

Natural Evil as a Test of Faith in the Abrahamic Traditions

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Abstract This paper critically examines what I call the ‘testing theodicy,’ the widely held idea that natural evil exists in order to test our faith in God. This theodicy appears numerous times in the scriptures of all three Abrahamic faiths. After examining some of these scriptural passages, we will argue that in light of these texts, the notion of faith is best understood as some type of commitment such as trust, loyalty or piety, rather than as merely a belief in God’s existence. After carefully showing the form this theodicy must take, I argue that the testing theodicy suffers from serious difficulties and fails to adequately account for the existence of natural evil.

Keywords Evil · God · Religion · Test · Faith · Natural evil

Anyone who has taught the problem of evil has heard it time and again: God allows evil to test our faith in Him. The idea of evil as a test of the believer is found repeatedly in various monotheistic scriptures. The ‘testing theodicy’, as I call it, is also widely believed among non-philosophers. I will argue that there are compelling reasons for thinking that this theodicy fails.

Philosophers, by and large, have not devoted a great deal of discussion to the testing theodicy, perhaps feeling that the theodicy is not promising. However, a feeling that a theodicy is not promising is not the same as a decisive argument against this theodicy; and this speaks in favor of attempting to develop just such a careful and decisive critique of the testing theodicy.¹ Further, the presence of the testing theodicy in various scriptures (including the Qur’an and both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible) suggests that the monotheist must give this theodicy

¹This line of thought was suggested by an anonymous referee for *Sophia*.

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serious consideration and scrutiny. Before beginning our critical discussion of the testing theodicy, let us examine certain instances where this theodicy appears in both the Bible and the Qur'an.

The Testing Theodicy in the Bible

Matitiahu Tsevat writes that 'The primary theme [of the book of Job] is the suffering of the innocent. For the overwhelming majority of readers and commentators this is, and always has been, the problem of the book.'² But what (if any) solution to the problem of the suffering of the innocent does Job offer? One problem in answering this question is that the Book of Job consists of two different sections: the prose section (comprising the prologue and the epilogue) and the poetic interlude. Not only is Job portrayed differently in these two sections—as patiently suffering in the prose sections, and as rebellious in the poetic section—but the two sections seem to offer different answers to the questions of why the innocents suffer.³ Although the poetic section does not seem to offer an answer to this question (beyond the idea that it is not man's place to question God's plans, which is a different theodicy altogether, if it can be called a theodicy at all rather than a refusal to theodicyize), the prose section arguably does offer an explanation for Job's suffering. In this paper, I will confine my comments to the prose sections of the Book of Job. Many commentators have (not surprisingly) concluded that the message of these passages is that the suffering of the innocent is allowed by God in order to test their faith in Him.

Job is described in chapter 1 as 'blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.'⁴ It would seem as though Job did not deserve to have evil befall him. And yet the book of Job portrays a situation where God tests Job in order to prove Job's steadfastness. Consider the discussion between God and Satan which results in God's delivering great evils upon Job.

The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord (Job 1:8–12).

The story of what follows is familiar: Satan causes a series of disasters (mostly natural disasters, such as fire from heaven, a dust storm, and so forth) which kill all Job's children, his livestock, and most of his servants. When Job remains steadfast to the Lord, the Lord allows Satan to afflict Job with 'loathsome sores...from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head' (Job 2:7). In the poetic section of the book, Job

² Tsevat (1966), p. 364. Quoted in Dell (1991), p. 29.

³ See, for example, Illman (2003) and Ehrman (2008).

⁴ Job 1:1. All quotations are from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV.

and his friends debate why God has allowed Job to suffer so, but come to no firm conclusion.

We, unlike Job and his friends, are privy to the conversation between God and Satan, and so we have a better idea of why God has allowed such great evils to befall Job. As one commentator writes, in the Book of Job, God stands revealed as

a God who respects human independence, who wishes to have the *free* gift of human service, and towards that end there is the testing of human beings. The restoration of Job in 42:7ff is not the point of the book; it is merely the recognition of Job's integrity, and in line with divine generosity.⁵

God doesn't want loyalty that is purchased by His generosity; He wants loyalty that is freely given despite good or bad fortune. And so the testing of humans through evil separates those 'fair weather friends' from those whose devotion to God is not conditional on their own good fortune.

