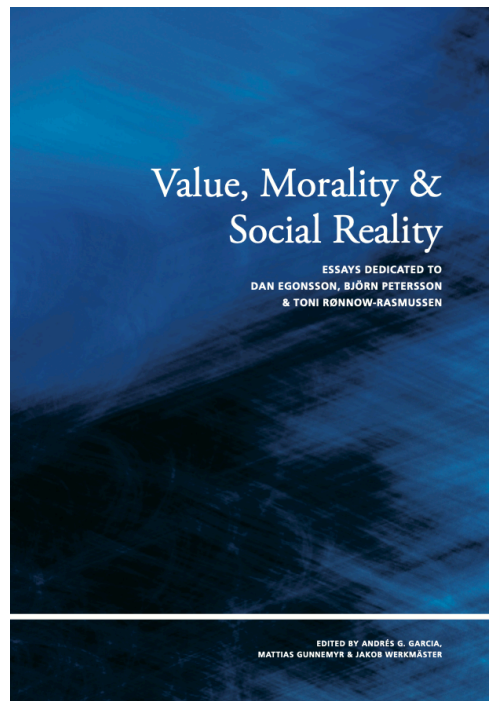


# Theodicy as Axiology and More

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In: Garcia, A., Gunnemyr, M. & Werkmäster, J. (2023) *Value, Morality & Social Reality: Essays dedicated to Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson & Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen*. Lund: Department of Philosophy, Lund University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.189>

ISBN: 978-91-89415-65-2 (print), 978-91-89415-66-9 (digital)



Published by the Department of Philosophy, Lund University.  
Edited by: Andrés Garcia, Mattias Gunnemyr, and Jakob Werkmäster  
Cover image by Fabian Jones. Cover layout by Gunilla Albertén.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.189.c518>



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# Theodicy as Axiology and More

Seyyed Mohsen Eslami

**Abstract.** The literature on the problem of evil does not draw enough upon the relevant debates in (meta)ethics, and ethical theorists (broadly understood) can engage with the problem of evil as a way of inquiry in their field. I review how the problem of evil is essentially formed based on (evaluative and deontic) ethical judgments, and how responses to it, either theistic or atheistic, are mainly based on the relevant ethical judgments. Meanwhile, though contemporary debates in metaphysics and epistemology have influenced the literature on the problem of evil, the same does not hold true for ethics. This suggests that there are ways to engage with the problem of evil as doing axiology or ethical theory more generally, which may be fruitful regardless of their being theodicy. I end by briefly discussing an example focused on the idea of moral progress.

## Introduction

The problem of evil is both an important theoretical question and a fundamental human concern that is dealt with as a philosophical problem mainly in the philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, it should not be a surprise if the problem of evil is not, in a sense, essentially a question of “philosophy of religion”. Philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> There *are* problems around evil that have been a concern of moral philosophers. For example, Socrates’ claim about impossibility of knowingly choosing to do wrong which is now discussed as the guise of the good, or the debate among modern philosophers about the nature of human beings and whether it is primarily good or bad. All this is much expected considering the subject matter of the discipline.

of religion is where (so-called) core philosophical questions are raised concerning religion. Therefore, questions of the existence of God or the rationality of faith are at bottom metaphysical and epistemological questions.

What about the problem of evil? The rich literature on the subject emphasizes the important metaphysical and epistemological questions involved in the problem of evil, including how to understand divine omnipotence, free will, possible worlds as well as probabilities of knowing God's reasons, and so on. True as it is, the role ethics plays in this area is not as one might expect. For one thing, it is not hard to find great contemporary metaphysicians and epistemologists engaged with such issues, though this is not exactly the same with regard to ethics, broadly understood.

In the following, I briefly review the ways the problem of evil is formed and dealt with mainly ethically. The aim is not to claim that the current literature on the subject does its work without ethics. But the worry is rather whether the role ethics plays is acknowledged consciously, and whether the relevant ethical literature is used properly and effectively.

