

## SELF-DECEPTION AND COSMIC DISORDER IN THE BOOK OF JOB

David J. Rosner

**ABSTRACT:** The Book of Job fundamentally involves the confrontation (or lack thereof) with the apparent upending of the universe's entire moral order. This paper will employ the concept of self-deception as put forth primarily in twentieth-century existential philosophy (specifically Heidegger and Sartre) to explain the behavior of Job's three 'friends' – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – in the face of this apparent moral chaos. In order to expand our understanding of this theme, the paper will also access, secondarily, a number of other theoretical frameworks, as follows: "trauma-based" Biblical interpretations, the idea of the "social construction" of moral order (as discussed in classic texts in the Sociology of Religion – Eliade and Berger) as well as the "just world hypothesis" as articulated in recent work in social psychology.

**KEYWORDS:** Authenticity; Chaos; Disorder; Justice,

### INTRODUCTION: EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE BOOK OF JOB

Self-deception has been analyzed extensively in twentieth-century existential philosophy, especially in the thought of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. While these analyses were not written to apply specifically to the Book of Job, they underscore how embedded in human consciousness the phenomenon of self-deception is, and how we evade disturbing truths so as not to have to confront the abyss.

For Heidegger the abyss is that of finitude. Heidegger's *Being and Time* contains an analysis of "inauthenticity" – a mode of being in which we flee into a "public" consciousness where background noise, gossip, "idle-talk" and other forms of distraction prevent our confrontation with silence and solitude. In states such as silence and solitude, we are forced to confront "the nothing", which causes anxiety

because it reflects the human condition as being-towards-death. For Sartre it is the abyss of radical freedom that we find frightening.

Sartre's analysis of "bad faith" in *Being and Nothingness* is illustrated through the example of a girl on a date who, while aware of the romantic intentions of her suitor, chooses not to acknowledge them, discussing everything but these advances, as they confront her with the uncomfortable need for choice and action, i.e., the vast open space of possibilities and all of the responsibilities this freedom entails.

How do such forms of self-deception apply to the Biblical Book of Job? In the case of Job's 'friends', their theodicies serve to prevent them from having to confront the abyss of moral chaos and our ignorance as to how this moral chaos fits into a larger, coherent (divine) plan. I seek in this paper to interpret God's anger at Job's friends from an existential perspective – that the theodicies of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar actually constitute of a form of 'inauthenticity', and that God is angry at them not merely because of their lack of empathy for Job, but because of their fundamental dishonesty in dealing with his predicament<sup>1</sup>.

#### FACING THE TRUTH

After suffering the horrific deaths of his children and the destruction of all his property, Job, by all accounts a righteous man begins to question not only God's benevolence but the very existence of an intelligible moral order in the universe. It doesn't matter if a person is righteous or evil. Job says: "...it is all one...He destroys blameless and wicked alike."(Job, 9-22)<sup>2</sup>. This denial of a cosmic moral order is a radical notion, antithetical not merely to Judaism but to the religious impulse in general. Job's 'friends', while first offering him comfort, soon grow impatient with (and threatened by) Job's anger at God, and accuse him of impiety. They argue that he must have sinned to deserve his fate and they basically repeat the standard lines of theodicy – that there is an intelligible moral order in the universe in which the wicked are punished and the good rewarded. For example, Bildad, in 8-3, asks Job rhetorically: "Does God pervert justice? Does the almighty pervert what is right?"

Job doesn't merely accuse his friends of emphasizing the positive aspects of a bad situation and minimizing the negatives. Job actually accuses them of uttering outright lies in their attempts to defend God. Job says to his friends: "you go on smearing truth with your falsehoods, one and all stitching a patchwork of lies." (13-4) What are the

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rev. Theodor Damian of Metropolitan College of New York for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The paper also benefited from interesting conversations had with Rabbi Gordon Tucker and with Prof. Phil Washburn of NYU's Liberal Studies Program.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from the Book of Job (left as parenthetical references in the body of the text of this paper) are taken from *The Oxford Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

implications of this, especially as God says to Eliphaz in the Epilogue: “My anger is aroused against you and your two friends, because, unlike my servant Job, you have not spoken as you ought about me” (42-7)? Why is God angry with Job’s ‘friends’? How can the ideas of ‘inauthenticity’ and self-deception as found in existential philosophy help us understand this paradox?