Other interpreters have similarly interpreted the Book of Job as defending the idea that humans' faith must be tested through trial. Roland Murphy, adopting for the sake of argument the assumption (made by the author of the Book of Job) that God cannot know the outcome of Job's trial, writes,

By its very nature, human loyalty and love has to be demonstrated. That is part of the freedom that God has given to creatures. They can turn rebellious. The Lord does not know their loyalty unless they are tested. Otherwise, the agreement with Satan is a sham...[God's creatures] might blaspheme God to his face. One can be sure only by testing, by suffering...It is only in being tested that humans can truly show their genuine love of God (1999: 10–11).

William Henry Green writes that Job's 'affliction...was a trial and a test of his integrity and pious faith in God; and...the Lord regarded with complacent approbation his steadfast endurance of the test thrust upon him by his great adversary' (1874/1999: 44). Bart Ehrman writes, 'The overarching view of suffering in this folktale is clear: sometimes suffering comes to the innocent in order to see whether their pious devotion to God is genuine and disinterested. Are people faithful only when things are going well, or are they faithful no matter what the circumstances?' (2008: 317–8) Stated otherwise, '[I]f God is ultimately in charge of all of life, why is it that the innocent suffer? In the folktale, it is because God tests people to see if they can retain their piety despite undeserved pain and misery' (2008: 327–8).

Other passages in the Bible are also suggestive of the testing theodicy. 1 Peter 1:6–8 reads,

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

⁵ Terrien (1991), p. 625. Terrien does not seem to regard Job as offering an answer to the question of why the innocent suffer, as he also writes, 'The Book of Job does not explain the mystery of suffering or 'justify the ways of God' with human beings, but it does probe the depths of faith in the midst of suffering.'

These verses are a bit ambiguous; discussing this passage, David L. Bartlett writes,

Verse 7 suggests either the *reason* for the present difficulties or the *result* of those difficulties. It may be that the trials are sent in order to prove the genuineness of the readers' faith; or it may be that, however the trials arise, the result is that the genuineness of that faith will be proved (1998: 251).

1 Peter 4:12 is a bit more clear; it reads, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you.' Bartlett interprets this verse as follows:

That the 'fiery ordeal' is also a test or temptation brings the readers back to 1:6–7. There they were reminded that for a little while they may suffer various 'tests' so that the genuineness of their faith may be proven 'as through fire.' The root word for 'fire' is the same used in 1:7 and 4:12. Now the fire is burning, and the faith is under trial (1998: 310).

Here, Bartlett seems more confident that the ordeals referred to in 1:6–7 are intended to test the faith of the readers and probe the genuineness and strength of this faith. Ehrman offers a similar interpretation of this passage, writing, 'The suffering that Christians endure is a 'test' to see if they can remain faithful to God to the very end, even to death' (2008: 324).

The Testing Theodicy in the Qur'an

The Bible is not the only monotheistic scripture in which we find this testing theodicy. John Nawas writes,

Some one hundred verses in the Qur'an deal directly or indirectly with trial, in particular as a trial or test of true belief...In his exegesis of a qur'anic verse dealing with the issue of coercion in religious matters (Q 2:256), the exegete al-Razi actually speaks of this world as a place of trial with reference to the fact that people have a choice to believe or not... Believers are subjected to trials in this world, both materially and spiritually (2006: 362–3).