## Formulating the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is primarily a moral problem in its formation. This is how we come to the problem of evil. On the one hand, there is God. Traditionally, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent. According to the last one, *i.e.* benevolence, God is expected to be good and do right, normally understood as to help people, to prevent people from suffering, and the like. On the other hand, there is the world. The world as we see and experience it includes evils. Bad things happen in the world, and that is what is meant by "evil" (van Inwagen, 2006). And, thus, there is the ordinary question "why does God allow us to suffer?" This is the question that leads to the different versions of evil, either focused on gratuitous evil or the amount, kind, or distribution of evils (see: Trakakis, 2007), formulated in different ways.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear how the framework in which these questions are formed is ethical. By "ethical" I mean any sort of deontic and evaluative judgment which are not that of other normative domains (say, legal, aesthetic, or else.). Deontic judgments are claims about which category of forbidden, required, or permissible (or else) an action belongs to. On the other hand, evaluative judgments mainly focus on matters of value, whether something is good, bad, or neutral.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here the problem of evil is mostly presented in terms of consequentialism, and the deontological considerations are mentioned along the way. This is partly a narrative choice, not meant to accurately formulate the problem or represent the literature.

<sup>3</sup> The same is true about other categories of the normative, such as characterological (Miller, 2011) or fittingness (Berker, MS).

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On the one hand, regarding God, it seems that it is assumed that God is an agent, able to be good or bad and do right or wrong. These are in part metaphysical assumptions, with ethical implications, such as what is required for an agent to be a morally good one. Furthermore, it is assumed that not only God is good, but God's goodness also requires God to treat us in a certain way. Either God has obligations toward us and should respect our rights, or considering God is morally perfect God should do as best as God can, say, as a matter of supererogation. Be that as it may, these are all deontic judgments.

Regarding the world, first, there is the idea of what is good and what is bad, or evil. It is assumed that, for example, innocent people being killed in wars or natural disasters killing lots of people is bad. Furthermore, there are claims about the world as a whole. A world without war, cancer, and earthquakes would be better than the one we live in. These two groups of claims about God and the world are enough for some versions of the problem of evil.

The problem of evil might be focused on why there are evils that seem to be pointless, say, not having any positive role. For example, perhaps one thinks pain is something bad, or even has negative value, and that the world would be better without it. But it may turn out that pain brings about good consequences, and therefore leads to something of value. In that case, we ought to stop complaining about why there is pain, indeed we should be thankful. Sure, to this end, we need some explanation, such as whether this makes pain itself valuable in some sense, or that it has a specific relation with the good consequences. Certainly merely leading to a good outcome is not sufficient for justification. More on this follows in the discussion of the greater good theodicies.

In the same vein, we wonder why there are evils, such as innocent kids getting killed in wars, looking for explanations. Furthermore, we can imagine that what ignites the problem of evil to be different claims: about the very existence of evil, some kinds of evils, or the huge amount of evils – say, many kids getting killed in many different wars at different times and places.

For example, concerning the very existence of pointless evil, van Inwagen argues that we might be able to tolerate some gratuitous evil. In response, others have attempted to argue that the problem of evil challenges theism even if we allow some gratuitous evils (Russell, 2017). Some other arguments from evil maintain that there are “intense sufferings” in this world that are pointless (Rowe, 1979). Children being tortured, raped, and killed for example. These are not only bad things but too bad and horrible, in terms of quantity as well as quality (Adams and Sutherland, 1989). Perhaps they also lead to some good consequences, though the amount of evil may still be weightier than the good outcomes, and a specific relation between them is required. (More on this later.)

Be that as it may, in all of these judgments, not only are some things evaluated as good and bad, but there are also claims about value comparisons (“what good outcomes would be weightier than the evil?”) and actions (“what God has good reason to do, to permit, or to avoid?”).

One might think that this claim about the ethical nature of the problem of evil has something to do with a familiar distinction between “moral evils” and natural ones (for a discussion of the distinction, see: Trakakis, 2007). This is not the case. Evil in the problem of evil can include all bad things. The distinction between natural and moral evils is due to the source of evil, or what has led to the evil – whether it includes some intention raised from an agent who enjoys some kind of freedom. In either case, the result is some evil. And judging the result to be evil is the moral claim which is central to the problem of evil. But the distinction between moral and natural evils works at another level, dealing with specific proposals in response to the problem of evil, such as the free will defense (Plantinga, [1974] 2002). In that context, we can ask whether the theodicy in question can deal with both kinds of evils.

