

## ON THEODICY

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### Abstract

The problem of evil is both theological and philosophical. Theology attempts to solve the problem through the idea of God taking care of the world (Providence). In this paper, I draw attention to a distinction between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Western theology considers Providence as theodicy: namely, God's justice is fulfilled in the need for taking care of creation in a just way and is not responsible for the appearance of evil in the world. In contrast, Orthodox theology affirms divine Providence as love; it is not the fulfilling of a duty, but God's assumption of human suffering. Love is not a duty or an aspect of justice, but rather the assumption of someone else's suffering. Therefore, Orthodox theology denies the conception of divine Providence as theodicy.

*Keywords:* theodicy, providence, suffering, justice, love

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### 1. Introduction

The problem of evil is both philosophical and theological; but essentially it concerns Theology, not Philosophy. Irrespective of the explanation it gives for the existence of evil, the essence of philosophy is not affected. Evil is the responsibility of Theology. The problem of evil is theological because, by affirming God as the person that absolutely governs existence, He is willingly or unwillingly judged as being responsible for evil. God's existence as the absolute Good seems incompatible with the reality of evil. Affirming both God and evil simultaneously seems to be a contradiction. But reality imposes this paradox and, in any case, it sends us to God and His responsibility for the world.

Philosophically speaking, it is true that God's responsibility for evil could be minimised: if we did not refer to the supreme Principle as a person or as absolute Good, then evil's manifestations could be considered accidents and not events in being; essential mutations are inconceivable because this would deny being. The reality of evil imposes itself from a philosophical point of view, too. The experience and the most palpable evidence of evil is man himself in his lack of authenticity as well as the suffering present in the human condition. Dasein is the contradiction or the paradox itself: being – non-being, sense - nonsense and

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life - death. Man does not see himself in his whole existence as “*exclusively physical for the body, nor just spiritually for the needs of the spirit ... but above all specific features and determinations*” [1]. Still, he experiences his own condition as a fall; namely, “the transfer of specifications into the condition of parts (elements), with the possible preeminence of one or the other” [1]. These contradictions make Dasein nonsense and nonbeing and impose the reality of evil.

However, conscience and the problem of evil remain specific to Theology. While Philosophy can see the human condition as an abnormality and distortion of being, only theology admits that the human being is connected by destiny or is anchored in the Absolute of existence, and that evil is God’s responsibility. Only Theology can assert that evil relates directly to the Transcendent. This is the reason why the ontological deficiency is called *evil* in Philosophy and *sin* in Theology: there is no evil without sin. *Responsibility* marks the difference between these two notions and visions. Theologically speaking, evil is always personal; even so-called impersonal evil ultimately refers to persons.

## 2. The conception of classic theodicy

The attempt to explain the reality of evil as if it was not God’s responsibility, or as if it did not affect the Absolute as Supreme Goodness, is called theodicy. Theodicy is the attempt rationally to prove God’s compatibility as the absolute Good with the reality of evil, and especially to ‘absolve’ Him of any responsibility. To understand theodicy, it is very important to see from the beginning that, being exclusively rational, theodicy is in fact a philosophical methodology appropriated by rational Theology (by onto-theology). This methodology has proven to be a Trojan horse in Theology’s stronghold.

In antiquity, the theodicy that was attempted by blessed Augustine is paradigmatic. Unlike Hellenistic philosophy, which regards both good and evil as principles, for Christian theology evil is a deficiency in being, a “*privatio boni*” or a “*privation of being*” [2]. It represents the ontological distance between the Creator and the creature. The origin of evil does not consist in the creature’s free will – explains Blessed Augustine – because the possibility of being tending towards evil must be explained. Indeed, being does not belong to the will, but the will belongs to being. That is why Blessed Augustine offers the following explanation: “*evil will appear because man is created out of nothing and is attracted towards nothing*” [3]. Specialists have observed that starting with Augustine theodicy’s foundation consists of “*the conjugation of ontology with theology in a new kind of discourse, that of onto-theo-logy*” [4].

