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A suggested truce between intellectual and practical theodicy

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COMPASSIONATE THEODICY: A SUGGESTED TRUCE BETWEEN INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL THEODICY

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Abstract

The basic morality of theodicy is oft disputed. Classical theodicians defend the pursuit of an intellectual solution to the problem of evil while anti-theodicians and practical theodicians argue that this distracts efforts from alleviating the pain people suffer. In this article, I draw on psychological studies that show that beliefs about God and evil change how resilient people are in their experience of pain. In light of that research, I suggest that the pursuit of an intellectual solution to the problem of evil is actually a part of the practical response to evil. However, the pursuit of a solution must be undertaken by the person who has suffered evil, not by the theodician on their behalf. The theodician must instead take up the role of coach or guide to the process of making sense of evil—this is what I call compassionate theodicy. I finish with an example of a resource that attempts a compassionate theodicy, showing the links between theory and practice.

“How can I see the hand of God in tragedy? I was going to say there’s just one response but no, there’s no response. There is a path.”

—Pope Francis¹

Classical Theodicy and Its Critics

Theodicy is a contested subject. I divide the discipline into three basic approaches: classical theodicians, anti-theodicians, and practical theodicians, to which I will introduce a fourth approach: compassionate theodicy.

Classical theodicians are those who defend the pursuit of finding plausible reasons for the existence of evil in a world created by a God of love and power. Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Marilyn McCord Adams, and John Hick remain the key figures,

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¹ Pope Francis, “Full Text of Pope Francis’ Powerful, Unscripted Talk with Kenya’s Youth,” Catholic News Agency 27 (November 2015): <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-pope-francis-powerful-unscripted-talk-with-kenyas-youth-72927/>.

although they could easily be joined by Eleonore Stump and Christopher Southgate as scholars defining the current direction of this kind of theodicy.² I subdivide this group into “instrumentalist” and “individualist” approaches: the former argues that evil in an individual’s life can be redeemed by being part of some greater good (Swinburne, Plantinga, Hick), whilst the latter argues that each individual who suffers must find their own redemption or compensation (McCord Adams, Stump, Southgate). Other differences in approach also exist. Plantinga and McCord Adams do not claim to know the actual reasons why God allows suffering, but only offer ‘defences’ or ‘models’ that might be plausible reasons. If these are true, the existence of God and the existence of evil cannot be mutually exclusive by the normal logic of the problem of evil. Southgate and Stump, by contrast, approach the problem through narratives and experience. Instead of formal logic, both paint a picture of the world in which God, suffering, and redemption all fit in the same canvas, however paradoxical that may seem. These are broad stroke approaches and in some ways there are strong divisions within this grouping. McCord Adams, for example, would join the anti-theodacists in strongly denouncing the instrumentalist, but it has been ably argued that her own approach of compensation falls victim to the very same criticisms she raises.³

Anti-theodacists, including Terrence Tilley, D. Z. Phillips, Dorothee Sölle, Kenneth Surin, and Genia Schönbaumsfeld, argue that the practice of classical theodicy is immoral.⁴ Their critiques are legion: theodicy is a dalliance by leisured philosophers who write just-so stories that serve to do little except to silence the voices of those who suffer;⁵ theodacists are happy to trade concrete evils for abstract goods; theodacists claim that God is a member of our moral community and reduce God to a superhuman projection.⁶ As Walter Kasper and D. Z. Phillips complain, theodacists defend something that is not even the Christian God in the first place, but a fictional abstraction of their own making. Surin also objects that theodacists act as if the work of philosophers and theologians can be abstracted from their historical contexts—as though one can treat Schleiermacher and Augustine as if they were basically having the same conversation about the problem of evil.⁷ The intervening centuries, the audiences, the pastoral purposes for which their books were written are all discarded in order to abstract their

² Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: MacMillan, 1966); Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). An excellent, though now dated, resource for charting the extensive literature on theodicy is Barry L. Whitney, *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil* (New York, NY: Garland, 1993).

³ As Andrew Gleeson writes: “Adams retains more in common with the instrumental theodacists than she is wont to admit. What drives her is the theoretical impulse to tidy up the absurdity and disorderliness of the world, specifically to tidy up evil by showing that really it has a ‘positive aspect’ (her words).” Andrew Gleeson, “On Letting Go of Theodicy: Marilyn McCord Adams on God and Evil,” *Sophia* 54 (2015): 1–12.