Another worry might be whether all versions of the problem of evil are ethical, *i.e.*, inquiring about them could count as ethical inquiry. Here is one classification. The problem of evil can be of these sorts: (a) theoretical, (b) practical, and (c) existential. The theoretical problem of evil concerns the consistency of the (belief in) existence of God and the existence of evils in the world. The questions are about the possibility of consistent acceptance of both, what epistemic stance we should take in this regard, and what implications it has for what we believe (and, consequently, do). This is primarily a theoretical problem. Atheists can also find the question theoretically interesting: if God with such and such attributes did exist, would it be possible that this world, with its evils, was God’s creation?

As illustrated, the theoretical problem of evil, which is the more familiar form, is ethical. Note that the theoretical problem of evil can include non-theological versions. The problem of evil can arise from within a non-theological worldview. This also suggests that the problem is ethical rather than theological. Imagine that there is no God (as understood in the Abrahamic religions). Still, the fact that there are evils combined with some judgments about the world leads to the problem of evil.

For example, consider the belief that the world is governed by some sort of “moral order” – that doing good will return to you, “the world” does justice to everyone, and the like. Another option is the belief that the world is getting better and better. (cf. Nagasawa, 2018 on “existential optimism”). To get to the problem of evil we need two classes of moral judgments: judgments about the world that set our expectations of it, and judgments about the things we find in the world. But no discussion of God (as is common to the debate in the literature) is necessary. This being said, in the following “the problem of evil” is the familiar debate, usually involving God with the aforementioned attributes.

Aside from the theoretical problem of evil, there is the practical problem of evil. In this case, God is not at the center of the debate. Here, the challenge is that there are evils in the world - What can or should we do about it? Consider theists who believe that there is no inconsistency between admitting the existence of evils in the world and the existence of God and the rationality of belief in God. Still, the

practical problem of evil is there to be dealt with. In a sense, a considerable part of moral philosophy is concerned with this practical problem.

Obviously, the practical problem of evil is ethical, though this is not what philosophers of religion are typically concerned with. Again, the evaluation that the world (that it should not be as it is, and that it should be as it is not) is ethical. Furthermore, in this case, there is the “practical” element – that something should be done. This requires both a description of an ideal (or a better) situation to work toward it and a discussion of how this should be done on our part. Morally speaking, not all means are justified to reach the ideal (or better) situation. There is no way to deal with the practical problem of evil without getting into ethical inquiry, though many non-ethical (and non-philosophical) inquiries are needed too.

What about the existential problem of evil? The existential problem of evil refers to the phenomenon that people lose faith or go through a huge and deep change after confronting some evil (for a review, see: Peterson, 1998, ch. 7). Note that the theoretical solutions to the problem of evil will not be necessarily effective here, since in this case psychological aspects are also involved. Yet, this might be itself an instance of evil to deal with, the evil being people being hurt in this way and being unable to deal with the suffering. Similarly, this counts as evil for the theist if people lose faith without responding properly to the relevant considerations.

Furthermore, there are other ethical aspects to the existential problem of evil. Although the main issue might seem psychological, one can argue that the psychological reaction is (at least partly) grounded on the person's moral perceptions. A normal person facing a brutal killing would not merely come to the belief that something morally wrong is happening but would be, say, horrified and angered. Of course, the belief underlying the emotional reaction need not always be explicit. Still, it is plausible to think that people's emotional reactions, though psychological, are affected by their deep-rooted moral views.

It is noteworthy that it is rather obvious that ethical judgments play a central role in the formation and formulation of the problem of evil. The point to be emphasized is that there are relevant debates in the context of (meta)ethics, not properly reflected in the literature on the subject in the philosophy of religion. There seems to be a gap to be bridged.

## Reactions to the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil (henceforth meaning “the theoretical problem of evil”, unless otherwise stated) has invited different responses. Roughly speaking, the responses are of two kinds: theistic and atheistic. I take theistic responses to include all reactions to the effect that the problem of evil does not threaten theism. On the other hand, atheistic responses include all responses to the effect that the problem

provides a challenge for theism. Though, in principle, it seems possible for a theist to accept some atheistic response.