God is angry with the three ‘friends’ not merely because they have given dishonest, unsympathetic responses to Job in his time of suffering, but also, and more importantly, because they are lying to themselves and to God. From our finite human perspective, which is the only experience we know, Job’s lament about the absence of cosmic justice often seems true. There often seems to be no coherent moral order governing the treatment of either the wicked or the righteous. Job’s ‘friends’ are deceiving themselves because they know that Job’s complaint is legitimate but they won’t acknowledge it to Job, God or to themselves.

In the beginning of the story, after Job loses everything, the three ‘friends’ simply sat with Job in silence, and this was the most authentic response they showed throughout the story. Silence was in fact the most “authentic” response the friends could have given at this time. Silence essentially functions as a means of communicating compassion for and solidarity with, Job, a mutual recognition that no one really knows (nor can know) exactly why so many central events of our lives unfold in the particular ways they do. But the situation quickly degenerated. When Job started to ask legitimate questions of God the ‘friends’ became threatened, and began to engage in patterns of rationalization and self-deception. They repeated platitudes in order to convince Job and themselves that what happened makes sense. But from the human perspective, the tragedy that befell Job doesn’t make sense and perhaps never will.<sup>3</sup> God is aware that we often experience the world this way – this is the point of his speech towards the end of the book, which offers a litany of examples illustrating our cosmic ignorance. As Elaine Phillips writes: “What Job said represented reality, although it was an incomplete picture, as is that of any human observer”<sup>4</sup>. The world makes sense from God’s perspective but from the finite human standpoint it often does not. But the angry responses of Job’s ‘friends’ show no confrontation with, or acceptance of the brutality and randomness of life as it is often experienced. This is

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<sup>3</sup> See Harold .S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (NY: Anchor, 1981). 53-54.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine A. Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully: Jobs Friends and Job”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (2008). P. 35. Religious traditions other than Judaism also illustrate our cosmic ignorance regarding suffering and the mystery of God’s ways. Compare the parable of the blind man in the Gospel of John. When Jesus came across a man born blind, his disciples asked “Why was this man born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents?” ‘It is not that he or his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered; ‘he was born blind so that God’s power might be displayed in curing him.’” John, ch. 9, *Oxford Study Bible*, p. 1377.

why their responses are ‘inauthentic’, and ring hollow throughout the story.<sup>5</sup> Indeed a truly ‘authentic’ response from Job’s friends would have been an honest admission that they simply don’t know why the events unfolded the way they did. They needed to just admit their ignorance and not presume to know God’s reasons, as such knowledge is beyond all finite human capacity. They only could have stated their sincere hope and belief that these reasons in fact exist and that the universe is ultimately good in the end.

#### SACRED COSMOS OR MEANINGLESS ABYSS?

Perhaps the reactions of Job’s friends throughout the story are not really examples of any sort of individual self-deceptions but rather a “human, all too human” attempt to maintain a moral order to shield them from the horrific spectre of cosmic disorder and moral chaos raised by Job’s predicament. The human condition is finite, and events in our lives often seem contingent and random. How to make sense out of these brutal features of our lived experience? Peter Berger’s classic work in the sociology of religion, *The Sacred Canopy*, defines this process as one of the most basic and fundamental features of religion itself. Berger writes:

The socially constructed world is above all an ordering of experience. A meaningful order or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meaning of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. ...religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant... The socially established *nomos* may thus be understood...as a shield against terror....<sup>7</sup>