Consider a passage from the Qur'an. In *The Prophets*, it is written, 'Every soul shall have a taste of death: and We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. And to Us must ye return' (21:35). Commenting on this passage in his exhaustive commentary on the Qur'an, Mufti Muhammad Shafi'i writes

[This passage] means that man is tested both by good things and by bad things. Bad includes unpleasant things such as illness, grief, pain, poverty, etc. while good means desirable things, like good health, happiness, comfort and abundance. Man is subjected to these conditions in this world for test and the test is that he should show patience and endurance in the face of adversity and should offer thanks to Allah when his life is peaceful and comfortable. (1999 vol. 6: 192)

In his famous commentary *Tafhim al-Qur'an (Towards Understanding the Qur'an)*, Syed Abul Ala Maududi comments on 21:35 by saying, 'Allah is always putting human beings to test and trial both through adversity and affluence' (2006).

Other passages with a similar message abound. 2:155–7 reads,

And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast, who say, when a misfortune striketh them: Lo! we are Allah's and lo! unto Him we are returning. Such are they on whom are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. Such are the rightly guided.

The suggestion, of course, is that Allah will test people with disaster and misfortune; and those who, in the face of such disaster, continue to praise Allah and humble themselves before Him, are truly righteous. To conclude, then, various passages in the central scriptures of monotheism suggest that at least some evil exists to test the faith of believers. Let us begin our examination of this theodicy.

What is Faith?

A natural question that arises is what precisely is being tested in this theodicy. After all, there are many ways one might interpret the notion of faith. In the philosophy of religion, faith is often interpreted as belief (often belief in the absence of evidence). On the other hand, faith can be understood as some kind of non-belief commitment like trust, loyalty, or piety. If I say that I have faith in a product or person, I am not saying I believe the product or person exists; rather, I am saying that the product or person in question can be counted on, is reliable, can be trusted. For example, although C.S. Lewis (1998) calls faith belief, he writes of faith as though it were a kind of trust, rather than being strictly belief-like. There are good reasons to construe the present theodicy in terms of trust or loyalty, rather than in terms of belief. First, considering the scriptural sources we cited in the opening of our paper, the authors were in general not concerned about the problem of belief. For example, Job's belief in the existence of God was never in doubt. What was in doubt was whether he would remain true to God through his trials,⁶ or whether he should follow his wife's advice to 'Curse God, and die' (Job 2:9). Understanding faith as belief reflects a fairly modern notion of faith;⁷ and an argument focusing purely on the question of belief could easily be accused of missing the point of the scriptural passages we cited in support of our theodicy. Thus, in the context of these sources, construing the notion of faith as some kind of commitment like trust or loyalty makes a good deal more sense. And indeed mere belief in God is not sufficient. As the author of the Epistle of James writes, 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder' (James 2:19). It is not enough merely to believe that God exists. And so it is more plausible to interpret faith as some other kind of commitment to God such as trust, loyalty, or piety.⁸

⁶ This point was emphasized by an anonymous referee.

⁷ I owe this and some of the related points in this paragraph to an anonymous referee.

⁸ I owe this point to Mark Nelson, who also directed me to the passage from James.

Natural vs. Moral Evil

A further question arises as to which type of evil the testing theodicy is supposed to address. There are two ways in which evil might exist as a test. First, the possibility of moral evil might exist as a temptation, tempting people to misuse their free will. Second, evil might exist in order to test people's faith in God. The first is just the free will theodicy, so we will not be discussing this here. The second is the theodicy to be discussed here. But what type of evil exists to test our faith? It seems unlikely that moral evil does. First, if the free will theodicy works, then it is not necessary for moral evil to serve some other purpose; it is sufficient that it be the product of free will, and that free will is sufficiently important to justify the moral evil resulting from human possession of freedom. Second, given that moral evil is supposed to result from human free will, it is plausible to think that God cannot control the magnitude or distribution of this moral evil (or at least, He cannot do so without interfering with our free will).⁹ However, as I argue below, the testing theodicy requires a particular distribution of evil; and so it seems unlikely that the testing theodicy can be intended to explain the existence of moral evil. Thus, we must conclude that the purpose of the testing theodicy is to explain natural evil. On this understanding of the theodicy, let us examine its merits and defects.

What is the Benefit of Suffering?