⁴ Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000); D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005); Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975); Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Genia Schönbaumsfeld, “On the Very Idea of Theodicy” in *Wittgenstein, Religion and Ethics: New Perspectives from Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Mikel Burley (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 93–112.

⁵ Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 205.

⁶ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1984), 25; Phillips, *The Problem of Evil*, 26–46.

⁷ Surin, *Problem of Evil*, 8–10.

thought into ‘defences’ and ‘theodicies’ which the authors themselves may or may not recognize.

Classical theodicy is not written for those who suffer. Regardless of the content, most theodicy books begin with the caveat that they are *not* practical books, not meant to be handed to people who suffer. Peter van Inwagen, for example, begins his Gifford Lectures on the problem of evil by pointing out that he will address the apologetic and definitely *not* the personal problem of evil. He asserts that he is the wrong person to deal with the practical problem, writing:

If a grieving mother whose child had just died of leukemia were to say to me, “How could God do this?,” my first inclination would be to answer her by saying, “But you already knew that the children of lots of other mothers have died of leukemia. You were willing to say that he must have had some good reason in those cases. Surely you see that it’s just irrational to have a different response when it’s your own child who dies of leukemia?”⁸

Thankfully, van Inwagen admits this would be an “abysmally stupid and cruel” thing to say. Yet, he then goes on to write an entire book full of arguments that could not be repeated to the mother. His defence for this activity is that the theoretical discussion of the argument of evil “may provide materials the pastor can make use of” although it is “asking the wrong thing entirely . . . to ask that it be suitable reading for a mother who has lost a child.”⁹ The statement provokes the question “Why is this asking the wrong thing entirely?” The usefulness of the book to the pastor is almost wholly determined by what *can* be said to the grieving mother. Others like Richard Swinburne, by contrast, do not even acknowledge that there might be a pastoral audience and proceed as if the only readers are sceptical atheists.¹⁰ James Wetzel rightly complains of Alvin Plantinga’s minimalist approach that “a demonstration of theism’s logical consistency with evil barely begins to contain the damage that evil could potentially wreak upon the intelligibility of faith.”¹¹ Theodicy is often concerned with abstract generalisations about suffering, but not actually concerned with those who suffer or relieving their suffering, and it is this distance that anti-theodicists critique.¹²

One of the effects of that distance is that theodicists stand over and explain the meaning of the suffering of others—it becomes an institutionally acceptable way for the rich and powerful to tell those who are lamenting their oppression and suffering to simply “get over it.” Stories of horrendous suffering become objectified, used by the theodicy, to demonstrate an abstract point. One example is found in Richard Swinburne’s *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, where he writes about the African slave trade. After enumerating its horrors, he writes:

But God allowing this to occur made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of

⁸ Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

⁹ Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 11.

¹⁰ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–29.

¹¹ James Wetzel, “Can Theodicy Be Avoided? The Claim of Unredeemed Evil,” *Religious Studies* 25 (March 1989): 1–13; 5.

¹² Dorothee Sölle is one of the first to offer this critique. Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975).

this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not and to treat them well or ill; for ordinary white people and politicians to campaign for its abolition or not to bother, and to campaign for compensation for the victims or not to bother; and so on. There is also the great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless, their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices, and thereby so many steps towards the formation of good or bad character.¹³

D. Z. Phillips rightly observes about these approaches:

I say that “no one in their right mind” would speak in this way, while knowing that many philosophical religious apologists do. But my language registers my amazement at the fact. I have found the same amazement among non-philosophically minded people, believers and non-believers alike . . . the most common response is “Good God! They don’t say that do they?”¹⁴

The use of objectifying stories like this is not universal in classical theodicy. Eleonore Stump begins with this approach in her *Wandering in Darkness*; she uses everyday instances of small suffering, but avoids the horrors of war, rape, and murder. Of the Holocaust she writes:

Although it is vitally important for us to remember the Holocaust and to reflect deeply on it, taking it simply as one more example or counterexample in academic disputation on the problem of evil strikes me as unspeakably awful. It is enough for me that I am a member of the species that propagated this evil. Stricken awe in the face of it seems to be the only response bearable.¹⁵

