

Article

Theodicy, Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry: Primo Levi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Anti-Theodicy

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Abstract: Emmanuel Levinas declares that we have reached the end of theodicy, but we have not reached the end of discussions and books and special issues on theodicy, and people continue to ask, and answer, the questions “Why?” and “Why me?” about their suffering. In this essay, I would like to explore this persistence of theodicy as a topic of scholarly discussion and as an ongoing human activity, despite powerful and convincing critiques of theodicy. How might we take seriously what Levinas calls “the temptation of theodicy” and, at the same time, take seriously the ways that engaging in theodicy might be a vital part of how someone navigates her own suffering? I suggest that we look to Levinas’s asymmetrical configuration of the uselessness of suffering—that is, while the other’s suffering must remain useless to me, my suffering in response to the other’s suffering can be useful—for a parallel asymmetry concerning Levinas’s declared end of theodicy: while theodicy that justifies the other’s suffering is forbidden to me, I cannot forbid the sufferer’s theodicy in response to her own suffering. Further, I suggest that even in Levi’s harsh rejection of his fellow inmate’s implicit theodicy, Levi still seems to refrain from condemnation of his fellow sufferer, through his use of interrogative and conditional rhetorical structures. Thus, while we might agree with Levinas’s argument that we have reached the end of theodicy on a collective or historical or interpersonal or, even, personal scale, we are forbidden from declaring the end of theodicy for the other. The sufferer always has the prerogative to narrate her own suffering in the manner in which she chooses, and the imposition of meaninglessness onto her suffering, through a prohibition of all theodicy, may be a violent imposition, that mimics, in part, the violence of the imposition of meaning onto her suffering.

Keywords: theodicy; anti-theodicy; Emmanuel Levinas; Primo Levi; suffering

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness . . . is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought’s explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century.

—Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering”

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground.

—Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*

1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas declares that we have reached the end of theodicy—that the horrors we have witnessed over the last century outweigh and overwhelm any of the theodicies by which we try explicitly or implicitly to explain them. And yet, we have not reached the end of discussions and books and special issues on theodicy, and people continue to ask, and answer, the questions “Why?” and “Why me?” about their suffering. In this essay I would like to explore this persistence of theodicy as

a topic of scholarly discussion and as an ongoing human activity, despite powerful and convincing critiques of theodicy. How might we take seriously what Levinas calls “the temptation of theodicy” and, at the same time, take seriously the ways that engaging in theodicy might be a vital part of how someone navigates her own suffering?

To think about this question, I begin with a passage from Primo Levi’s Holocaust testimony *If This Is a Man*, in which Levi depicts a Holocaust inmate engaging in a kind of theodicy and then offers a powerful indictment of that theodicy. The selection from Levi’s work puts us right in the middle of the tension between theodicy’s immoral movement towards justifying the suffering of the other and the palliative function to alleviate some of the non-physical pain of suffering that a sufferer might find in it. I then turn to Levinas’s anti-theodicy and his prohibition against justifying another’s suffering in his essay “Useless Suffering.” Finally, I ask: if the proper response to the extreme suffering of others is compassion, a suffering in response to others’ suffering, as well as the offering of aid to alleviate that suffering, what are we to do when the sufferer herself is engaged in theodicy, asking the perennial question “Why?” about her suffering? When theodicy is part of her own effort to alleviate or endure her suffering? In this situation, might not the declaration of the end of theodicy function as a violent imposition of *meaninglessness* onto her suffering—an imposition that resembles the prohibited imposition of *meaning* onto it? While Levinas powerfully redraws the territory of the purview of theodicy, extending it beyond the theological effort to justify the goodness and omnipotence of God in the face of evil to any effort to justify the other’s suffering, he also leaves us with a moral conundrum about how to respond to the sufferer’s own theodicy and what the declaration of the end of theodicy means for her.

