantee their own undoing; this self-undermining is, in fact, one of the key characteristics of nihilism—and the reason that nihilism is so often discussed in terms of its history.[62] Nietzsche does not explicitly connect compassion with this process of "devaluation." Nevertheless, the fact that he regards compassion as the central value in the Judeo-Christian scheme (and its offspring) suggests that we should look for a connection. And when these two claims—that compassion is nihilism; that the highest values devalue themselves—are combined, we can construct an interesting Nietzschean account of moral critique of theodicy, or moral anti-theodicy. I will argue that from this Nietzschean perspective, the role of compassion in undermining theodicy could be seen as an instance of this process of devaluation, even though—to my knowledge, at least—the connection between compassion and devaluation is not made explicitly anywhere in the published works.

The clearest explanation in the published work of what it might mean for the highest values to "devalue" themselves is contained in an important passage from the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche reflects on the meaning of "the will to truth." Nietzsche argues that modern science is based on a grounding conviction about the unconditional value of truth: that "[n]othing is more necessary than truth; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value."[63] But, Nietzsche argues, this conviction is a form of *moral* commitment: it is not just "do not let oneself be deceived" (a commitment which could be explained in purely naturalistic, prudential terms) but "I will not deceive, not even myself." But what could possibly ground such an unconditional commitment? Why be truthful, if nature itself is full of deception? In the end, an *unconditional* commitment to truth only makes sense if it was, all along, grounded not in the natural world, but in the affirmation of a "true world":

> No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this "other world", must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our* world? . . . But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie—if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie?[64]

If truth is held as a highest value, then it ends up devaluing itself: the truth-seeker sacrifices God and all "true worlds" on the altar of truth, but then is left with no overriding reason to value truth with such an unconditional passion and so can no longer make sense of the sacrifice they have made. If truth is only prudentially valuable under certain conditions, then

[62] *WP* 2.
[63] *GS* 344.
[64] *GS* 344.

why abandon the comforts of deeply-held religious beliefs—even if they are illusory? This point is crucial for Nietzsche's late work and explains the strange, final moments of the *Genealogy* where only at the final "stroke of the bell" does the reader find that the critique has been building up to an unmasking of the illusions, *not* of the Christian ascetic, but of the "godless anti-metaphysicians" who are, in their own way, "still pious"; that is, still an expression—perhaps the final one—of "the ascetic ideal."[65]

Nietzsche does not explicitly spell out the relationship between compassion and this dialectical process of devaluation. But enough hints are present to construct a Nietzschean account of the relationship between the value of compassion and devaluation; furthermore, I want to argue, some of the characteristic points made by morally motivated anti-theodicies help to see this connection.

The erosion of the possibility of a "true world" does not have to be driven by the need for truthfulness; another way in which this could happen would be if appeal to a true world were, in some circumstances, to be deemed morally questionable. One reason this might happen would be if compassion impelled one to attribute a significance to the suffering of others that made it impossible—and undesirable—to reconcile recognition of this significance with belief in the justification of the suffering. So, just as the will to truth can result in the erosion of the conditions that allow one to see truth as unconditionally valuable, so the value of compassion can result in the refusal to countenance the kinds of beliefs that theodicy defends. Or at least it can rule out the distinctive kind of appeal to such beliefs that theodicy involves. So, for example, one might no longer feel able to appeal to the prospect of "the life of the world to come" *as* a way of coming to understand the significance of present suffering. In other words, Nietzsche's account predicts that compassion, which to some extent gives rise to the need for theodicy, might end up undermining theodicy altogether.

On Nietzsche's account, compassion contains a protest, and whilst there may be ways of understanding compassion in which this aspect is downplayed or removed altogether, this certainly does seem to be the case insofar as compassion for the sufferings of others structures the emergence of the problem of evil in the first place. But when it is held in tension with the theistic affirmation of a transcendent realm or eschatological era (from which all suffering will be absent), this protest runs in tandem with affirmation in a distinctive way. In other words, the compassionate protest is linked to something beyond, or above, or outside the natural world. But the compassionate protest can be decoupled from the belief in a "true world," in such a way that it functions so as to determine what kind of appeals can and cannot be made to such a realm. On Nietzsche's account, this means that the protest against suffering is no longer rooted

[65]For a reading along these lines, see Gemes, "We Remain of Necessity Strangers to Ourselves."

in any affirmation at all; it is exposed as condemnation and nothing else—pure negation. And so, on this account, the compassionate protest against suffering—one manifestation of which is the rejection of theodicy on moral grounds—involves a fatally conflicted and despairing posture: it judges "of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist."

