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Wright on Theodicy Reflections on *Evil and the Justice of God*

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For the past four decades, the problem of evil has been one of the most important and widely discussed topics in analytic philosophy of religion. For those participating in this discussion, what the problem of evil *is*, fundamentally, is just the problem of figuring out whether and to what extent the existence of evil counts as evidence against the existence of God. Nobody doubts that evil is problematic in other respects too. And, of course, it seems almost silly to mention that nobody doubts that one of the main problems with evil is just that . . . well . . . evil is *bad*, and we would like for it to be dealt with and to go away. But this has not stopped any of us from thinking that the *philosophical* problem of evil is worth our time, and well worth the ink that has been spilled to talk about it.

In *Evil and the Justice of God*, however, N. T. Wright presses the point that attempting to solve the philosophical problem of evil is an *immature* response to the existence of evil—a response that belittles the real problem of evil, which is just the fact that evil is *bad* and needs to be dealt with.¹ Though Wright does not spend a great deal of time defending this point, it is reiterated several times in the text and seems to play a significant role not only in motivating Wright's own conception of what the *real* problem of evil is, but also in motivating his approach to solving that problem. If the point is correct, then the vast majority of work on the problem of evil in the analytic philosophical tradition has been worthless at best, and possibly even pernicious (by virtue of trivializing a serious theological issue).

ABSTRACT: In *Evil and the Justice of God*, N. T. Wright raises two objections against the project of theodicy: that it minimizes the badness of evil, and that it manifests a kind of hubris. In addition to recommending the abandonment of theodical efforts, Wright suggests that we turn our attention instead to biblical narratives in an attempt to more fully understand and appreciate what God is doing to deal with the evil we find in this world. In this paper, I deny that theodical efforts minimize the badness of evil, and I argue (drawing on recent work by Eleonore Stump) that following Wright's advice and attending more closely to biblical narratives might actually provide a way of pursuing theodicy without the sort of hubris that Wright decries.

1. N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006). Subsequent parenthetical references are to this text.

As you might expect, I am not inclined to endorse this sort of sweeping indictment of the entire field of research on the philosophical problem evil. (I sort of doubt that Wright really meant to either). But I do think that there is a kernel of truth in what I take to be Wright's fundamental objection to attempts to solve the philosophical problem of evil. In the first section of what follows, I will try briefly to explain why. I will then go on to argue that, despite this fact, certain efforts at solving the problem of evil avoid Wright's objection. Indeed, drawing on recent work by Eleonore Stump, I will argue that one perfectly legitimate way to try to solve the philosophical problem of evil is to follow precisely what seems to be the main piece of advice in *Evil and the Justice of God*: namely, to look more seriously than we have at the attitudes taken toward evil by the human authors of and characters in the Bible, and to attend more carefully to what the Bible says about how God deals with evil.

Wright against Theodicy

In the literature on the philosophical problem of evil, there have been, broadly speaking, two kinds of solution offered: (a) solutions that attempt to show how God might be justified in permitting evil of the sort and amount we find in our world, and (b) solutions that attempt to explain why, though we have no idea how God might be justified in permitting evil, the existence of the sort and amount of evil that we find in the world still does not count as reason to disbelieve in God. I will use the term "theodicy" to refer to any solution of the first type. (I thus ignore, for ease of exposition, a familiar distinction between *theodicy* and *defense*.) Moreover, when I talk of "the problem of evil," I will have in mind just what I have been calling the *philosophical* problem of evil—again, the problem of figuring out whether and to what extent the existence of evil of the sort and amount we find in our world is compatible with the existence of the all powerful, all knowing, perfectly good God of traditional theism.