It should be a familiar point that in a theodicy, the suffering that is allowed must be in the service of some good. But what good is served in the testing theodicy? We should start by noting that steadfastness, loyalty and the like are generally considered virtues. Furthermore, one who has been through good and bad times and is 'loyal' to someone only in good times isn't really loyal at all. Genuine loyalty requires that one be willing to endure difficult times for the sake of the other, as well. A person who is loyal to a person or a team only insofar as he deems it is to her benefit to be so is, in the words of one commentator, 'a fairly calculating person and not particularly loyal. The loyal person sticks in there in the bad times as well' (Ewin 1992: 411). Thus, the purpose of God's allowing suffering would be that it would give people an opportunity to prove that their loyalty was real. Recall that Satan charged that Job wasn't really loyal to God, but only appeared so because he hadn't suffered. As Ehrman writes,

The overarching view of suffering in this folktale is clear: sometimes suffering comes to the innocent in order to see whether their pious devotion to God is genuine and disinterested. Are people faithful only when things are going well, or are they faithful no matter what the circumstances? Obviously for this author, no matter how bad things get, God still deserves worship and praise (2008: 317–8).

⁹ The theist should not say at this point that God interferes with our free will sometimes, when it serves a greater good; for this invites the question of why God doesn't interfere with the free will of people who are about to perform an evil act such as harming the innocent. An admission that such interference is permissible would prove damaging to the free will theodicy.

Natural evil separates the wheat from the chaff, as it were; and gives those with real faith the opportunity to prove themselves, while the faithless fall away. Presumably, those who pass this test are rewarded (if not in this life, like Job is rewarded at the end of the tale, then in the hereafter).

We now have a fuller understanding of the testing theodicy: natural evil exists in order to test the steadfastness (trust, loyalty, piety, or some similar state) of believers, to separate those who truly possess the virtue of faith from those who are faithless and only appear to be true to God. On this understanding of the theodicy, let us turn to an evaluation of its merits.

Preliminary Objections

A problem facing the testing theodicy is that it seems to imply that there would be an equal distribution of evils. After all, it would not be fair for some to undergo a more severe test than others. And yet the evil of the world is not at all evenly distributed; obviously, some people bear a much greater burden than others.

One possible reply to this is that those who are given a heavier burden are tested more leniently. Thus, the suggestion is that God uses the ‘Olympic dive’ method of evaluating test results: one’s ‘score’ is a function of one’s success *and* the difficulty of the test undertaken.

One problem with this reply, though, is that it is manifestly unfair to those who have a more severe test. Granted, they are ‘graded’ more leniently, but they also have to undergo a greater share of evil than do others. The second problem with this reply is that if God is capable of testing someone with a lesser amount of evil, why would He instead use a greater amount of evil? For Him to do so results in an inadequate theodicy. Clearly, God is capable of testing someone using less evil; for Him to use more than is necessary is for Him to countenance gratuitous evil.

Another possible explanation for the unequal distribution of natural evil is that some are more resilient than others, and can endure more evil; such people might then require a heavier burden of evil in order to be adequately tested.¹⁰ This move has problems of its own. First, it seems unfair to burden someone with greater evil merely because she is capable of enduring it. Second, if this move were correct, we would predict that those on Earth who suffer the greatest share of evils are those with the greatest strength of faith. This prediction is factually false; many people with vulnerable faith are tested severely, and many people with resilient faith are scarcely tested at all. Thus, this suggestion does not rescue the testing theodicy.

Faith and Divine Foreknowledge

Another possible problem facing the testing theodicy is that it implies an imperfection in God’s knowledge. Presumably, God knows whether a person’s faith is strong enough to withstand the test or not. So it is not clear why God would need people to actually endure the natural evils in question before judging them.

¹⁰ I owe this reply to Nelly Dib.

The theist might reply by arguing that it is unfair to punish or reward someone for something they have not done, even if they would do it if allowed to do so. On this reply, even though God knows the outcome of our test, we must still endure the test because it would be unfair to reward or punish based on how we would complete a test that we had not actually completed. A possible objection against this is that it is certainly permissible to punish someone for a crime he hasn't yet committed. After all, if I am plotting to kill someone, the police need not wait until I actually kill the person to arrest me; they may arrest me beforehand and charge me with some crime (such as conspiracy to commit murder).