### **Theistic Approaches**

No doubt, some responses philosophers have adopted to deal with the problem are mainly metaphysical or epistemological. For example, consider an approach that relies only (or at least mainly) on the idea of possible worlds. One might say that although it might *seem* that a better world could be created instead of this one, it is not the case, and since the actual world is the best possible world. Defending that this world is the best possible world and that no better world is possible might be a theistic response to the problem of evil. A classic example is Leibnitz (Murray and Greenberg, 2016). Such maneuvers are metaphysical.

Similarly, there are epistemological approaches. One might resist the conclusion of the problem of evil, insisting that we do not know enough and we don't have enough epistemic capabilities to know the premises of the argument, and thus cannot acknowledge its conclusion. Some forms of skeptical theism are examples. These approaches suggest that perhaps not all responses to the problem of evil are mainly based on normative judgments. Although, it may turn out that the development of such responses would, in the end, need normative judgments.

Be that as it may, it seems that the majority of the theistic reactions to the problem of evil are ethical. Meanwhile, note that even the aforementioned examples of metaphysical and epistemological approaches will require some ethical discussions, or would benefit from them. Consider the first one, the best possible world response. Perhaps this response can resist the conclusion of a simple version of the problem of evil – why didn't God create a better world? However, a further question will arise – why did this world have to be created, at all? This can be not merely an inquiry out of curiosity, but a challenge, implicitly suggesting that if this is the best possible world, and that the best possible world includes such and such evils, no world at all would be morally preferable. Or, at least, a moral agent would not allow this best possible world, considering the evils it contains. The best possible world response is not enough on its own, and some elements that it can benefit from are ethical.

The same is true about the skeptical theistic approach. The skeptical theist needs to explain where and why we have epistemic limitations. For example, one might appeal to the ethical aspects of the problem to emphasize our limited knowledge – how can we know about the value comparisons, or how can we know the moral obligations of an agent such as God? Again, some maneuvers of ethical nature would be helpful to further such approaches.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I have put aside the point that all such judgments (say, that if we do have epistemic limitations then we should not rely on our limited knowledge and conclude things about God) might be understood as deontic judgments.

While not all responses to the problem of evil are merely or mainly ethical, the majority of responses to the problem of evil are so. This being said, such attempts and debates about them may be considered inquiries in ethical theory, broadly construed. In many cases, proponents of theistic responses to the problem of evil propose an ethical claim regarding either God or the world, which is supposed to eliminate the alleged conflict between the two. Here are some examples.

One might argue that (i) God is not *morally* good. The source of the problem, according to these philosophers, is that people have understood God as an agent like us, therefore expecting God to be caring or loving. God's goodness, if saved, is interpreted as metaphysical goodness. This is understood in different ways, including perfection. But what would justify giving up the common conception of God as morally good? This line of thought might be motivated by ideas about the source or nature of ethical norms.

For example, if God is just another (but maximally perfect) agent, and morality is a matter of rational agents, then moral principles apply to God. In that case, it is not easy to claim that God is not morally good. However, other views about the nature and source of morality may open other possibilities. Perhaps endorsing other views that ground morality on facts about human beings (which may be developed in various realist or non-realist forms), then there is room for God not to be morally good.<sup>5</sup>

This brings us to a more familiar approach: divine command theory. If what is good and what should be done is grounded on God's will, then the arguments from evil must be problematic. There is no way for God to go wrong. Compare this with some form of personal subjectivism to the effect that one should do what one wants to do at the moment. In that case, with some conceptions of "want", one hardly can go wrong, since one always does what one wants at the moment. Similarly, assuming some forms of divine command theory, there is no worry about the morality of God's actions.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it is not our concern here whether such an approach has any plausibility.

Another route to take is that (ii) God is morally good, but is not omnipotent. At face value, if the theistic response to the problem of evil is based on the limitations of God's power, it might seem to be metaphysical. However, it is also important how the limit on God's power is explained. One line of argument for limiting God's power is insisting on God's goodness. Theologically speaking, this sounds better than sheer limitation, which counts as a weakness. For example, one can propose a

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<sup>5</sup> To defend an atheistic response, Maizen (2017) argues that this line of thought fails. In fact, it doesn't seem easy for theists to let go of the idea of God's moral goodness.