I suggest that we look to Levinas’s asymmetrical configuration of the uselessness of suffering—that is, the other’s suffering must remain useless to me, but my suffering in response to the other’s suffering can be useful—for a parallel asymmetry concerning Levinas’s declared end of theodicy: while theodicy that justifies the other’s suffering is forbidden to me, I cannot forbid the sufferer’s theodicy in response to her own suffering. While I must not engage in theodicy that justifies the other’s suffering, that is, while I must follow a ban on theodicy in relation to others’ suffering, I must not ban the sufferer’s theodicy in response to her own suffering. I cannot refuse the possibility that her suffering may have meaning *for her*, may be seen *by her* as useful *to her*. Further, I suggest that even in Levi’s harsh rejection of his fellow inmate’s implicit theodicy, Levi still seems to refrain from condemnation of his fellow sufferer, through his use of interrogative and conditional rhetorical structures. Thus, while we might agree with Levinas’s argument that we have reached the end of theodicy on a collective or historical or interpersonal or, even, personal scale, we are forbidden from declaring the end of theodicy for the other. The sufferer always has the prerogative to narrate her own suffering in the manner in which she chooses, and the imposition of meaninglessness onto her suffering, through a prohibition of all theodicy, may be a violent imposition, that mimics, in part, the violence of the imposition of meaning onto her suffering. The difficulty, of course, is when that narrative has implications for the meaning of the suffering of others, when it implies a theodicy about the other’s suffering, as the following scene from Levi reveals.

2. Primo Levi and Blasphemous Theodicy

In his testimony, *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi describes a scene in the concentration camp barracks: a selection has just taken place; some inmates have been chosen for the gas chambers and others have been passed over to live. Kuhn thanks God for not being selected; Beppo lies in silence, knowing that he is one of those selected for death. Levi writes:

... from my bunk, on the top level, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his cap on his head, his torso swaying violently. Kuhn is thanking God that he was not chosen.

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it, and lies there staring at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore?

Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal?

If I were God, I would spit Kuhn's prayer out upon the ground. (Levi 2015, pp. 123–24)

From Beppo's defeated and enervated silence in the face of his impending murder to Kuhn's expression of gratitude in response to narrowly escaping a death sentence, "the intensity of this passage is striking" as Nancy Harrowitz notes (Harrowitz 2016, p. 27). In particular, Levi's concluding commentary on the scene—"If I were God, I would spit Kuhn's prayer out upon the ground"—startles and draws our attention. Judith Kelly suggests that "this is one of the rare moments of *If This Is a Man* in which Primo Levi's anger at the situation rises to the surface" (Kelly 2000, p. 35). Why, of all the horrors, injustices, and cruelties that Levi recounts in his testimony, is the occasion of Kuhn's prayer one of the few times during which his anger emerges into view?

Levi is, I would argue, outraged at the theodical logic implicit in Kuhn's prayer, and he exposes this logic by commenting on several aspects of Kuhn's response. First, Kuhn's focus on the results of this particular selection reveal an extremely limited view of the situation—as Levi notes, it is only a matter of time before Kuhn is selected. His gratitude for avoiding death today will likely be replaced by his facing selection in the near future. Kuhn sees the tree of his momentary safety rather than the forest of destruction within which it has taken place.

Further, Kuhn seems unaware of the implications of his loud prayer for Beppo who lies within earshot. Not only does his prayer highlight the insane logic by which a twenty-year-old is chosen to be killed—by thanking God for not being chosen, Kuhn implicitly suggests that God did not save Beppo, that God is responsible for Beppo being selected for the gas chambers. As Jonathan Druker notes, "Kuhn's personal theodicy wrongs his fellow victims yet again" (Druker 2009, p. 33).

Levi wonders about what is going on inside Kuhn that he can be so oblivious to Beppo's suffering and the realities of the situation: "Does he not see . . . Beppo the Greek . . . ? Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand . . . ?" All three questions ask about, and express Levi's exasperation with, Kuhn's apparent blindness and incomprehension. They also register Levi's acknowledgement that Kuhn's actions are not an intentional offense against Beppo. Kuhn is not thinking about Beppo in this moment—the answer to Levi's questions are implicit in the tone in which they are asked: Kuhn does not see Beppo; he does not know, he is not thinking about, the fact that next time it will be his turn; Kuhn does not understand.