In modern Philosophy, the German philosopher G.W. Leibniz was a specialist in theodicy; he wrote a treatise called ‘Theodicy’. Leibniz’s explanation is onto-theological, too. It starts from the idea of the possibility of perfection from a logical point of view; thus, “*God exists necessarily, if He is possible*” [5]. Similar to Augustine, Leibniz affirms evil as a deficiency of any created being, an ontological difference from the Supreme Good, because unlike

God creatures cannot be absolute. The exegetes appreciate the fact that Leibniz adds the principle of sufficient reason to the principle of non-contradiction, according to which *“creation is conceived as deriving from a competition in the divine intellect between a multitude of world models, out of which only one combines a maximum of perfections and a minimum of flaws”* [4]. In other words, Leibniz wants to assure us that God has created *“the best of all possible worlds”*. If the researcher analyses the biblical book of Job, he will see that Leibniz’s attempt is derisive, because the biblical Job understood long before that *“wanting to be biased with God”*, that is, supporting God with logic and humanity, provides only pitiful and insulting support.

Finally, in contemporary Philosophy, Alvin Plantinga provides the most powerful recent attempt at theodicy [6, 7]. He is considered by some as being *“famous for solving definitively the logical problem of evil through what he calls ‘the defence of the free will’”* [8]. It does not seem to me, however, that he has definitively solved the logical problem of evil; on the contrary, no one can solve this issue in a logical way, because its solution lies beyond logic. As we have already seen, Blessed Augustine understood that the existence of free will in created beings could not explain the origin of evil. Saint Maximus the Confessor points out that the will that deliberates is already a distorted will, because the absolute will is the one that does not choose; we are not the ones that choose Good, but Good chooses us, just as a parent chooses his son and not the other way around.

Nowadays, the most meticulous thinkers agree that any attempt at theodicy fails, because it is a rational argument or an onto-theology. Some consider that theodicy as onto-theology has already been fully deconstructed by Kant: *“The hardest blow... against the very foundation of the onto-theological discourse on which Theodicy had risen, from Augustine until Leibniz... is given by the Critique of Pure Reason”* [4].

The error of theodicy is that it wants to demonstrate in a rational way something supra-rational and to argue in a moral way about something that is ontological. A contemporary specialist sees the failure of theodicy in that all it does is *“harvest the scattered seeds of the excess of perfections compared to the imperfections, placing them in the balance of good and evil”* [4]; he also sarcastically concludes that *“one needs a robust human optimism in order to be able to affirm that the balance is, collectively, positive”* [4]. It seems that the failure of theodicy justifies sarcasm. More important is the observation/conclusion that *“the task of ... thinking God and of thinking evil in relation to God - might not be exhausted by our reasoning subject to non-contradiction”* [4]. In the problematics of evil, the maximum philosophical possible is to admit the mystery, as Kierkegaard understood it: *“The fact that God can create free natures in His image represents the cross that Philosophy cannot carry, but which has been assigned to Philosophy”* [9].

### 3. Today's theodicy and its disproof

Present philosophical thinking rejects theodicy in the same way as it rejects its support (ontology), seeking a different representation of the origin of evil. Paul Ricoeur, for example, invokes Karl Barth and Paul Tillich's vision: "*It seems that Karl Barth responds to Hegel, the same as Paul Tillich... might appear as responding to Schelling*" [9]. Similarly, Kant, who had deconstructed the foundation of theodicy, had also noticed that "the reason of being of this radical evil is 'impenetrable' (unerforschbar)", because "*for us there cannot exist a conceived basis, thanks to which the moral evil could have come to us for the first time*" [10].