The theodist can refute this objection. For even if we in some sense punish people for crimes they have not committed,¹¹ they must at least form the intention of committing the crime, and possibly as well perform some action (or attempt to perform some action) constitutive of criminal wrongdoing. Presumably it would be unjust to punish someone for a crime they never even formed an intention to commit. For example, a person conspiring to murder someone can be arrested before actually committing murder, but conviction for conspiracy to commit murder in most Western legal systems does require that one took actions to advance the conspiracy.¹² Similarly, police can arrest someone in a drug sting (even though the police didn't actually sell the person drugs) because the person attempted to buy drugs. But of course the person must at least attempt or intend wrongdoing before becoming criminally culpable. To turn our attention back to the testing theodicy, if God has not given us the opportunity to retain or lose our faith, then he cannot punish or reward us. A person who has not yet been confronted with natural evil has not even had the chance to form the intention to lose his faith (whatever that means); punishing him would be like jailing a person who would kill his wife if she cheated on him (even though she never has and never will do so) simply on the grounds that he would do so if put in the right circumstances. So again, we see that the theodist can appeal to certain intuitions that one must actually *engage* in wrongdoing (or at least try to engage in it, or form the intention to engage in it) before we can punish the person for said wrongdoing. Of course, this strengthens the theodist's defense against the present objection.

Thus, this reply (that we must endure the test for God to have the right to punish or reward us) on behalf of the theodicy may succeed. It is not clear. After all, we may say of the person who would kill an adulterous wife that he deserves to be punished for his bad character even if our legal system only allows for the punishing of people who commit (or form the intention of committing) a crime. Perhaps God, knowing as He does the character of each individual, knows what each deserves even before any test has been performed, and can justly distribute reward and punishment even in the absence of a test.

I don't have a solid intuition on whether God would be justified in doing this or not. However, the defender of the testing theodicy can argue that God needs to actually test us before rewarding or punishing us. She might say the following:

Character is not destiny. A person of weak faith may, by dint of great willpower, retain her faith in the face of a severe test; and a person of strong

¹¹ Technically, I suppose, the person has committed a crime—namely, conspiring to commit a murder. But given that we are already conceding that the person may be punished for forming the intention to commit the crime, this technical point does not affect the flow of the argument.

¹² This was pointed out by an anonymous referee for *Sophia*.

faith may lose faith. Thus, even if God knows our character, our character does not fully determine how we will react to being tested; to deny this is to deny the reality of free will. Thus, God must test us to give us the chance to freely respond to the test.

One could even ally this argument with the position (advanced by some theologians) that since our free actions are genuinely free and undetermined, God actually does not know how we will respond to the test. Thus, the theist may well have an adequate reply to the objection that the testing theodicy implies an imperfection in God's knowledge. Let us turn to another line of investigation.

Faith and Evidence

To introduce our final criticism of the testing theodicy, I would like to begin by developing a line of criticism of faith as trust, and see how we are led to a general criticism which defeats all versions of the testing theodicy which make faith into some kind of non-belief commitment, such as trust or loyalty.

Trust, like belief, can be with or without evidence. That is to say, you can trust someone because you have evidence of that person's trustworthiness, or in the absence of such evidence. Let us begin by considering the option that faith is trust guided by evidence. It has been convincingly argued that trust in God needs to be on the basis of evidence. Michael Scriven, for example, writes,

Now the normal meaning of *faith* is simply 'confidence'; we say that we have great faith in someone or in some claim or product...Of such faith we can properly say that it is well founded or not, depending on the evidence for whatever it is in which we have faith. So there is no incompatibility between this kind of faith and reason; the two are from different families and can make a very good marriage. Indeed if they do not join forces, then the resulting ill-based or inadequate confidence will probably lead to disaster (1998: 380).

