

Introduction of Special Issue “Theodicy”

Jill Graper Hernandez 

Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Texas, One UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249, USA;
jill.hernandez@utsa.edu

Received: 6 September 2018; Accepted: 7 September 2018; Published: 12 September 2018



For a topic that many have thought long-solved, theodicy in the 21st-century has thus far produced novel approaches, uncovered new dilemmas, juxtaposed itself with other philosophical and religious fields, listened to new voices, and has even been done through uncommon methodologies. Though never removed from the logical problem, theodicy at least in the near future will generate unique arguments related to the phenomenology of lived suffering, modal claims across worlds, the possibility of ameliorative analysis, narrative theodicy, and standpoint difficulties in generating theodical discourse. This special issue is dedicated to extending the platform for clear and interesting perspectives on new dimensions of theodicy, or in reclaiming perspectives on the topic that have been largely ignored in philosophy of religion.

Rather than coming to a consensus about the nature, scope, and future of theodicy, the authors in this volume create new avenues for exploring an age-old problem: is the existence of God consistent or compatible with the presence of suffering in the world?

The anthology is organized thematically. The papers in the first grouping all could be headlined under, “New Dimensions in Narrative Theodicy”, because they either rely upon narratives for theodical engagement or critically engaged into whether narratives can be used for a theodical purpose. Sue Whatley provides a meta-theodical piece that marries Flannery O’Connor’s complication of good and evil to the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of “unification” to argue that despair need not be the ultimate phenomenological experience of suffering. Jill Hernandez draws upon the narrative work of Margaret Cavendish to argue that Cavendish—despite her unorthodox theology—provides a unique advancement about how to eradicate moral evil while preserving free will. Mark Scott prefers to take up the problem of suffering at home, and focuses on hope as a theodical tool, embedded in the work of contemporary American novelist Marilynne Robinson. Poetry, rather than novels, is the means by which A.K. Anderson introduces his concept of “enestological theodicy”, the view that that the presence of God is experienced in the midst of suffering through the deeds of humanity.

The second segment of essays focuses on “New Dimensions in Worlds and Value”, and shifts to multiverse theodicy and the types of worlds God could or should instantiate, if such a being existed. Michael Almeida argues against several leading multiverse theodicians on the basis that they unnecessarily restrict the creation of multiverses to those that meet some threshold of goodness. Klaas Kraay is one such interlocutor of Almeida’s, and he replies that Almeida’s theistic modal realism is not that different from his view, but instead pivots upon whether the lack of universes that surpass a goodness threshold is a “bug” (as Almeida suggests) or a desirable feature of a theistic ontology (as forwarded by Kraay). Marshall Naylor’s paper contends that, regardless of the content of any particular world, there are no worlds that are better overall than any other world, regardless of whether God prevents evil for the betterment of any particular world. Atle Ottesen Søvik argues for a rich version of indeterminism, to justify his view that the only way to account for to explain token goods as well as goods in an eschaton is to distinguish between unique type and token values. Joshua Thurow articulates a “mystical body theodicy”, in which God could allow evils in part to contribute to facilitate the shared value of human unity.

The third theme of the special issue raises “New Challenges in Theodicy”, and each paper presents heretofore unexplored obstacles to theodicy, or cast the problem of evil in a unique way. Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström contend that theodicies fail morally because in their quest to objectively problematize the problem of evil and justify extreme harm, they fail to recognize others, and their suffering. Anthony Pinn goes even further, and argues for a conception of “theological absurdity”, or an existential angst that comes from realizing that theodical projects can neither create answers to the problem of socially-induced suffering, nor make philosophical progress in doing so. Theology is not ill-equipped to tackle theodicy, Joseph Rogers suggests, but needs better tools to do so, such as the “indecent theology” of Marcella Althaus-Reid, which offers a queer lens through which to view suffering, the sufferer, and God. Eric Wiland challenges the problem of evil as a problem for theodicy—if “good” and “evil” are “attributive adjectives”, then God is never defective for failing to prevent suffering since he is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to him.

Whereas the third theme focuses on challenges for the project of theodicy itself, those in the fourth evaluate the prospects for theodicy into the future, both as an academic project and phenomenological problem. Nasrin Rouzati engages with historical Islamic theology to show, first, that the problem of evil in Islam is not a problem, but divine providence, and second, that the efficacy for theodicy is that God’s plan is inextricable with human spiritual experiences in the world. Jennifer Geddes takes up Levinas’s claim that theodicy has ended but argues that we can never prescribe the end of theodicy for a sufferer, who always is entitled to work through the violence of her suffering however she chooses, even through the imposition of theodicy. Scott Williams extends Marilyn Adams’s “horrendous evil” theodicy to a subspecies of horrendous-difference disability to demonstrate that time-bias, if rejected, can show that all persons (despite ability) can participate in horrendous evils—evils which can be defeated by God. Finally, Amber Griffioen requires theodicy, in order to remain efficacious, to shift its perspective onto those who suffer, with the result that theodicy becomes a process of therapeutic imaginings of God, which can help the sufferer and her community through struggle.

Throughout the text, the authors push their readers to consider the question of theodicy anew. The promise for academics, students, and lay people who are interested in the problem of suffering and evil is that discourse on theodicy has opened up new avenues of thought, and new paths for discovery.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).