These failures are certainly understandable in the context of Auschwitz, where thinking alone was difficult—let alone clear, rational, perceptive thinking. Given the terrors of the situation, Kuhn's obliviousness to Beppo is understandable—how could we expect someone who is continually facing the terror of selection and random murder, the effects of near-starvation and brutal physical conditions, and the reduction of all markers of identity to a number, to have any energy left for anything but an immediate reaction to the fact of not being chosen to die? Levi seems to recognize this when he states that "Kuhn is out of his mind." When Levi asks, "Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal?" he knows the answer: Kuhn does not have the mental energy left to see the situation from anywhere but up close. Thus, Levi's condemnation attaches not so much to Kuhn himself, as to Kuhn's prayer and the theodicy it suggests. It is Kuhn's prayer that Levi would spit out were he God. Why?

By ascribing responsibility to God for not being selected, Kuhn's prayer of thanks implicitly ascribes responsibility to God not only for Beppo's selection, but by extension, for the whole genocidal system of which it is but one moment. If God is to be thanked for Kuhn's salvation from the selection, this implies that God has ultimate power over not only who is chosen for the selection, but also over the whole system itself. The agency and culpability of the Nazi officials in charge of the selection thus become invisible in this rendering of responsibility. Kuhn's gratitude in the moment shuts out the circles of horror in which the selection took place, extending out to the whole camp, to the

system of concentration camps, to the coordinated effort of the Nazis to exterminate all the Jews of Europe (and then perhaps the world). By thanking God for the goodness of not being selected, by ascribing agency to God as the author of his temporary salvation, Kuhn's prayer implicitly ignores the human responsibility for the whole system of abominations in which the selection took place and the culpability of the thousands upon thousands who were participating in it, benefitting from it, leading it, and designing it.

The last line of this passage suggests that not only is Kuhn's prayer an affront against Beppo, it is also an affront against God, a kind of blasphemy. Kuhn's prayer obscures the human origin and culpability for the horrors of the selection and ascribes the abomination to God. It is not simply that the goodness of God is called into question in the process, but that the authorship of evil is ascribed to God. Why would Levi spit out Kuhn's prayer, if he were God? Perhaps because of its insensitivity to Beppo, perhaps because of its failure to hold accountable the Nazis who run the camp and conduct the selection, but perhaps most likely because of the outrage of suggesting that it is God who is responsible for the violent and cruel events of the camps. What kind of god, Levi might ask, would be in charge of such a place as Auschwitz?

Levi would spit out Kuhn's prayer if he were God because he would be offended, perhaps even disgusted, by what such a prayer implies about him as God. A theological view of the world that suggests that all that happens within it is ascribable to God should be, in Levi's view, offensive to God. As he notes later on in his testimony, "Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence" (Levi 2015, p. 150). Levi argues against the idea of providence and a theodicy that justifies the evils in the world by claiming that they are in some way part of a divine plan, as many theodicies do. Levi's critique strikes to the heart of theodicy itself, not by proving that God does not exist or that God is not all-powerful or all-good, but by arguing that in the context of the Holocaust, the very engagement in such account-making itself is morally repugnant and deserving to be spat out, even, or perhaps especially, by God.

3. Emmanuel Levinas, Useless Suffering, and the End of Theodicy

Levi's critique of Kuhn's implicit theodicy—as offensive to those who suffered during the Holocaust and blasphemous by its implicit ascription to God of authorship of the evils of the Holocaust—finds a parallel in Levinas's critique of theodicy. This parallel includes their common sense of moral outrage: Druker notes this connection when he describes Levi's "uncharacteristic anger toward Kuhn, [as] akin to the outrage that Levinas claims is provoked in us by unethical justifications of the other's suffering" (Druker 2009, p. 33). Levinas suggests that the kinds of suffering inflicted and endured during the course of the twentieth century have broken any possible balance between those sufferings and the theodicies that try to explain them and justify God's goodness and omnipotence in the process. Levinas argues that "the disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. Its possibility puts into question the multimillennial traditional faith" (Levinas 1998, p. 97). Like Levinas, Levi finds the scales weighted overwhelmingly on the side of evil and suffering, such that theodicy can never right the scales. Levi declares that the events that comprise the selection, all the decisions made and lives and deaths determined, are "an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty—nothing at all in the power of man to do—can ever heal" (Levi 2015, p. 124).