Theodicy, the anti-theodicy maintain, is an oppressive activity and must be replaced by practical theodicies that seek to change the contexts in which suffering occurs. Anti-theodicy approaches (though these are sometimes called “practical theodicies”) generally either argue that theodicy should not be attempted or seek more actively to “dismantle theological ideologies which justify or glorify human suffering and thereby discourage efforts to change the societal conditions under which people suffer.”¹⁶ It is, in essence, a type of liberation theology: proclaiming salvation to those who suffer, rather than playing games of logic. There are differences within these approach as well, but what unites them is that they are, in the end, still intellectual approaches.

Meanwhile, the practical theodicy are busy turning the objections of the anti-theodicy into practical suggestions for how evil can be resisted. John Swinton is the paradigmatic figure in this regard.¹⁷ While his work reiterates the complaints of the

¹³ Swinburne, *Providence*, 245.

¹⁴ Phillips, *Problem of Evil*, 70.

¹⁵ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 16.

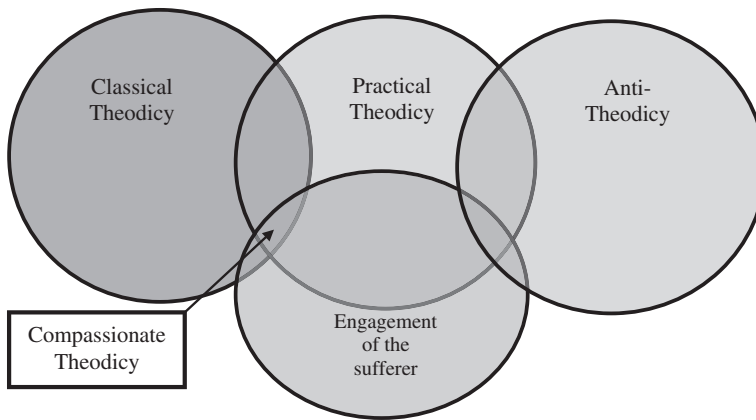
¹⁶ Wetzel, “Can Theodicy Be Avoided?,” 11-12.

¹⁷ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). His work on dementia is also relevant: *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

anti-theodacists,¹⁸ the majority of his work can be seen as a way to stretch beyond the intellectual thrust and counter-thrust of theodicy and its critics. Swinton explores what lived resistance to evil looks like. Lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, hospitality, and faithfulness are practices of redemption that allow people to oppose evil's corrosive effects. Similarly, the work of Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla A. Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations* explores the intersection of theodicy, trauma theory, and congregational life to help ministers encounter tragedies well.¹⁹ Liturgical and personal practices are at the forefront in this book, and the assumed reader is the priest or minister of a congregation, not the people themselves. It is in these two small regards that my own suggestion is different.

Compassionate Theodicy: A Truce in Discontent

I will suggest a fourth option: that the practice of theodicy *as theodicy*—that is, exploring the theological and philosophical reasons for God allowing suffering—can be part of a practical response to the problem of evil. I will argue that the *intellectual problem* of evil forms a crucial part of the resolution of the *practical problem of evil*. I call this approach “compassionate theodicy”: a practical, subjective, and affective alternative to the objective and often dispassionate theodicy that currently sets the standard for classical theodicy.



Compassionate theodicy takes an alternative route to practical and anti-theodicies in two major ways: it is written for those who suffer, and it only focusses on the intellectual question. Compassionate theodicy is, in one sense, just a small part of practical theodicy, but an aspect that has been underexplored. For compassionate theodicy, the intention is to uncover how the theodicies people hold affect their ability to encounter suffering and to offer practical resources that help the sufferer develop theodicies that grant more resilience in the face of suffering. The theodicyist takes on the role of coach or guide to the varied approaches and resources of theodicy, facilitating non-academic people to take their own journeys in making sense of suffering.

¹⁸ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 9-29.

¹⁹ Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla A. Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison, eds., *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Why Bother with Classical Theodicy at All?

Given all the dangers of classical theodicy, why try to redeem it at all? Why not join the anti-theodicyists and simply engage in pastoral responses that resist evil and bring good?