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that a complete defence of this position requires an explanation about our intuitive ethical judgments that have *led* to the problem of evil. That is, it seems that there are evils in the world. It seems that according to this position, those are not in fact "evils", since they are somehow willed by God. Now, we need to know more about our intuitive ethical judgments – are they trustworthy at all, how we learn about morality, etc. In a similar line of thought, some have argued that some, many, or all of the theistic responses lead to scepticism about ethics. For example, see: Maitzen, 2009.



moral principle that limits God's world: interfering with the events of the world violates the autonomy of adult human beings or our valuable freedom, which is not permissible. Technically, this might not be a limitation on the side of power, indicating weakness. Be that as it may, these kinds of responses are also rooted in ethical ideas and invite further ethical inquiry.

Yet another line of thought is that (iii) God does not have any obligation to us, at least not the obligations which the arguments from evil assume. Obligations have grounds. I cannot blame people for not helping me if they do not have any obligation to help me. Similarly, to expect God to help us (or to not allow evil and the like), one needs to explain why exactly God is obligated to help us. Some have argued that God is morally good and omnipotent, yet there is no implication that God should, say, stop the evils or avoid creating a world with evils. Such an approach can be developed in different ways and directions. Recent examples include challenging the idea of the "perfect love" of God toward human beings (Rea, 2018, ch. 5) and God's specific relation to the world (Mooney, 2022).

An objection might be raised to the effect that if God is morally perfect, there is no need for any obligation. A perfect being should go beyond the call of duty, and do not only what is required, but what is supererogatory. Considering that the idea of supererogation is controversial among moral philosophers, evaluating these suggestions depends on the relevant debates.

Similar attempts have been done on the other side of the problem – regarding the world. First, one can go into detail about each instance of evil. For example, if the problem of evil is based on the badness of pain, an assessment of the badness of pain is helpful. It might turn out that the pain is not bad. Considering pain's evolutionary role and its survival value, it is arguably good for us. However, this line of defense has its limits. Perhaps some proposed evils are not ultimately evils. It doesn't sound promising to apply the same strategy to horrible particular cases of, say, rape and murder.

A rather relevant approach is appealing to the privation theory of evil. Traditionally, one way to deal with the problem of evil has been to propose a theory of value, to see if the alleged evils are in fact evils. For example, the privation theory is mainly about the nature of evil, claiming that it is a form of absence. However, it seems that the main motivation and application for the theory have been in the context of the problem of evil. If the alleged evils are mere privations, according to the proponents of this approach, they might not need much explanation. Evaluation of this theory of value, both its formulation and its relation with other positions in axiology, is an ethical inquiry.

Second, one popular approach is to develop a greater good theodicy (Langtry, 1998).<sup>7</sup> Philosophers have looked for valuable things in the world which are

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<sup>7</sup> Here I use the theodicy in the broad sense, meaning any theistic response to the problem of evil. It includes both theodicy and defence, as the distinction is not relevant here – and it might be unimportant basically. See: van Inwagen, 2006.

dependent on the alleged evils, and greater than them. Some of the most famous theodicies are in this group. Soul-making theodicy of John Hick is an example. According to a famous formulation of the problem of evil by William Rowe (1979), the challenge is to find a “greater good” for which the evils exist. Soul-making is the good we get, according to Hick ([1966] 2010, III and IV). Similar approaches are proposed based on the value of sympathy, care, etc.

In the same vein, the free will defense could be understood in this way. It seems that we should understand Plantinga’s free will defense (1977) as proposing a *greater good*. The idea is that a world with freedom would be better than a world without freedom, even if the former has more evils in it. (Then, it is argued that the valuable freedom has features, limiting what is possible for God to do.) Evils are bad, but freedom is worth it. As Plantinga writes, “[t]he Free Will Defense can be looked upon as an effort to show that there may be a very different kind of good that God can’t bring about without permitting evil” (Plantinga, [1977] 2002).