However, if our trust ought rationally to be based on evidence—if we ought to trust God on the basis of evidence that He is trustworthy—then evidence to the contrary ought to count against trusting God. Again, if trust ought to be based on evidence of trustworthiness, then God can hardly punish one for failure to trust if He is intentionally inflicting evils (sometimes terrible evils) on us, thereby giving us reason why we ought not trust Him. We will return to this point shortly.

But what if faith is trust without evidence? That is, we are to trust God without any evidence that He is trustworthy. Now, there is a certain strand of religious thought that valorizes faithfulness in the absence of evidence. But construing the theodicy this way has implausible consequences. I will first point out that the testing theodicy only makes sense if faith in God is obligatory—if it is something that we owe to God. That faith must be obligatory can be seen by discussing an objection against the testing theodicy raised by Bob Seltzer. He argues that the problem with the testing theodicy is that it is immoral to test

someone in this way without her consent. Seltzer (1998) gives the following example:

I am walking along, and then out of the bushes Evander Holyfield jumps out and starts beating me up. When he's done, he throws a check on my lap in the amount of a million dollars. Now consider this situation in contrast to the previous one: I am walking along, and then Holyfield jumps out of the bushes—but instead of pounding me, he says, 'Look, I'll give you a million dollars if you can last five minutes fighting me.' What is the difference between the two situations? In one, I get pounded, but I get a check—in the other I have the choice of whether or not to get pounded. It seems clear that just pounding me out of the blue without my consent is morally reprehensible, to say the least.

The situation is even worse if we imagine that in the first case, after pounding you, Holyfield says 'Sorry; you failed the test. You don't get a million dollars.'

Now under what circumstances does God have the right to test us—subject us to (occasionally horrific) evils—without our consent? Notice that one of the features of the above example that seems particularly unjust is that the ability to last five minutes in a fight with a professional boxer does not seem like a moral virtue, or a trait that one is in any way morally obligated to possess. Thus, to punishingly test someone against his will to see if he possesses this trait is immoral, to say the least. Nor does it seem ethical if the trait in question is somehow praiseworthy without being obligatory. No, the only conditions under which such a punishing test might conceivably be permissible is if the trait in question is *obligatory*—if the person in question is morally obligated to possess the trait. That is, God can only test our faith by inflicting evil on us without our consent if God has the right to demand that we possess faith—in other words, if faith is something we owe to God, or is something we are morally obligated to possess. (For what it's worth, it's not clear if God's testing us without our consent is morally permissible even in this case, but the above example *at least* shows that faith must be obligatory if the testing theodicy is to pass moral muster.) So the question is, can we be obligated to trust God in the absence of evidence that God is trustworthy?

One might object that the question is absurd; that we *know* that God is morally good and trustworthy. But this is an evasion of an important question: if evidence is important in deciding whether to trust someone, then as noted above, evidence that God cannot be trusted (say) not to kill your children and servants (as He did with Job) *rationaly ought* to diminish your trust in God. So the question of whether trust ought to be proportioned to evidence of trustworthiness is an important one. As we saw, the testing theodicy makes little sense if trust is to be connected to evidence (although I promised to say more about that below), so let us continue with the assumption that we are obligated to have trust in the absence of evidence. But if we are not allowed to base trust on evidence of trustworthiness, then what is to prevent us from trusting the wrong entity? Why not place our trust in Satan rather than God? Again, the theist will protest that the question is absurd. I agree; it is absurd, but its absurdity brings out an absurdity in this reading of the testing theodicy. Trust cannot be divorced from an evaluation of the moral characteristics and trustworthiness of the trusted person. And so the whole notion of trusting someone in the face of evidence that the person is untrustworthy makes no sense at all. It makes even less sense to say that we are *obligated* to invest trust in such a person, even though the

person punishingly tests us. As the above example illustrates, a punishing test of someone's faith can only be permissible if faith is obligatory; but (as we have seen) the testing theodicy fails if we understand it in terms of obligatory faith in the absence of evidence. This leads us into our final criticism of this theodicy.