From a rational point of view, the issue of evil is insurmountable. In order to break this aporia, the protestant theologian Barth suggested a "*broken theology*" through which he affirms that "*nothingness belongs to God*", in that it is effectively rejected by God: "*Nothingness is what God does not want*" [11]. Barth calls this rejection "*God's left hand*": "*Because God also rules with His left hand too, He is the cause and the master of nothingness itself*" [11]. The difficulty, however, is that Barth complicates things even more. He deepens this aporia, this philosophical puzzle. His supporter, Ricoeur, asks himself rhetorically: "*has Barth not exceeded the limits that he had imposed to himself, those of a rigorous Christological discourse?...has he not reopened thus the way to speculations...concerning the demonic side of the deity?*" [4]. It is obvious that Ricoeur does not understand the contradiction he has reached; namely, theologically and philosophically the formulation "*the demonic side of deity*" is a contradiction of terms; otherwise, we cannot understand why he underlines that "*Paul Tillich was not afraid to do what Barth encourages and refuses at the same time*" [4]. It must be underlined that speaking about "*the demonic side of deity*" is impropriety and madness, both philosophically and theologically.

Philosophy and theology both agree, in principle, that affirming God means affirming the absolute Good as the opposite of evil. Speaking of God's fight as an adversary to nothingness is a different matter. To us, Barth's explanations seem to be useless speculation. It is clear that nothingness is something that God does not want; nothingness is not a Principle, like God. Beyond theodicy things are possible, but beyond God nothing is possible. Beyond Him is nothingness, that is, evil, because "*non-being is pure evil*" [2] and the only demonic thing is its speculation. At the end of his suggestions, Ricoeur asks himself: "*is wisdom not the recognition of the aporetic character as concerns evil?*" [2].

Transforming the issue of evil into theodicy means transforming faith into reason, freedom into necessity and Theology into Philosophy. But, creation is not justice, reason, necessity and Philosophy; creation is love, faith, freedom and Theology.

Overcoming theodicy seems necessary, but not by breaking Theology. It is worth noting that by not starting from being's absolute and from existence as positive in itself, Philosophy comes to consider evil as something essential or as

a fatality of the human being, up until the nonsense and the impossibility of its affirmation. If philosophy mentions *evil* in an impersonal way, theology names it *sin*, precisely to point out that evil is not an inherent or immanent feature of being. Treating evil as a principle, philosophy risks thinking of evil in an absolute impersonal sense. As long as we refer to an impersonal evil, we remain in aporia and we will not understand anything. Understanding evil is possible only in an existential way, as the experience of sin. Experience shows us that sin is a kind of nothingness or "*nihil privatum*" (as Blessed Augustine says), a depletion of being, a confinement or a denial of being. Interpreting Hellenistic philosophers, Heidegger points out that salvation or redemption is opening and keeping the human being open: "*the Greek thinkers spoke about *sozein ta phainomena*, about saving 'what appears', meaning keeping and sheltering what it is shown, not hiding it*" [12]. For man, evil is a matter of responsibility and is not a moral quality in a certain moment; it is an opposition to the human being ("*sin against the Holy Spirit*" or against the truth of the human being, as theologians say): "*the essence of evil does not consist in the abjection of the human action, but in the malignancy of fierceness*" [13]. Thinking as a theologian, Neagoe Basarab said that only "*the one who is not angry will see the truth*". Neither the theologian, nor the philosopher can dismiss the issue of evil in the moral area. For both the idea that "*the controversy regarding nothingness being God's business, our battles against evil make us allies*" [4] can be a supporting point.

Theodicy can be overcome even on a biblical basis. As C. Noica observes, God "*creates first and then He sits and judges ... extraordinary reply for the theodicy of Leibniz, who affirms that the world is created because it is the best*" [14]. A biblical deconstruction of theodicy is found in the book of Job; it is said that "*loving God for nothing means to completely exit the cycle of reward*" [4]. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ systematically and defiantly breaks the logic of justice (for example: in the parables of the prodigal son, of the lost sheep, of the labourers in the vineyard and the one of the talents), concluding in the Apocalypse: "*because you are not warm, nor cold, but tepid, I will spit you from my mouth!*" (Revelation 3.16) This is the clearest example of deconstructing theodicy. God's justice is not man's justice, but love. This 'justice' is the secret of love as the existing Absolute and the secret of creation *ex nihilo*. God is free love, not a reward; creation is loved, not just. Philosophically, one might say that "*the motives we have for believing in God have nothing to do with our need to explain the origin of suffering*" [15, 16], because, obviously, believing means believing despite evil. Feeling and confessing theologically means accepting being; accepting one's own existence as it comes from God.