A similar point is also made by Mircea Eliade. Eliade writes how the experience of suffering (like that of Job) needs to be placed in a meaningful context in order to be even remotely tolerable. For Eliade, what is intolerable is the idea of a meaningless or ‘absurd’ suffering.<sup>8</sup> Suffering cannot be tolerated “as a meaningless experience”...“if it was possible to tolerate such sufferings, it is precisely because they seem neither gratuitous nor arbitrary.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Others have raised the issue of authenticity in the book of Job, but with a different emphasis. Hence, the biblical scholar Francis Anderson, noting how Job is the only one who honestly talks *to* God, as opposed to talking, like the ‘friends’, merely *about* God, mentions that Job is “the only authentic theologian in the book.” See F. Andersen, *Job* (IVP Academic, 2008), 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967). 19.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954). 98

<sup>9</sup> M. Eliade, 96

By these readings, religion is a socially constructed framework by which we order the human experience, a system by which we ‘make sense’ out of an otherwise disordered and incoherent world. Perhaps religion itself is a sort of unconscious, mass self-deception on the part of humanity to guard itself from the abyss of chaos and meaninglessness ever hovering in the background. It thus functions as a form of institutionalized protection against the terror of death and our state of radical contingency. Job’s friends are thus angry at Job out of their desperate need to make sense out of the world and maintain “the sacred canopy”, which has been called into question not only by Job’s horrific situation itself, but also by Job’s incessant (and seemingly justified) questioning, which simply pushes the issue further and further.

The spectre of the moral chaos underlying the human condition is taken up in an even more radical way by Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He writes that Job’s friends “start out wanting ...to reassure him by quoting all the maxims of faith and confidence on which they and Job alike were raised...they try to reassure him that the world does in fact make sense, that it is not a chaotic, meaningless place.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Job’s friends, according to Kushner, “can only make sense of the world and Job’s suffering, by deciding that he deserves what he has gone through...they find it easier to stop believing in Job’s goodness than to stop believing in God’s perfection.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Job won’t let the friends blame him for his predicament. He throws a wrench in their rationalizations and this angers them. He refuses to “make it easy” for them theologically.

Basically Job’s friends can’t deal with the truth. This truth, as Rabbi Kushner states it, is that “sometimes there is no reason”. He writes: “Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the Universe? Some people can’t handle that idea...But...why do we have to insist on everything being reasonable?”<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Kushner argues that the ‘friends’ are engaged in the classic scenario of “blaming the victim”, because it is easier for them to do this than to blame God. Kushner at this point in his analysis thus brushes away “the sacred canopy” and deals with the question from ground zero.

The existential approach from the perspective of ‘authenticity’ differs from Kushner’s in that it posits that Job’s predicament has brought to the surface a primordial form of anxiety in the minds of Job’s friends. From an existential perspective, ‘inauthentic’ being-in-the-world arises out of our inability to face the abyss. Consider by analogy Martin Heidegger’s perspective on anxiety in the face of

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<sup>10</sup> H. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (NY: Anchor, 1981). 53

<sup>11</sup> Kushner, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Kushner, 53-54. See also H. S. Kushner, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person* (Schocken, 2012).

death. For Heidegger, we have been ‘thrown’ into the world, certain only of our own finitude. “Being-towards-the-end has the mode of evasion in the face of it – giving new explanations for it...and concealing it.”<sup>13</sup> Heidegger discusses how our propensity towards idle-chatter and other forms of distraction serves to conceal the anxiety engendered by human finitude. Unlike fear, occasioned by a specific threatening thing in the world, anxiety is a mood naturally accompanying the human condition itself because of our consciousness of life’s finite, contingent nature. According to Heidegger, “anxiety makes manifest ‘the nothing’.”<sup>14</sup> “We try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk” and other distractions, but “this only proves the existence of the nothing.”<sup>15</sup> Authentic being can only emerge out of a process of confronting my own impending death and the nothingness it may signify. Just as Heidegger discusses how our propensity towards distraction serves to conceal the anxiety raised by the fact of our own mortality, similarly the inauthenticity of Job’s friends lies in their covering over rather than confronting the anxiety occasioned by Job’s predicament. The dimension of existential ‘inauthenticity’ or ‘bad faith’ becomes clear when we witness how instead of facing the seeming randomness of life directly, the friends turn on Job, as if they are angry with him for having forced them to come to terms with this disturbing possibility.