Let us continue with the idea that faith should be understood as trust, and then broaden our discussion to include other sorts of commitment, like loyalty. The problem, which I take to be the chief problem confronting the faith-is-trust version of the testing theodicy, is that to inflict evil on someone merely to test their trust, and then to expect that this should not affect their level of trust, flies in the face of reason (and basic moral principles).

Suppose my child trusts me. Suppose she is learning to, say, walk on a balance beam. I am holding her, but she is afraid. Imagine that further, in order to test her trust in me, I intentionally let her fall. The next time she gets on the balance beam and is afraid she will fall, I say, 'Trust me, I won't let you fall.' Should she trust me?

There are two things to note about this example. First, what I did is morally grotesque. I betrayed her trust in me. If this is what God is doing when He visits natural evils upon us, then God is far from morally perfect. And this seems true *regardless* of whether faith is trust with or without evidence. Second, she *should* in fact be hesitant to trust me, because I intentionally allowed her to fall the first time. It would not be reasonable for her to have the same trust in me as before, and given my actions it would again be morally grotesque for me to punish her for her lack of trust. And so it seems that the testing theodicy faces two difficulties, if we interpret faith as trust. First, it is not compatible with God's moral perfection, regardless of whether trust is supposed to be with or without evidence. Second, testing someone's trust in this way *should* result in a diminution of the tested person's trust, and it would be wrong for the 'tester' to hold this diminution against the one tested.¹³

At this point, the theist might say that we have misrepresented the kind of test of trust that God performs. Consider the example given above of allowing my daughter to fall off of the balance beam. The theist might say:

Perhaps you had a reason for letting her fall: perhaps she needs to learn a lesson by falling (say, that falling doesn't hurt very much, and is not something to be afraid of). When God wants us to trust him, it is like this: God has a reason for allowing suffering, and we need to have faith that he has a good reason for allowing this suffering. He is not allowing us to suffer *merely* to test our faith; rather, our faith is tested in that we must continue to believe that God, in His wisdom, has a plan, and that this suffering and evil are part of His plan for us.

While this is a compelling argument, it completely undermines the testing theodicy. After all, it says that God allows evil for some other reason than in order to test our faith; it says we must have faith that God has some other reason for allowing natural evil. So in other words, this response reduces the testing theodicy to some other theodicy. If God has some sufficient reason for allowing suffering and evil (and we are merely supposed to trust that he has such a reason), then *that* reason (whatever it is, even if it is known only to God) is what justifies His allowing this

¹³ The case is scarcely improved if I allow another child to fall in order to test my child's faith in me (that is, if God inflicts evil on person A to test person B's faith).

evil and suffering; the idea that this evil serves to test us is redundant, and not needed to justify this evil.

Faith as loyalty fares no better than faith as trust. Loyalty is, of course, a moral notion: we do not accept loyalty to just *anyone*. For example, extreme loyalty to a vicious and wicked person is not praiseworthy. Loyalty ought ideally to be based on someone's positive moral qualities. Loyalty can also be based on a relationship (such as child to parent), but naturally such loyalty is not without limitations, and can be overridden by moral considerations. If loyalty leads you (say) to assist your sibling in covering up a serious crime, then loyalty has become a vice rather than a virtue.

If loyalty is a moral notion, and the degree to which we owe it to others is based partly on their moral character, then of course the degree to which they behave wickedly *ought* to affect our loyalty to them. Thus, if natural evils are purely a test of loyalty (and are not justified by some other fact—for if they are, then *that* fact, not the test of loyalty, provides us with our theodicy), then they are undeserved evils intentionally visited upon us by God, and ought to affect our loyalty to Him. As Ehrman writes in his discussion of God's testing of Job,

Some [biblical] authors thought of suffering as a test of faith. But I refuse to believe that God murdered (or allowed the Satan to murder) Job's ten children in order to see whether Job would curse him. If someone killed *your* ten children, wouldn't you have the right to curse him? And to think that God could make it up to Job by giving him an additional ten children is obscene (2008: 520).