For these theodicies to work, three conditions need to be met. First, the theodicy needs to pick a value. Next, the evils in question (or God permitting them) must be necessary for that value to obtain. Finally, the value must be greater than the evils. A greater good theodicy might be challenged in each part. For example, imagine if “coming back to God” is introduced to be the greater good. Not everyone *agrees* that such things are valuable to help make sense of the evils in the world. In this regard, values that are *not* dependent on theological assumptions have a better chance. Similarly, a greater good theodicy that introduces “freedom” as its central value might be challenged concerning the second condition. It is not easy to show the necessary relation between all (kinds or instances) of the evils (or God permitting them) and that value. Finally, there is the worry about being a “greater” value. Consider the greater theodicy which finds soul-making to be the greater good. One can easily acknowledge that soul-making is valuable and even if one accepts that there is some necessary relation between evils and soul-making, the question remains whether, ultimately, this outweighs the evils.

### **Atheistic Approaches**

Atheistic approaches, insisting on the *problem* of evil for theism, are also mainly ethical. First, they are direct challenges to the abovementioned claims in the theistic responses, especially regarding the world, such as the question of whether the evils of the world are in fact evil, or what can or cannot outweigh such evils. Furthermore, there can be more explicit and direct moral attacks on theodicies, such as on the greater good theodicies.

One challenge against theistic responses to the problem of evil is whether it is morally permissible to prefer some greater good, even if it requires the suffering of innocent human beings. This is mainly the same question mentioned before, *i.e.*, even if this is the best possible world, is it necessarily better than no world at all?

That is, if the moral principles applying to God are similar to ours, it is not clear that one can allow evils affecting innocent people merely to achieve a greater good.<sup>8</sup>

This being said, anyone who defends some atheistic response is, first, defending some ethical judgments involved in the very problem of evil, and, second, defending some ethical judgments to show that theistic attempts to resist the problem of evil fail.

So far, some standard lines of argument in the debate are overviewed. However, there are additional worries about theodicies, shaping a growing area in the recent literature. Some philosophers have raised worries against theodicies in general, instead of focusing on this or that proposal or its specific argument.

One main challenge is the ethical implications of theodicies. For example, it is argued that some or all of the theodicies have the potential to lead to moral skepticism. These theodicies try to convince us that what seems to be evil is not actually evil; overall, it is good as it brings about a great amount of value. Therefore, accepting such theodicies makes us suspicious of our moral intuition in general (see: footnote 6).

This can be done in two different ways. First, according to the argument, the theodicy can lead to skepticism as long as our first-order intuitions play a central role in our understanding of the right and the good. In that case, the very problem of evil may resolve, as there are not the required normative ingredients to have the problem in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Second, this may be understood as an answer to the problem of evil by rejecting its normative premises. This is compatible with having some normative judgments, very different from commonsense morality, say, thinking that the source of underrating right and wrong is some specific religious manuscript or procedure. Either way, intuitions of commonsense morality are undermined, which is not a welcomed consequence.

Another ethical challenge about the theodicy is that it weakens people's moral motivations. If suffering helps to improve sympathy or soul-making, why should one try to eliminate it? Or, more worrisome, why should one avoid making people suffer? These are sides of the same question: if God exists and God has knowledge, power, and benevolence, why does not God intervene and help people?

In response, one might suggest that God does not do this so that we can do it and gain the good. This is not as helpful as it might seem. For this proposal to work, one needs to explain when it is morally permissible for an agent (God) not to act and let us act, even when there is not much chance that we can do it. Consider a parallel

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<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere (Eslami and Saedimehr, 2021) I have discussed the moral objection to greater good theodicies. To argue against theodicies based on this argument, one needs to defend the idea that the moral principles appealed to (say, do not harm, or do not harm to bring about greater good) are absolute. However, it seems that such principles are not exceptionless. Meanwhile, this is not enough for a theodicy. Even if we agree that humans (limited in all sorts of aspects) may be permitted to violate the moral principles in question, it is not automatically clear if the evils in question can also be exceptions and why the same route is open to God.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Jakob Werkmäster for this point.

case by Maitzen (2017). A kid is drowning. I am there and I can help. But there is also someone there that is much more equipped and better suited to do the job in all respects. Is it permissible for that person to just wait and let me act? And if something goes wrong, who is blameworthy? Whatever answers we give to these questions, we can agree that these are normative claims, playing important roles in the debate on the problem of evil.