The anxiety arises because Job’s predicament puts them face-to-face with moral and epistemic chaos, as it calls into question all their own beliefs about cosmic justice. Because the friends cannot face this moral and epistemic chaos, their anxiety turns to anger. They are angry that Job’s questioning has forced them to confront this abyss. The “sacred canopy” has been stripped away. They rationalize Job’s predicament ad hoc, but these rationalizations ring hollow because Job’s lament seems in large part justified. The rage directed at Job by his friends is displaced anxiety. It is easier for Job’s friends to lash out at Job than to confront their own doubts. Throughout the story, Job shows courage to face this abyss (and to question God) unflinchingly. Indeed he felt he had nothing left to lose. But at the end, God bestows favor upon him because of his integrity, his confrontation with the abyss of cosmic indifference. This is not the case with Job’s friends, who God admonishes for speaking falsely.

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie & Robinson (NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 298. Heidegger’s work and philosophical categories such as ‘authenticity’ have influenced a number of existentialist theologians, especially Christian ones, e.g., R. Bultmann. Yet I don’t believe the theodicies offered by Job’s friends have yet been analyzed in terms of these categories.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in *Pathmarks*, trans. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 89

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in *Pathmarks*, 89

Of course, as Rabbi Kushner notes, (and as Berger and Eliade also believe) it is only human to try to make sense out of the world. That is what the mind was created to do. And that is why religion has been socially constructed by the human race in the specific way it has – as a complicated series of collectively shared meanings and orderings that serves to function as a shield against the abyss of cosmic chaos. It is disturbing when one’s basic assumptions about life, God, justice and morality are called into question. A world characterized by moral and/or epistemic chaos is impossible to navigate, and may even be in some basic sense unlivable.<sup>16</sup> Hence the need for “the sacred canopy” in the first place.

#### COSMIC ORDER AND THE “JUST WORLD HYPOTHESIS”

The idea that the world often does not seem to exhibit cosmic justice deserves more attention here. The response to this perception is contained in God’s speech, essentially the theodicy that “God’s ways are not our ways”. By this view, although the world may often seem to exhibit no discernable moral order, this does not mean that this moral order does not exist. We just cannot know what the moral order is. God’s plans for our world are unknowable through human beings’ finite intelligence. We do not and cannot know the reasons for why things in the world happen the way they do, and we probably would not be able to understand these reasons even if we could know what they are. Job’s friends presume to know God’s ways by insinuating that Job must have sinned to deserve his fate. God’s anger is directed at the friends partly for presuming to know God’s ways, when no mortal can know why the world unfolds the way it does. The point of God’s speech at the end of the book is that divine ways are inscrutable and beyond mortal comprehension. Thus the friends’ explanations diminish the mystery of God and present God negatively, as punitive and vindictive, but they are overestimating their own understanding, even though paradoxically, they are asserting the standard lines of theodicy. On the other hand, perhaps some empathy for the friends is appropriate, as they are just trying to make sense out of what happened to Job, and this is an understandable human response to an unintelligible situation.

Another perspective arises out of what social psychologists call the “Just World Hypothesis”. Julie Bollmer defines this as follows:

How we see the world around us can affect how we react to certain situations and events and consequently how we relate to the people that we encounter. More specifically, whether or not the individual believes that world is a safe just place can affect that person’s interpretation of an event and therefore impact how that individual relates to the people involved. One area that seems particularly

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<sup>16</sup> See Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, passim.

relevant to the just world hypothesis and interpersonal relationships is that of victimization...individuals who have become victims of misfortune are often judged by others as being responsible for their own fate.<sup>17</sup>

Citing studies by Lerner & Miller (1978) as well as Kleinke & Meyer (1990), Bollmer elaborates further on the Just World Hypothesis. She writes:

Individuals that have a strong belief in a just world can have this belief challenged when they encounter a victim of random misfortune...the individual wants to believe that the world is a safe, just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Even when evidence suggests otherwise, the individual is reluctant to give up this belief...In the face of contradicting evidence, research suggests that people with a high belief in a just world will do one of two things: either they will try to eliminate the suffering of the...victims or else they will derogate them for their fate.<sup>18</sup>

By this reading, we could suggest that Job's friends were people with a high belief in a just world. Job's friends at first tried to comfort Job, but when they realized that this was not alleviating Job's suffering, they then took the strategy of "blaming the victim" in order to reconcile Job's suffering with their belief in a just world. However, one might also argue that Job possessed a strong belief in a just world also. It is precisely because what often happens in life contradicts that belief that the theological problem of evil arises in the first place.

Perhaps we should then have some compassion for Job's friends for their inability to make sense out of what has transpired. Job's friends are clearly not consciously trying to deceive themselves; they just can't face the truth that Job's predicament has brought to the fore. They desperately need their "sacred canopy" and cannot deal with life when it has been stripped away. They are vulnerable in this sense. Yet they show little humility in the face of the harshness of the situation and even less compassion for Job himself, the person who actually suffered the losses. While one wants to feel compassion for them, they are not sympathetic characters. As Sartre writes: "In bad faith there is no cynical lie nor knowing preparation for deceitful concepts. But the first act of bad faith is to flee what it cannot flee...the very project of flight reveals to bad faith an inner disintegration in the heart of being."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Julie Bollmer, *Interpersonal Aspects of the Just World Hypothesis* (1998). [www.units.muohio.edu/psybersite/justworld/interpersonal.shtml](http://www.units.muohio.edu/psybersite/justworld/interpersonal.shtml).

<sup>18</sup> See Bollmer. She cites Lerner, M.J. and Miller, D.T. (1978) "Just World Research and the Attribution Process: Looking Back and Ahead" *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, as well as Kleinke, C.L. and Meyer, C. (1990) "Evaluation of Rape Victims by Men and Women with High and Low Belief in a Just World" *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 14

<sup>19</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (NY: Philosophical Library). 70.



Another way of looking at this is from the perspective of trauma studies, an emerging field that has lately produced a number of interesting excursions in Biblical scholarship<sup>20</sup>. The trauma Job experienced is clear enough. But Job and his friends were also forced to confront the spectre of moral chaos and the ultimate amorality of the universe (Job alludes to this in Book 9, verse 22). This loss of moral intelligibility definitely constitutes a form of trauma as well. The lack of any discernible moral order in the world means the world makes no sense. This, as Eliade says, is an “intolerable” situation. For Job and his friends the entire moral order has been upended. What could possibly undercut the religious impulse more? This explains why Job’s friends moved from sympathy to a stance of blaming Job for his own misfortune. Kathleen O’Connor, who has effectively applied the emerging field of trauma studies to Biblical interpretation, discusses the phenomenon of “blaming” to make sense out of trauma and moral chaos (though she writes of a different Biblical context, the story of Jeremiah):

Why did this happen...? Whose fault is it? Holding someone accountable for disaster is an interpretive task, a necessary effort to find explanation, to discover cause and effect, and to enable understanding of the catastrophe to emerge... The very act of seeking out responsible parties for disaster is an inevitable human act, a necessary strategy of survival. It gives reasons for events, reins them into palatable size and finds cause and effect in a quagmire of fear and chaos. Blaming is a search for justice and order in the universe when all signs of justice and order have vanished from view.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of an overarching moral order is a difficult possibility to confront and it flies in the face of all conventional religious teachings. The manner in which the book’s various characters deal with this apparent moral chaos therefore constitutes a study in contrasting representations of the existential virtues of authenticity and existential honesty.