Levi and Levinas are proposing that too many people have suffered in forms too outrageous, too grotesque, for anyone to claim that there is a divine purpose for that suffering. Such a claim seems to depict a sadistic god—one whose omnipotence is purchased at the price of divine goodness. Levinas writes:

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness—but it is also an event in Sacred History—is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought's explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century. (Levinas 1998, p. 97)

The very logic, or movement, of theodicy, in which I look at suffering and try to come up with reasons for why an all-good and all-powerful God would allow or cause such suffering is, according to Levinas, the beginning of wrongdoing, injustice, and immorality because it amounts to justifying someone else's suffering: "the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (Levinas 1998, p. 99). For Levinas, even asking the question "Why?" in relation to suffering that is not one's own becomes a potentially culpable question, because it suggests the effort to justify others' suffering.

Levinas extends the definition of theodicy beyond those efforts that seek to justify God in the face of evil, beyond the effort to solve the conundrum that David Hume so succinctly framed with the questions: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (Hume 2007, p. 74). Theodicy, Levinas argues, is at its core the effort to justify human suffering. Whether in the traditional religious form in which human suffering is rendered useful or necessary for God's ultimate purposes—a part of God's plan—or in a secular form in which the suffering of others is necessary for the achievement of some greater good, both kinds of theodicy are, according to Levinas, immoral.

The very logic or movement of theodicy can be found at the heart of the worst evils of which humans are capable. These evils begin with the idea that the other must suffer because . . . , that it is right/acceptable/required that this person or these people suffer because . . . Levinas's expansion of what constitutes a theodicy is also a distillation of theodicy down to a core movement of justifying an other's suffering. An example of a secular theodicy would be the way that the suffering inflicted in punishment and in the prison system is declared necessary and useful for the good of the prisoner, the safety of society, etc. Levinas's extension of the bounds of theodicy asks us to be attentive to any situation in which someone's pain or suffering is justified, or the infliction of pain or suffering on another is justified. For Levinas doubts both the efficacy and the intention of theodicy. He writes:

Certainly one may inquire into whether theodicy, in the broad and narrow senses of the term, effectively succeeds in making God innocent or in saving morality in the name of faith or in making suffering bearable, or into the true intent of the thought that has recourse to theodicy. It is impossible, in any case, to underestimate the temptation of theodicy, and to fail to recognize the profundity of the empire it exerts over humankind . . . (Levinas 1998, p. 96).

Instead of giving in to the temptation of theodicy, Levinas argues, we must respond to the suffering of others with aid, help, medication, efforts to alleviate that suffering, and with compassion, love, and our own suffering in response to their suffering. This response of aid, compassion, and suffering is the basis for the interhuman order in which I respond to the other's asymmetrical call for help, outside of the logic of commerce, reciprocity, and expectations of return. The other's call for help requires my assistance without thought of reciprocation. Levinas describes this as "the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other," and it is this kind of suffering, this compassion, that "opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human" (Levinas 1998, p. 94).

4. Asymmetry, Conditionality, and the Ban on Theodicy

In both Levi's and Levinas's works, we encounter a critique of theodicy based on its implicit justification of the other's suffering. In the context of the horrific suffering endured during the Holocaust, this justification is seen as not only insensitive, but also morally outrageous. But there is a tension between these powerful arguments against theodicy and the human need to ask why in the face of suffering—and not only to ask the question but to find answers to it. The strongest arguments against theodicy have to do with the way it is used to justify the evil that inflicts suffering either in preparation for it or after the fact—Levinas's prohibition against theodicy is an effort to prevent the justification and infliction of suffering. But what about when theodicy is part of the means by which sufferers are trying to navigate the suffering they are enduring?