Similarly, and more generally, there are discussions about the relation between ordinary moral rules and normative principles and how they apply (or do not apply) to God. One example in the Christian tradition is the Pauline Principle (Romans 3:8), according to which evil is not allowed even for the sake of good (Sterba, 2019). Therefore, one can ask whether it is permissible for an agent to do badly even though good consequences are predicted. Another issue is the Principle of Double Effect. According to this principle, one's intentions are also relevant to the evaluation of actions. For example, it differs if one intends bad consequences, or if one intends to do good and at the same time *foresee* that there would be unintended bad consequences. Aside from the controversy about the principle itself, some have argued that this principle does not apply to God and therefore cannot be appealed to in theodicies, because God has everything in perfection (see: Sterba, 2017).

Be that as it may, it seems that discussion of ethical principles and judgments, specifically in the context of the problem of evil, would hugely impact the debate. This is, of course, acknowledged in theory and practice by some authors, though still seems to be the minority approach.<sup>10</sup>

Illustrated in this way, it might seem that it is obvious and even trivial that the problem of evil is mainly an ethical problem, or at least has important ethical aspects. However, this is not how the literature on the subject has perceived the issue. There are even explicit statements to that effect. As James P. Sterba writes in his edited volume *Ethics and the Problem of Evil*,

What is a bit surprising, however, is that philosophers currently working on the problem of evil have yet to avail themselves of relevant resources from ethical theory that could similarly advance the discussion of the problem. (Sterba, 2017)

There are also other ways to point out the problem, roughly sketched here and in need of independent evaluation. For one thing, we can look into textbooks. By reading the textbooks of philosophy of religion, we learn a good deal about contemporary epistemology and metaphysics. These issues are either explicitly

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard, we can also think of questions of metatheodicy, about the very practice of developing and evaluating theodicies. Here again there seem to be ethical considerations concerning what we do and what we ought to be doing when doing theodicy. For example, one may argue against the very practice of developing theodicies (Trakakis, 2013). On the other hand, one may think of considerations for developing theodicies, hoping for consoling suffering people, as might be inspired Miguel de Unamuno's "San Manuel Bueno, Mártir". Though here I take the suggestion of theodicy as axiology (and, ethical inquiry, more generally) counting for theodicy, I do not claim that it settles this metatheodicy question about theodicying.

discussed, suggested in the readings, or cited along the way. Similarly, many works of epistemology and metaphysics are included in the bibliographies at the end of well-cited books and papers on the issue. The same is not true about ethical theory. Another way to depict the problem is to consider the authors. There are more prominent metaphysicians and epistemologists who also discuss the problem of evil. This is not the same in the case of ethicists, though there are exceptions.

Furthermore, we see how the debate on the problem of evil and the relevant metaphysical and epistemological issues have had mutual influences on each other. Familiar examples might be the cornea principle in epistemology or the relevance of conceptions of free will in metaphysics. The same is not obvious in the case of ethics. One clear example of this gap is how little of the recent changes in the ethics literature has entered the debates on the problem of evil. As Scanlon (2014) points out, one of the main shifts in ethical theory of the last few decades is the centrality of reasons. Many of the main questions in ethics are reconstructed and explored in terms of reasons. Furthermore, this has made it possible to connect different areas of inquiry about the normative, now in a unified field of inquiry. Therefore, some rich, vast, and growing literature on this subject has developed. Yet, not many of these shifts are reflected in the current literature on the problem of evil.