Both Heidegger’s notion of inauthenticity and Sartre’s conception of bad faith fundamentally entail a process of fleeing from and covering over life’s unsettling truths. Both behavior patterns constitute forms of self-deception. For Heidegger the harsh truth is finitude; for Sartre it is our radical freedom and the need to take full responsibility for all of our choices. In the Book of Job the harsh truth is apparent cosmic injustice. Because it is so hard (perhaps even impossible) for us to adequately confront and process these realities, everybody, in virtue of being human, is guilty of some form of “inauthenticity” in varying degrees. Therefore perhaps these illustrations

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<sup>20</sup> See David Janzen, *The Violent Gift: Trauma’s Subversion of the Deuteronomistic History’s Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2012) and Kathleen O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 50.

of human frailties generally should be met as far as possible with compassion rather than with derision. Yet it is difficult to muster this sort of compassion and understanding in the case of Job's friends, because as the story progresses it is precisely this compassion they so steadfastly deny to Job.

#### AUTHENTICITY AS RELATIONAL

Authenticity as an ideal has played a central role in existential philosophy, and it is found in various contexts in the writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Yet as a virtue it is misunderstood. Authenticity is often thought to be self-referential – describing self-knowledge, how one comports oneself in light of introspection, or how one confronts existential questions, without reference to others. But Charles Guignon, in *Being Authentic*, argues that authenticity is a relational concept as well; our authenticity or inauthenticity often affects others in the world.<sup>22</sup> This account is influenced by Heidegger, as part of his refutation of the Cartesian separation of the conscious subject from the “external world”. Heidegger writes: “Dasein in itself is essentially ‘Being-with’...The world is always the one I share with others. The world of Dasein is a ‘with world’...even Dasein’s Being-alone is Being-with in the world.”<sup>23</sup>

In this relational spirit, Guignon writes: “The project of becoming authentic asks us to get in touch with the real self we have within, a task that is achieved primarily through introspection:” But...”this ideal calls on us to express that unique constellation of inner traits in our actions in the external world – to actually *be* what we *are* in our ways of being present in our relationships, careers and practical activities”. “Contained in this notion is an ideal of ‘belongingness’ or ‘togetherness’... being part of a wider flow of life.”<sup>24</sup> “Know thyself” is a famous aphorism attributed to Socrates. Yet self-knowledge doesn’t help us if it doesn’t lead us to become better people. Authenticity must also translate into how we treat others.

One glaring example of failure with respect to the relational aspect of authenticity is the treatment of Job by his ‘friends’. The self-deception of Job’s friends is not harmless, i.e., affecting them only. The rebukes of the ‘friends’ have destructive emotional effects on Job. First of all, their rebukes are harsh. Hence Eliphaz 15, 2-3: “Would a sensible person give air to such hot-air arguments or puff himself with an east wind?” Moreover their lecturing serves to delegitimize Job’s pain, and blames him for his predicament. Hence Zophar, in 11-6, says: “Know then that God exacts from

<sup>22</sup> Charles Guignon, *Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4. See also Theodor Damian, *Theological and Spiritual Dimensions of Icons According to St. Theodore of Studion*, (Edwin Mellen, 2002)11.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 156-157.

<sup>24</sup> Guignon. 4

you less than your sin deserves.” Such accusations and rationalizations just increase the bitterness all around.

#### SELF-DECEPTION AND JOB’S FRIENDS

What is the phenomenology of self-deception? Exactly how does it work? It contains a paradox: if one knows something to be true, how can one convince oneself that it is not true (or vice-versa)? Consider the notion of repression in Freudian theory. One must be aware of something before one represses it, precisely in order to repress it. Alfred Mele analyzes this dynamic in his discussion of “the strategic paradox” of self-deception: “how can an individual both deploy and be duped by the same deceitful strategy?”<sup>25</sup> Sartre writes that “the one to whom the lie is told and one who lies are one and same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully.”<sup>26</sup>

One way this might take place is when we compartmentalize life by dividing thoughts and experiences into different aspects, dwelling on some while ignoring others. This comes under the rubric of “psychological partitioning”.<sup>27</sup> For example, a wealthy businessman can compartmentalize his life, deceiving himself that he is “successful” because his business is thriving, while ignoring other problematic aspects of his life, e.g., failures within his marriage.