What should we say about Kuhn on his bed, “violently” thanking God for his life saved? Surely none of us who were not there can say anything about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of Kuhn’s efforts to navigate the irrational hell into which he has been thrust by the Nazis. It may have been the case that the belief that God was orchestrating those events was the only thought that enabled him to survive another day. It seems to me that we are not authorized to make any judgment about any theodicy that Kuhn used to endure his own suffering.

And yet, there is Beppo lying in the next bunk. Do we not have a responsibility to say his selection for death can never be justified, must never be construed as an act of God, cannot even implicitly be deemed “authorized by God”? How can we affirm Kuhn’s need to pray, out of his senses, offering God thanks, while also refusing any suggestion that Beppo’s selection was part of any plan other than the Nazis’ genocidal effort to destroy the Jews of Europe? Isn’t it too much to ask (or compassionless to ask) Kuhn to accept his not being chosen as sheer chance, as the Nazis’ random overlooking of him this time?

I think Levinas’ insistence on an asymmetry in relation to the usefulness of suffering—that is, the other’s suffering can never be useful to me, but my suffering in response to her suffering can become useful—may be helpful here. Perhaps we can think about the ban on theodicy as itself being asymmetrical. While I must not ascribe meaning to the neighbor’s suffering, I also must not ascribe meaninglessness to the neighbor’s suffering against her own theodicy for it. In other words, I cannot declare the end of theodicy for the other. The sufferer may find meaning in her own suffering, engage in theodical thinking that suggests a reason for her own suffering or a narrative within which it makes sense to her. For the imposition of non-meaning or uselessness on another’s suffering would follow a similar logic to the imposition of meaning on it, that is, it would make the other’s suffering mine to narrate and interpret as useless. It would be co-opting what little the sufferer has left at her disposal in the aftermath, or the present enduring, of extreme suffering.

What I am suggesting is that Levinas’s argument implies that prohibiting the other from finding meaning in her own suffering might also be a beginning of immorality because it draws on a similar imperial logic as the justification of the other’s suffering. In observing and respecting the other’s suffering as hermeneutically off-limits to me, I can neither justify it, nor reject the other’s claims about its meaning or justification. Levinas’s declaration of the end of theodicy could function as a kind of imposition of uselessness onto the suffering of the other if it precluded the right of the sufferer to find whatever meaning she may find in her own suffering. Might we have to chasten our declarations of the end of theodicy to say that there must be an end of theodicy in me about the suffering of the other, while allowing there might be a continuation of theodicy by the sufferer herself about her own suffering?

In addition to thinking about an asymmetrical ban on theodicy, borrowed from Levinas’s asymmetrical understanding of the usefulness of suffering, might we also find some resources in Levi’s short passage? While Levi’s bitterness towards Kuhn’s prayer is viscerally present in his claim that if he were God, he would spit out Kuhn’s prayer, it is interesting to note that Levi’s treatment of Kuhn himself is somewhat less accusatory. Levi tells us that Kuhn is out of his mind, suggesting a reason for his failure to think about how his prayer must sound to Beppo. Levi asks a series of questions that wonder how Kuhn cannot see or know certain things—questions that Levi could easily have written in the form of accusations or judgments with even more vehemence. He raises questions about the motivations, the realizations, and the meanings of Kuhn’s prayer, rather than issuing a straight-out denunciation of them. The use of the repeated interrogative suggests a sense of incomprehension and exasperation, rather than mere accusation.

Further, Levi’s closing comment is made in the peculiar rhetorical formation of the conditional. It is, of course, a counter-factual statement that makes no claim to possibility: Levi is not God, of course, and knows it. Why, then, phrase the sentence in such a way? Why not say something along the lines of “God should spit out Kuhn’s prayer,” or leave God out of the picture altogether and state something along the lines that Kuhn’s prayer is offensive. Levi’s use of the conditional, the

hypothetical “if I were God,” suggests a space of distance. Levi is not God, so he is not in a position to spit out Kuhn’s prayer, but if he were, he would. Levi comes close to accusation and judgment, but keeps one step away, acknowledging the state that Kuhn is in, even while he registers the implied affront to Beppo. The space created by the conditional, by the hypothetical “if,” leaves room for other possible outcomes to Kuhn’s prayer. This space, though perhaps smaller and less absolute in Levi, may be akin to the space created by Levinas’s asymmetrical configuration of the possibility of useful or meaningful suffering.