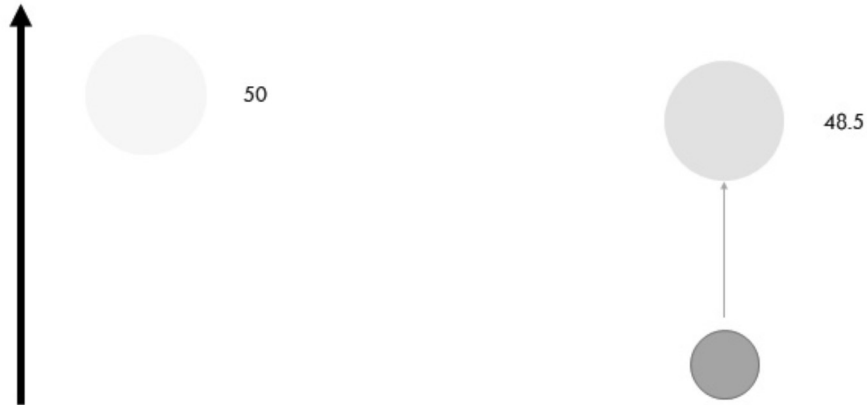
## Case of the Moral Progress Approach

So far, it has been suggested that there is a way to consider the problem of evil as an ethical problem. That is, the literature on the problem of evil could benefit from the various debates in ethics. Furthermore, this suggests that we can consider some inquiries into theodicy as ethical inquiries. That is, such attempts may be relevant and even fruitful for ethical theory, even if all theodicies are doomed to fail. Here is a brief example.

Dan Egonsson and I (2021) have proposed a Moral Progress Approach to the problem of evil. Evils in the world have led us to think that a world without evils would be better than this one. This thought could be developed into variations of the problem of evil. In contrast, we have argued that it may be possible for a world, with evils, to be better than its counterpart without evils. In doing so, we consciously rely on axiological claims about progress. The basic idea is that among the sources of value of progress is progress itself (Egonsson, 2018). Therefore, a world that has progressed from a lower point, B, to a better one, A, may be more valuable than a world just being at point A, due to the value of progress itself.

A parallel case in the personal domain can better illustrate and motivate the thought: a life including some progress from B to A may be more valuable than a life without any progress, just being at level A, or even A+, which is a bit higher than A. This suggests that progress is valuable, and its value is not merely from its endpoint.

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And to develop this idea into a theodicy and argue for its distinctiveness, we have to address various other questions from the axiology of the world to contrasting features of progress (compared with, say, soul-making). Note that it is one thing to argue for the possibility of a world with evils being better than a counterpart without evils, and it is another to claim that our world is better than a counterpart without evils. The aim is to defend the more modest claim while motivating further developments of the view, moving toward a form of theodicy.<sup>11</sup>

In the same vein, to further develop and defend the Moral Progress Approach one needs to get into the axiological questions involved. Here is an example. It seems that a more specific conception of progress is required for such an approach to have any viability. For one thing, to rely on the value of moral progress in the context of the problem of evil raises an extra question about how to value progress (or how to measure progress, so that we can compare different instances of it and their values).

Imagine that I have progressed from point A to point B, and this is valuable. But does it affect the value of the progress I have had for *how long* I have been at point B?<sup>12</sup> Here is the parallel case regarding worlds: granted that a progressing world has some value that the non-progressing world lacks, does it matter for *how long* the world has been at the lower point and after how long it has progressed? This is important, because even if we accept the rough claim of the Moral Progress Approach, we may wonder whether we may ask for a world with the same amount of progress, but with less time waiting for the progress to come.

It seems that applying axiological claims about progress in the context of the problem of evil may turn out to be helpful to better explore and understand progress,

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<sup>11</sup> Whether such a theodicy is successful is another issue. To that end, there are, to be sure, important objections to deal with. However, the relative strength of the view compared to other similar options in the literature (say, soul-making theodicy) is important. The Moral Progress Approach may be easier to defend in this regard.

<sup>12</sup> I have benefited from conversations with Mahmoud Morvarid on this.

whatever the result be as a *theodicy*. And the abovementioned suggestion also was merely one aspect of the issue. The same seems to be true for other questions in ethics, broadly understood. Such attempts though explored in the context of the problem of evil, and even if there is no hope for theodicies to work, may be seen as inquiries into axiology of the world and more. *This* is the world we live in, and it matters to our relationship with it how valuable it is.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the editors and readers of the *Festschrift*, especially Jakob Werkmäster and Frits Gävertsson, for their invitation and comments on the earlier draft. I am sincerely happy to have the chance to express my gratitude to the three philosophers this volume is for – Dan Egonsson, Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, and Björn Petersson.

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