Much of the literature on the problem of evil—both contemporary and historical—has focused on theodicy. According to Wright, however, this focus is misguided. Indeed, the project of theodicy, on his view, is immature and even pernicious. Thus, in the course of discussing "immature reactions" to evil, he writes:

Lashing out at those you perceive to be 'evil' in the hope of dealing with the problem [of evil]—say, dropping copious bombs on Iraq or Afghanistan because of September 11th 2001—is, in fact, the practical counterpart of those philosophical theories that purport to 'solve' the problem of evil. Various writers have suggested, for instance, that God allows evil because it creates the special conditions in which virtue can flourish. The thought that God decided to permit Auschwitz

because some heroes would emerge is hardly a solution to the problem. In the same way, the thousands of innocent civilians who died in Iraq and Afghanistan bear mute testimony to the fact that often such 'solutions' simply make the problem worse. . . . (28)

Later, he seems to characterize the effort at theodicy as something we ought to outgrow. Thus:

The big question of our time . . . can be understood in terms of how we address and live with the fact of evil in our world. Growing out of the traditional philosophers' and theologians' puzzlement, the problem of evil as we face it today on our streets and in our world won't wait for clever metaphysicians to solve it. (39)

A moment's reflection reveals that these are serious charges. Attempting theodicy is somehow akin to carpet bombing our enemies; and it is an intellectual project that we must "grow out of"—an opportunity, perhaps, to manifest a kind of cleverness; but not a serious project to engage in for people who are genuinely concerned about evil. But the question that receives no very explicit answer in Wright's book is just this: *Why* should we think of the project of theodicy this way? In what way, exactly, is it the intellectual counterpart of carpet bombing?

So far as I can tell, lurking behind the charges leveled in the passages just quoted are two different kinds of objection to the project of theodicy—one misguided, in my view; the other on target. The first objection is that theodicy minimizes either the badness of evil or the goodness of God's creation. Thus, he writes:

We cannot and must not soften the blow; we cannot and must not pretend that evil isn't that bad after all. That is the way back to cheap modernism. As I said earlier, that is the intellectual counterpart to the immature political reaction of thinking that a few well-placed bombs can eliminate 'evil' from the world. No: for the Christian, the problem is how to understand and celebrate the goodness and God-giveness of creation and how, at the same time, to understand and face up to the reality and seriousness of evil. It is easy to 'solve' the problem by watering down one side or the other, saying either that the world isn't really God's good creation or that evil isn't really that bad after all. (40–1)

The second objection is that there is some *hubris* in the attempt at theodicy. The relation between the two objections is just that both failings—the hubris involved in theodicy and the minimization of the badness of evil—are, Wright seems to think, a product of our failure fully to appreciate the depth and degree to which God's beautiful creation has been dipped in and tainted by evil. It is easy enough to see why such a failure to appreciate the depths of the problem might lead one to minimize the badness of evil; but it will take a bit of explanation to show how it might also lead to hubris.

Wright makes it clear that one of the reasons why carpet bombing the enemy is an immature reaction to evil is that it neglects the way in which we ourselves are tainted by evil. As he puts it in one context,

The gospels tell the story of Jesus as a story in which the line between good and evil runs not between Jesus and his friends on the one hand and everyone else on the other . . . but *down the middle of Jesus' followers themselves*. (82, emphasis in original)

This feature of the gospel is precisely what is missed by those who think that we can simply eliminate evil from the world by first identifying the evil people (them, not us) and then by bombing evil out of existence. Evil permeates the world, and it permeates us. Only by failing to see this can we even begin to think that the problem of the existence of evil could be solved in so simple a way as dividing the world into good guys and bad guys and then blasting the bad guys off the face of the earth.

But just as it is a sign of immaturity unreflectively to group oneself with the “good guys” who ought to be ridding the world of “bad guys,” so too, Wright seems to say, it is a sign of immaturity to think of oneself as possessing clear enough moral vision to determine what sorts of reasons might or might not justify God in permitting certain kinds of evil and suffering. Here again I quote him at some length:

. . . ever since the garden, ever since God’s grief over Noah, ever since Babel and Abraham, the story has been about the messy way in which God has had to work to bring the world out of the mess. Somehow, in a way we are inclined to find offensive, God has to get his boots muddy and, it seems, to get his hands bloody, to put the world back to rights. If we declare, as many have done, that we would rather it were not so, we face a counter-question: Which bit of dry, clean ground are we standing on that we should pronounce on the matter with such certainty? Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared that the primal sin of humanity consisted in putting the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God. That is one of the further dark mysteries of Genesis 3: there must be *some* substantial continuity between what we mean by good and evil and what God means, otherwise we are in moral darkness indeed. But it serves as a warning to us not to pontificate with too much certainty about what God should and shouldn’t have done. (58–9)