Think of a parent who, to test the loyalty of his child, systematically destroys the child's toys to see if the child will respond angrily or question the parent's judgment; or who gives the child a beating or some other undeserved punishment for the same reason. This type of loyalty test is a uniquely narcissistic action, because it (without regard for the benefit of the child) punishes the child to test her commitment to and love for the parent. It is unworthy of a supremely just and benevolent God.

Let us further broaden our discussion to include other sorts of commitment in addition to trust and loyalty. A test that is designed to test someone's trust or loyalty or piety (or however you choose to characterize faith, if not as belief) can be called a 'commitment test.' In general, there is a moral problem with commitment tests. As I noted above, with the case of trust and loyalty, it is not obviously permissible to visit great evils upon a person to test that person's commitment to you, even if you gave that person life. But the more difficult case for a commitment test is when evils are visited upon person B to commitment test person A. Consider again the case of Job. At first, Satan was not permitted to touch Job himself—God says 'all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' (Job 1:12)—and so he had to content himself with destroying Job's possessions and, crucially, Job's children and servants. Now a man who visits evils upon his children to test his children's loyalty to him is a bad man; but a man who (say) visits terrible evils upon his children to test his *wife's* loyalty to him is a monster. And of course the crucial question is this: ought such a man's wife remain committed to him? Clearly not. Would she be justified in leaving him, taking the children, seeking protection from him? Of course. A commitment, such as trust or loyalty or piety, ought not be made irrespective of the moral qualities of the person to whom you have made a commitment. As R.E. Ewin writes in his penetrating analysis of loyalty, 'Judgment

does have a role to play in loyalty...Somebody who showed loyalty to an unworthy object might be described as foolish to be loyal' (1992: 406). I am not here arguing that God is bad and therefore we should not make a commitment to Him. Rather, I am arguing that even a theist who is committed to God's goodness ought not think God is capable of such behavior, and hence ought to reject the testing theodicy. A theist who embraces the essential goodness of God cannot think that God would behave in this manner, and so cannot embrace the commitment test version of this theodicy. Thus, there are powerful moral reasons for rejecting the testing theodicy where faith is understood as some type of non-belief commitment like trust, loyalty, piety, or something similar.

This discussion ties together two points about which I earlier promised to say more: first, that if faith is trust (or some other commitment) based on evidence, then evils visited upon us to test our faith ought to diminish our faith; and second, that trust without evidence makes little sense because trust ought not be independent of an evaluation of the moral character and actions of the person in whom trust is invested. A God who intentionally inflicts evil on a person runs afoul of both of these issues: one can hardly be faulted for losing trust in someone when that very person is deliberately introducing evidence specifically designed to challenge that trust (after all, that's what the testing theodicy says the point of natural evil is). Further, trust, loyalty, and other sorts of commitment should not ignore the actions and character of the person on whom these commitments are bestowed; and (as demonstrated above) if the person in whom you have invested trust or loyalty intentionally inflicts great evils on you as a means of 'commitment-testing' then this is precisely the sort of consideration that ought to cause you to reconsider your commitment to the person in question. So as we see, the theist is faced with a dilemma: on the one horn of the dilemma, commitment cannot be without evidence, because a commitment to someone cannot be entirely independent of your evaluation of that individual's moral character and the quality of that person's actions. Otherwise, as we saw, one is led to the absurd conclusion that one might permissibly make a commitment to Satan instead of God! But on the other horn, if commitment is based on evidence, then (again) evidence introduced specifically to challenge that commitment rationally *ought* to diminish your commitment; to deny this (and argue that contrary evidence ought to have no bearing on your level of commitment) is just to fall back on the claim that commitments ought to be made in the absence of (or in the face of contrary) evidence, which is of course just to fall back on the other horn of the dilemma.

Conclusion

Some criticisms of theodicies argue that the theodicy in question fails because it doesn't account for all evil. This leaves open the reply that the theodicy is a partial theodicy, and the evil left unexplained by it is to be explained in some other way by some other theodicy. But the arguments I advance above are of a different sort: I argue that the theodicy is intrinsically flawed, and cannot offer even a partial explanation of the natural evil we encounter in the world. And so I conclude that the testing theodicy fails.

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