Another form of self-deception occurs when one tries to “forget” about something by thinking about something else, thereby distracting oneself. For example, sometimes people drink to forget their problems. The unpleasant stimulus is still present, but as a result of the inebriation it recedes into the background, while a new flood of experience occupies the forefront of consciousness (until the drug wears off and the disturbing stimulus returns to the forefront).

But in the case of Job’s ‘friends’, the relevant mechanism is that of rationalization, offering justifications for Job’s predicament and attempting to explain it away. This strategy denies the manner in which the situation is experienced by Job – precisely as

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<sup>25</sup> See Alfred Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), as discussed in “Self-Deception”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Ian Deweese-Boyd, 2012. [www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-deception](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-deception).

<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> See W.J. Talbot, “Intentional Self-Deception in a Simple Coherent Self”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55, and the discussion of this in “Self-Deception”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, by Ian Deweese-Boyd, 2012.

an event that defies explanation.<sup>28</sup> The reader can only speculate on why Job's friends feel the need to evade this truth. This truth may be too much for them to process intellectually. The brutality and randomness of job's situation has suddenly called into question all of their long-held beliefs about cosmic justice and this has triggered within them a reaction of primordial anxiety. The world no longer makes sense and "the sacred canopy" they have been so desperately trying to maintain has suddenly been torn asunder. They are trying to render the situation intelligible when deep down they know that it is not. Moreover, perhaps after witnessing the horrors that happened to Job for no good apparent reason, their theodicies are tinged with fear that Job's fate might soon become their own. They try to appease God by saying all the 'right' things. What happened to Job may have upended their own comforting ideas of cosmic justice and forced them to confront their own doubts about the existence of a coherent moral order (which then turned to indignation at Job's supposed audacity). Their indignation is therefore also self-serving, motivated in part by self-interest.

#### GOD'S ANGER

Job's experience has resonated through the ages because life's brutality often seems unintelligible. This has always been the case, and it remains the case today. For example, in December 2012 in Newtown, CT, USA, a young man, about twenty years old, walked into an elementary school and shot twenty-six people repeatedly, including twenty children, all under the age of ten, some as young as six. On the news reports, the "experts" discussed the ways adults should "explain" this massacre to their own children. But as I watched the details unfold on television, I thought: "if I can't honestly explain the situation to myself, how could I possibly explain it to my children"? Countless experts were interviewed to "explain" the situation, and to help us "understand" it. But how can anyone really ever understand it? How can anyone explain the slaughter of twenty children for no apparent reason at all? No amount of "facts" offered from any of the fields of law, psychology, forensics, criminal justice, etc., will ever "explain" it at all. If there is a God in heaven, maybe he knows why this sort of thing happens. God's speech towards the end of the book of Job paradoxically doesn't offer an answer to the problem of evil either. As it is implied in the book, we probably would not be able to understand the answer even if it were given. Perhaps this is the answer after all.

Why is God angry with Job's friends? Their theodicies not only "failed to acknowledge

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<sup>28</sup> The "explanation" that Job's predicament was the result of a wager between God and Satan is not particularly convincing, as it raises even more questions than it answers, e.g., why God would play with Job's life this way just to win a bet...

the dynamic cosmic dimension of what was happening”<sup>29</sup>; the friends *refused to acknowledge it*. They refused to acknowledge the truth to Job, to God, or to themselves. God has no use for false piety or empty moralizing. This is made clear elsewhere in the Jewish Scriptures (Isaiah) and it is a basic tenet of most other religions as well. Thus it is the friends’ self-deception and existential ‘bad faith’ which renders their theodicies not only unconvincing to us the readers, but ultimately distasteful to God as well. By reading the book this way, we can thus see how concepts imported through twentieth century existentialist thought (e.g., “authenticity” and “bad faith”) help to provide insight into the interpretation of complicated Biblical texts.

Metropolitan College of New York

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<sup>29</sup> Elaine A. Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully: Job’s Friends and Job”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (2008), p. 42

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