In short, just as a properly mature appreciation of the way in which we ourselves are tainted by evil ought to make us resist carving the population of the world up into white hats and black hats, so too it ought to make us doubt the need for theodicy (as if people as corrupt as we are have any business sitting in judgment over a pure and holy God), and it also ought to make us doubt our ability to find one.

What shall we think of these two objections? I am inclined to doubt that there is anything *essentially* trivializing about the project of theodicy. To be sure, there is something deeply appalling about suggesting, for example, that God might permit the rape and murder of a small child so as to build character in her parents. More controversially, one might also think that there is something appalling about, say, Leibnizian theodicies, according to which our world is the best of all possible worlds, and the many and varied instances of evil fit into our world in roughly the way in which various instances of an “ugly color” might fit into an overall beautiful painting. But, at best, all this shows is that *some attempts* at theodicy are bad ones. Why go on to conclude from this that just *any* effort at showing why God might permit certain kinds of evil and suffering must either minimize the badness of evil or minimize the goodness of the world? At the very least, a lot more argument would be needed to make such a claim plausible.

The second objection, on the other hand, seems right on target. Indeed, in recent years, many philosophers (myself included) have turned away from attempts at theodicy, advocating instead a position known as “skeptical theism.”² And their reasons for doing so have been roughly in line with what I have taken to be Wright’s second objection to theodical projects. At the heart of skeptical theism is the idea that our cognitive faculties are so limited that there is no reason to believe that we would be able to see what goods actually or even possibly justify God in permitting the various kinds of suffering we find in the world. And it is not implausible to think that one of the reasons why our faculties are so limited—one reason why our moral vision is so darkened—is just the fact that, as Wright highlights, we ourselves are tainted by evil.

But once the central thesis of skeptical theism is granted, the problem of evil as I have characterized it is solved, though not by theodicy. For the existence of some sort of evil counts as evidence against the existence of God only if we have reason to think that a good God, if he existed, would not be justified in permitting that sort of evil. But, says the skeptical theist, since we have no reason to think that we could tell what goods might justify God in permitting the sorts of evil we find in the world, we also have no reason to think, for any evil we might find, that God could not be justified in permitting it. Thus, the existence of evil does not count as evidence against the existence of God.

Not surprisingly, many find this “solution” to the problem of evil unsatisfying. But (philosophical objections to the solution aside) the dissatisfaction arises primarily from the fact that what we would *like* are definite answers to questions about why God permits this or that sort of evil; and these

2. For a useful overview and references, see Michael Bergmann’s “Skeptical Theism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

are precisely the sorts of questions that, if the skeptical theist is right, we are unequipped to answer.

In sum, then, I reject the suggestion that theodicy essentially minimizes either the goodness of creation or the badness of evil; but I think that the kernel of truth in Wright's rejection of theodicy lies (if I read him right) in his view that certain attempts at theodicy reflect an overestimation of our cognitive abilities and an underestimation of the depths to which they have been infected by evil.

But now does it follow from this that *all* attempts at theodicy are hopeless? Not obviously. In fact, a case can be made for the conclusion that one way of providing a theodicy is to follow Wright's own advice and take a close look at the attitudes toward evil that we find in the Bible, and, most importantly, at what God has done throughout history and in the person and work of Jesus Christ to deal with evil. In the next section, I draw on the work of Eleonore Stump to argue briefly for this conclusion.

Theodicy and Biblical Narrative

Suppose the skeptical theist is right: Our cognitive faculties are so limited that we have no good reason to think that we could identify goods that might justify God in permitting many of the sorts of evils that we find in our world. Still, it does not follow from this that we cannot come to see clearly the truth of the following proposition:

- (T) There are goods that justify God in permitting all of the various kinds of evil that we find in the world.