I think there are two reasons not to abandon classical theodicy wholesale. The first is simply that some theoretical work needs to be done in order to know what evil is and how best to resist it. For example, if we think that every natural evil, including animal predation, is a result of the fall,²⁰ then part of our work as co-redeemers with God might be to train lions not to eat gazelles. Conversely, if the system of death and life, eating and being eaten, is part of God's good world and not a result of fallenness, then there is a strong theological critique to be made of transhumanism and a death-denying culture. If all suffering in its very essence is evil, then drugging a population with opioids might seem like the compassionate approach.²¹ We need to have some idea of what evil is, and that task of identification is part of the work of theodicy.

The second reason not to throw out theodicy altogether is that it could play an important part in reframing people's experience of suffering. Medical studies have shown over and over again that the way we narrate the context of our suffering radically changes how much we suffer.²² Take a trivial example: consider a person who is afraid of needles. What is objectively only a very small pinch becomes, through their thoughts, a major source of a trauma. However, there are methods of training the person to think differently about the pain that can help them overcome their phobia.²³ In a successful case, they still experience the same small pinch of physical pain, but their suffering—defined here as their psychological state of anguish—is reduced. In fact, the entire premise of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy rests on this foundation: change the way you think, and you can change the way you feel.

A similar approach follows from experiments on pain and religious commitment conducted by Katya Weich.²⁴ A group of devout Catholics and a group of committed atheists were both administered an electric shock. While being shocked, the participants were asked to consider, one at a time, two renaissance paintings similar in composition

²⁰ While it is rare for contemporary theologians to claim that all animal suffering and death is a result of human sin (the exception is William Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009)), it is common for animal suffering and death to be attributed to the fallenness of the world. Cf. Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); Stephen H. Webb, *The Dome of Eden: An New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); Celia Deane-Drummond, "Shadow Sophia in Christological Perspective: The Evolution of Sin and the Redemption of Nature," *Theology and Science* 6, no. 1 (2008): 13-32; Michael Lloyd, "Are Animals Fallen?," in *Animals on the Agenda*, eds. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), 147-60; Paul J. Griffiths, "Impossible Pluralism," *First Things* 234 (June/July 2013): 44-48; Nicola Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering & the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²¹ For an approachable text on the necessity of pain, see Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *The Gift of Pain* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

²² Irene Tracy, "Getting the Pain You Expect: Mechanisms of Placebo, Nocebo, and Reappraisal Effects in Humans," *Nature Medicine* 16 (2010): 1277-83; Katja Weich and Tracey, I., "The Influence of Negative Emotion on Pain: Behavioural Effects and Neural Mechanisms," *Neuroimage* 47 (2009): 987-94; A. Vania Apkarian, M. N. Baliki and P. Geha, "Towards a Theory of Chronic Pain," *Progress in Neurobiology* 87, no. 2 (2009): 81-97.

²³ Examples include: Gavin Andrews and David Shaw, "'So We Started Talking about a Beach in Barbados,' Visualisation Practices and Needle Phobia," *Social Science and Medicine* 71, no. 10 (November 2010): 1804-10; Linda Rice, "Needle Phobia: An Anesthesiologist's Perspective," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 122 (May 1993): S9-S13; L. Yim, "Belonephobia: A Fear of Needles," *Australian Family Physician* 35, no. 8 (August 2006): 623-24.

²⁴ Katja Weich, Miguel Farias, Guy Kahane, Nicholas Shackel, Wiebke Tiede, and Irene Tracey, "An fMRI Study Measuring Analgesia Enhanced by Religion as a Belief System," *Pain* 139 (2009): 467-76.

and style. One was of an anonymous woman—Leonardo da Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine." The second painting was of Mary, "Vergine Annunciata" by Sassoferrato. The study investigated how the people reported perceived pain levels whilst contemplating either one of these paintings. The hypothesis driving the study was that for the religious people, contemplating the image of Mary would "affect indigenous neural systems of pain modulation." That is, the very act of considering Mary's story would reframe the experimental subjects' own experience of pain from the electricity. The hypothesis survived the study. Both groups looking at the da Vinci painting had high levels of pain, but when the two groups looked at the Mary painting, the religious group reported significantly less pain despite having the same level of electrical stimulation. This "reframing" is known by psychologists as reappraisal. As Weich writes, "reappraisal is a process of reinterpreting the meaning of a stimulus leading to a change in one's emotional response to it."²⁵