A furious passage from *Twilight of the Idols* expresses Nietzsche's own verdict on this posture, which summarizes nearly everything that has been said above:

> If you have understood how sacrilegious it is to rebel against life (and this sort of rebellion is practically sacrosanct for Christian morality) then, fortunately, you have understood something else as well; the futility, the absurdity, *deceitfulness* of a rebellion like this. A condemnation of life on the part of the living is, in the end, only the symptom of a certain kind of life, and has no bearing on the question of whether or not the condemnation is justified. Even to raise the problem of the *value* of life, you would need to be both *outside* life and as familiar with life as someone, anyone, everyone who has ever lived: this is enough to tell us that the problem is inaccessible to us. When we talk about values we are under the inspiration, under the optic, of life: life itself forces us to posit values, life itself evaluates through us, *when* we posit values. It follows from this that even the *anti-natural morality* that understands God as the converse of life, the condemnation of life, is only a value judgment made by life—but *which* life? Which type of life is making value judgments here?—But I have already answered this: it is the judgment of a declining, weakened, exhausted, condemned life.[66]

This passage also alerts us to an important point: on this Nietzschean account, even though theodicy and moral anti-theodicy remain on different sides of a nihilistic threshold, it is still true that the latter is the child of the former and that the latter is the kind of child we would *expect* from the former. This is because, as he sees it, there is something about Christian values that results in this self-undermining development: values that can only be realized in, or given the existence of, a true world are *already* despairing, nihilistic values that have set themselves against reality.

Finally, we could equally say that from a Nietzschean perspective the argument from evil—which tends to structure modern debate about the problem of evil—is susceptible of the same analysis, insofar as it already reflects a nihilistic despair about the value of the world as a whole and the realisability of the highest values, combined with some kind of residual commitment *to* those same values. Consider the following passage, from an essay by Graham Oppy, which focuses on the existence of horrendous suffering:

> Suppose, first, that, if God is to create a universe, then God's creative act involves the selection of a universe with its entire history: there is a range of universes with complete histories that are presented to God as feasible

[66] *TI* "Reason in Philosophy": 5.

> choices, and God selects from that range. On this way of thinking about things, God knows exactly how a chosen universe will unfold once it is selected: creation occurs with full knowledge of any horrendous evils that belong to the created universe. In this case, the intuitive basis for a logical argument from evil is that, if no feasible universes were non- arbitrarily better than one in which [there exists all the horrendous suffering that in fact exists in our universe], *then God would choose not to create any universe*.[67]

The argument from evil necessarily appeals to a concept of perfection, as Bishop has argued. The values that drive the argument, and to which it appeals, give rise to the possibility of a judgment about the world: that the world as it actually is is not something that a perfect being could conceivably will. Put more simply, if one were perfectly good and all powerful (the argument, in this form, takes it that we *could* imagine this), one would not want the world, as it is, to exist at all. That is to say, the argument from evil—in this form, at least—asks us to imagine a perspective from which nothingness would be *better* than the existence of the world as we know it. And it does so on the basis of a particular valuation of suffering, which is driven by compassion. So, on a Nietzschean account, this argument, atheistic though it appears to be, depends not just upon values that "surpass the value of the real world"[68] but upon values that *bring about* a negative judgment about the world; values that "persuade to *nothingness*."[69] In other words, the argument from evil itself appears to be structured by nihilistic values.

This paper has been concerned to give an account of Nietzsche's views on nihilism, compassion, and related ideas in such a way as to bring out their critical relevance to a range of debates that have been important in recent philosophy of religion. In particular, I hope to have shown that Nietzsche's views help to draw attention to the way that deep presuppositions about value frame these debates and perhaps even help to determine the way in which it unfolds over time. Much, much more would need to be said to properly interrogate these views and to direct informed criticism in the opposite direction. However, the striking way in which Nietzsche's claims about compassion, transcendence and nihilism seem almost to *predict* some features of current debate about the problem of evil surely means that they deserve serious consideration.

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[67]Oppy, "Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defences" 57–8; italics mine. I elected to remove reference to the specific events that Oppy chooses as his example to avoid needlessly disturbing readers for whom such examples are connected to real traumas. The tendency to use extreme examples in this way has been critiqued—rightly, in my view—by Bethany Sollereder. See "Compassionate Theodicy."

[68]*GS* 346.

[69]*A* 7.

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