Admitting evil as a mystery is not an abdication for Philosophy or Theology. The mystery becomes sovereignty before which Philosophy and Theology as sciences must manifest the silence of devotion. Eventually, the human being and its existence impose themselves to us as a striking mystery; that is why we are convinced that evil can be understood and solved by man only in an existential way. Not everything that is rational is real and not all that is real

is rational: evil is irrational but real. We cannot explain the irrational in a rational way; that is why the issue of evil is not logical, but supra-logical. Reflection might conclude that the origin of evil consists in the assumption of the non-being by God, as an Existence beyond the polarity of being/non-being; but this is a rational explanation. Any attempt to explain evil in a rational way (namely, philosophically) will fail. Therefore, we must find another way to understand, even if we cannot explain evil. This refers to an *existential explanation*. The intellect does not always find the meaning of things and faith means finding meaning where reason sees no meaning. Evil is a matter of faith, the same as love and sacrifice. They are not a matter of logic.

Saying that God exists means understanding that He is the real Freedom, that He can and wants to create a You, someone that can say something different, someone to contradict Him. If one could not contradict Him, one could not be truly free. We must understand that creating a *you* as a real freedom is an absolute risk. A child is the parents' risk; man is God's risk. The risk of paternity, that is, the risk of love, is complete Existence. Creation means challenging and guaranteeing the other's freedom, the freedom of *you*. Acknowledging a *you*: this is freedom. Creating (especially creating a *you*) is the challenge to and the defeat of the non-being as evil. If "*the nonbeing is the absolute evil*" (as Saint John of Damascus says), then creating means challenging and defeating the nonbeing as an in-existent, but possible evil. Defeating evil means challenging and defeating nothingness, placing freedom above necessity, love above justice and the possible above effectiveness, to defeat the fear of existing through love (joy, courage). This is not reason, but faith; that is why Tillich calls faith '*the courage to exist*'. Absolute existence and the triumph of existence do not consist in simply just 'existing', but in challenging and defeating inexistence. This truth is for man an 'absolute' of existence, to the extent in which man becomes God's 'ally' against nonbeing. Love appears as the only risk: love is all risk and nothing else but risk. God is risk and only risk, because He is Love. Only this risk is reassuring, because only this risk assures authenticity. This is the only freedom that can be called Freedom, which is absolute Existence. We can say: freedom is a mystery, because it is the mystery of Love. The true or the unique mystery is Love: more precisely, the fact that true freedom is love. Love's aplomb genuinely to exist, that is to exist only as a sacrifice or a risk, is in fact the triumph and the Absolute of existence.

#### 4. Conclusions

Thinking and confessing God means affirming the reality of being, of existence, of truth and of man. Avoiding or denying God means denying everything or affirming the possibility of the absolute non-being, that is endorsing the absurd, the nonsense and the non-being in the absolute. The Person-God is imperative, because He is the basis of the being, of existence, of knowledge, of certainty and of man. All these 'realities' have no basis in

themselves: their basis can only be absolute Reality as an absolute Person. Remembering God becomes the only certainty, the only sign that man exists and that man can reach the absolute. Without remembering this, man is illusion, convention, nightmare and non-being. Yet, even admitting this conclusion, the God of Philosophy is not to be identified with the God of Theology. But this limit is not defiance from theology, nor is it disbelief, but honesty. Knowing God is not philosophy, but theology, because it is not a human success, but a holy revelation. It is the same as in the case of the son who knows his father: the son knows his father not because he hunts and conquers him, but because the father reveals himself to his son.

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