What do we do when the sufferer asks us “How could God let this happen?” or simply “Why?” What response shows true compassion in that moment when the sufferer asks us to engage in theodicy? Might it be an unwillingness to suffer with the other that motivates our response to the anguished “Why?” with a well-formulated answer? Might it be a refusal of care and compassion to declare that we have reached the end of theodicy? Like Levi, we are not God: Kuhn’s prayer is not addressed to us. We cannot spit out Kuhn’s attempt to narrate his suffering within the framework of divine providence. But we also cannot simply be silent when we see its proximity and implication for Beppo the Greek. This is the tension within which we have to move as we seek to respond to the suffering of others.

5. Conclusions

In thinking about Levi’s and Levinas’s critiques of theodicy, we realize the temptation that theodicy can be both as a means of justifying evils and others’ suffering and as a means of foregoing the responsibility to come to the aid of the other who is suffering. But while there may be reasons to declare the end of theodicy, there are also reasons why we cannot make such a ban on theodicy absolute. Only the sufferer herself has jurisdiction over the meaning of her own suffering. As Sarah Pinnock notes, “For individual agents, personal suffering may be voluntarily given religious meaning, as it happens or in retrospect, but it is a moral scandal to impose meaning (including theodicy reasons) on the suffering of others. To do so is illicitly to exercise the privilege and responsibility of the actual victims” (Pinnock 2002, p. 137). There is an asymmetry of theodicy authorship in which I can never impose meaning on the other’s suffering, but I also cannot deny the other’s possibility to ascribe meaning, or no meaning, to her own suffering.

It may be helpful to be clear about the aim and scope of any engagement in theodicy. While the theodicy that seeks to justify the goodness and omnipotence of God despite the presence of evil in the world often takes place on an abstract, theoretical, theological level—and often does so not so much to respond to suffering but to protect the possibility of continued religious belief—the theodicy that takes place at an individual level in the face of present suffering is often of a quite different kind: rather than seeking a final answer or complete explanation, the sufferer often seeks possible answers, fragments of explanations, moments of faith.

We can think about theodicy less as a complete explanation or final justification, but rather as a space of inquiry in which we raise questions, explore possible responses, register protest and outrage at our sense that things are not the way they should be, and engage the conditional and the hypothetical—forms that keep open the space of conversation, the possibility of error and of dissent, ongoing thought, engagement and unknowing, imagination, and even role playing. Theodicy as inquiry, rather than justification.

Contemporary work on theodicy has extended it as a genre beyond the theological to include secular forms as well as theological ones. Susan Neiman and Larry Bouchard propose extensions of theodicy, beyond a justification of God, beyond a justification of the other’s suffering, to a defense of the worthiness of the world or of humanity. Bouchard suggests that we think of theodicy as “any endeavor, theological or otherwise, to bring coherence to the problem of evil and thereby justify humanity to itself” (Bouchard 1989, pp. 1–2). Further he argues that we would do better to think of theodicies as “manifestations and not explanations of the tragic dimensions of human experience and ultimate reality” (Bouchard 1989, p. 2). In *Evil in Modern Thought*, Neiman describes theodicy as a necessary effort to continue to believe in the world. The problem of evil, according to Neiman, is

“fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a whole” (Neiman 2002, pp. 7–8). Whenever we think, “that ought not to have happened,” we are, she argues, engaged in theodicy. This secular theodicy entails a belief that the world should be a certain way and that when it is not that way, something is wrong in a way that demands a response. In this version of theodicy, the effort is less about explaining the existence of evil than in protesting its occurrence and seeking to change it, so that the world more resembles the way we think it should be. Might we even say, then, that Levi and Levinas are themselves engaged in this reconfigured space of theodicy in their very inquiries into suffering; their critiques of the injustices, blasphemies, and outrages of theodicy; and their prescriptions for responding to suffering?

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