Just as we do not need to be able to identify particular electrons in order to be justified in believing that there are some, so too we do not need to be able to identify particular God-justifying goods in order to be justified in believing that there are some.

How might we come to be justified in believing (T) even in the absence of identifying particular God-justifying goods? Here is an easy way: We come to believe in God on the basis of argument or religious experience; we then infer from the existence of God, together with the existence of the various kinds of evil that we find in the world, that (T) is true. But, of course, demonstrating the truth of (T) in this way does not count as offering a theodicy. For we have not come to see the truth of (T) directly, as it were. Though we have inferred the truth of (T), we have not come to understand the goodness of God in such a way that we can just see that *that sort of goodness* is compatible with the permitting of this or that evil. If we could identify particular goods that justify God, then we would have the right sort of direct appreciation of (T). But there may be another way of getting that.

In *Wandering in Darkness*, the manuscript based on her Gifford Lectures, Eleonore Stump aims to provide a theodicy via reflection on biblical narratives that portray God's dealings with suffering human beings. Stump's treatment of the biblical narratives is masterful, well worth extended discussion and reflection in its own right. For purposes here, however, what is most relevant is just her methodology, and her justification for that methodology. For if what she says in defense of her particular way of approaching the problem of evil is correct, then it is possible to arrive at theodicy via reflection on biblical narrative *without ever supposing that it is possible for us to discover God-justifying reasons for permitting particular instances of suffering*.

The main novelty in Stump's approach to the problem of evil (at least from the point of view of the analytic philosophical tradition within which she writes) is her attempt to arrive at theodicy by way of an extended literary-critical treatment of a variety of biblical narratives. Rather than treating, say, the story of Job or the story of Abraham and Isaac as brief toy examples to illustrate particular principles that then go on to get discussed in the analytic mode, she presents these and other stories in full detail, tries as much as possible to help us understand the motives, desires, and experiences of the characters involved, and aims in so doing to show us that we can learn philosophically useful things from the narratives that simply cannot be expressed propositionally. I cannot here present her full defense of this methodology; but I can at least offer a brief sketch.

First some terminology. According to Stump, the biblical narratives that she discusses—the story of Job, the story of Abraham and Isaac, the story of Samson, and so on—are *second person accounts* of the events they relate. A second person account, in her terminology, is just a narrative that communicates the content of a *second person experience*. A second person experience is, roughly, a conscious experience of another conscious person *as* a person. A conversation with your child, an exchange of glances at a coffee shop, a hug—these are paradigm instances of second person experiences, to be contrasted, say, with a surgeon's "objectifying" experience of an unconscious patient on an operating table or with your own conscious awareness of yourself.

This terminology in hand, we can now present the main elements of Stump's defense of her methodology.

- (1) Second person *experiences* provide a particular kind of nonpropositional knowledge—knowledge that simply cannot be conveyed as "knowledge *that*."
- (2) Second person *accounts* are able to communicate roughly the same knowledge that one gets from a second person experience by making that experience available to us through the narrative.

- (3) Many biblical narratives—in particular, the ones Stump considers in the manuscript—are second person accounts of suffering human beings' second person experiences of God.
- (4) Some of the knowledge gained via biblical narrative can be put to philosophical use in formulating a theodicy.

If all of these claims are right, then there will be value for the project of theodicy in trying to address the problem of evil by way of extended consideration of biblical narratives. As I have said, I cannot here provide in detail Stump's defense of these claims. But I do want to provide a very brief indication of why she endorses the first claim; and I will also register a concern about the fourth claim.

On behalf of the first claim, Stump adapts a familiar example from the literature on materialism in the philosophy of mind. In the familiar example, we are invited to consider a woman—Mary—who has all of the physical information about the color red that one might ever want, but who has never actually experienced the color red.³ We are then invited to ask whether Mary *learns* anything when she experiences red for the first time. Many think that she does; and those who think this typically say that what she learns—roughly, *what it is like to experience redness*—is something that goes beyond any of the physical information that she has. Various conclusions have been drawn from this example; but at least one conclusion one might draw (if one is convinced that Mary learns something) is that some of the things we might learn cannot be expressed propositionally. (For if what it is like to experience red could be expressed propositionally, it would have been among the information she had prior to experiencing it—in which case she would not have learned anything upon experiencing it.) And likewise, Stump says, if we suppose that Mary had been deprived not of the experience of red but of second person experiences of other persons, in this case too she would learn something upon first meeting another person (say, her mother)—and this would be so even if she had all of the propositional information she could possibly want about persons, personal interactions, and the particular person whom she met for the first time. This, Stump argues, lends support to the idea that there is information conveyed in second person experience that cannot be expressed propositionally.

If we take this claim seriously, however, the fourth element of Stump's defense of her methodology starts to look problematic. To see the problem clearly, it will help to quote a brief passage from her manuscript. She writes:

The problem of evil is, in a sense, a question about interpersonal relations, insofar as the problem has to do with possible morally sufficient reasons for God, an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good

3. Some of the most important discussions of this argument can be found in Peter Ludlow et al., eds., *There's Something about Mary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

person, to allow human persons to suffer as they do. The narratives in the subsequent chapters present for us second-person experiences between a loving God and suffering human beings. They are therefore, in effect, descriptions of (part of) a world in which God exists and has a morally sufficient reason for allowing human beings to suffer. If we can learn from the second-person accounts of the narrative the [non-propositional] knowledge they have to convey, then we can use that knowledge in the . . . philosophical project of formulating a defense and spelling out the nature of God's morally sufficient reason.⁴

If this is right, however, then we face the following puzzle: If what we glean from the second person accounts provided by the biblical narratives is (as Stump seems to suggest) a nonpropositional understanding of what justifies God in permitting human beings to suffer, how could that knowledge possibly be put to use in *spelling out* (presumably propositionally) a story about what justifies God in permitting human beings to suffer? On the other hand, if the narratives give us the resources for an explicit theodicy, then it would seem that whatever knowledge we gain from them that is of relevance to the project of theodicy could, in principle, be gained apart from reflection on the biblical narratives—in which case such reflection is not nearly as indispensable as Stump seems to think that it is.

I am not entirely sure how Stump would want to resolve this tension; but neither am I convinced that it is irresolvable. In any case, my goal here is not to press the objection but rather to point out that, regardless of whether what we learn from biblical narrative can be put to use in generating an *explicit* theodicy, if Stump is right about the other claims that support her methodology, reflection on biblical narrative might nevertheless provide us with all of the resources for a *satisfying* (even if nonexplicit) theodicy. The reason is simple: As Stump notes in the passage just quoted, what we might glean from attention to the right sorts of biblical narratives is *nonpropositional* direct insight into the fact that a perfectly good, loving God can be justified in permitting exactly the sorts and amounts of evil that we find in our world. In other words, we can come to see in a direct way the consistency of God's goodness with the existence of evil; and so we can come to see in a direct way the truth of (T). But seeing the truth of (T) in a direct way suffices for theodicy. And, importantly, if Stump is right about claims (1)–(3), then seeing this is fully consistent with the suggestion that we might never be able to articulate, or even fully grasp, God's specific reasons for permitting the suffering that he permits. Skeptical theism is left standing, hubris is avoided, but theodicy is nonetheless provided.

4. Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered some of what N. T. Wright has to say against the project of theodicy, and I have defended three conclusions: first, that one of his reasons for rejecting theodicy seems to be unsound; second, that his other, apparently main reason for rejecting theodicy is right on target; but, third, despite this fact, certain ways of doing theodicy escape the objection. One of the more important pieces of advice in *Evil and the Justice of God* is that, in thinking about the problem of evil, we ought to attend more fully to what God himself has done to deal with evil, and that the way to do this is to pay closer attention to the biblical texts. My main goal in this paper has simply been to argue that, far from having to set aside the philosophical problem of evil in order to follow this advice, following it might actually be a way of acquiring the resources for solving that problem.