The endeavour of compassionate theodicy is to draw on models of therapeutic reappraisal to shift the aim of theodicy away from constructing elaborate and singular "solutions" towards helping sufferers investigate and reappraise their beliefs about God, the world, and the problem of evil. Psychological research suggests that these beliefs make a significant difference to how much suffering someone undergoes in encountering suffering. Certain God images cause more stress, inhibit resilience, and so on whilst other God images enhance resilience and build community. Psychologist Jamie Aten's work looks at how religious beliefs affect wellbeing after major natural disasters. Two months after Hurricane Katrina, Aten and his team interviewed survivors, asking about the experience of trauma and their image of God.²⁶ What they found was that there were seven major categories of representation: (a) Omnipresent God, (b) Omnipotent God, (c) Distant God, (d) Personal God, (e) God in Others, (f) God as Judge, (g) God of Lessons, and (h) God as Loving Father Figure. These are not, for Aten, mutually exclusive categories; rather, they often overlap and interfere with one another. The views of God that people had correlated with their resilience and wellbeing. Those who had views such as God is judge or God as distant had a harder time of it than those who thought of God as personal, loving, and present.²⁷ Aiding the move from a psychologically damaging view to a psychologically resilient view is the aim of compassionate theodicy.

If theodicy seems to be a natural ally to the task of reappraisal, what would need to change to shift from classical theodicy to compassionate theodicy?

²⁵ Weich et al., "An fMRI Study Measuring Analgesia," 467-76; 474. Cf. James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation: Affective, Cognitive, and Social Consequences," *Psychophysiology* 39 (2002): 281.

²⁶ Jamie D. Aten, Michael Moore, Ryan M. Denney, Tania Bayne, Amy Stagg, Stacy Owens, Samantha Daniels, Stefanie Boswell, Jane Schenck, Jason Adams, and Charissa Jones, "God Images Following Hurricane Katrina in South Mississippi: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36, no. 4 (2008): 249-57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254. "Some studies have shown that an image of God as punitive may be harmful and associated with psychological distress (e.g., Eurelings-Bontekoe, Van Steeg, and Verschuur, 2005). However, the participants in the current study did not seem to hold this internalizing view, rather they placed blame on external factors or others, such as the casinos or people they perceived as immoral. None of these participants reported that they were to blame for the punishment of God sent via the hurricane." "The participants in the current study appear to have interpreted their surviving the storm as an act from a loving and caring God, who acts like a father protecting his children. Attributing father-like qualities to God may have assisted participants in making more meaningful conceptualizations of their survival, as opposed to having survived due to 'luck' or chance."

The Theory of Compassionate Theodicy

A first step, as suggested above, is to refuse to use the stories of those who suffer as data points of analysis in discussions of suffering. I suggest that Stump's respectful abstaining from using other people's narratives of suffering as fodder for dispute could be extended to nearly all narratives of suffering. It might be appropriate to use one's own experiences to illustrate a point, where the objectification objection is not a problem, but perhaps it is better to use no illustrations at all and instead to allow the experience of the reader to fill that need. Yet there is another pressing reason to avoid using stories of horrendous suffering.

Graphic illustrations may have an adverse effect on the very possibility of thinking through a theodicy; reading the stories of horrific suffering that most theodicians deem necessary runs the risk of traumatising, re-traumatising, or desensitizing the listener. My own experience of reading through numerous books of theodicy during doctoral work is that the horrific stories made me want to stop and weep, rather than read on, consider, and analyse. In so far as I got better at reading these stories without the impulse to weep, I lost something valuably human. Classical theodicies, and even some of the practical theodicies, are a violent form of literature. The natural stress response triggered by those stories severs the connection between the front and the back of the brain, and "the neocortex, including the left hemisphere of the prefrontal cortex, which has functions associated with linear, rational thinking, and the ability to translate experience into words, are fragmented."²⁸ The stories chosen to illustrate suffering were specially selected by the authors for their profound emotional impact, but it had an unintended consequence. The very form of the argument prevented me from engaging with it, whereas the few books with more gentle quotidian illustrations, like Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness* or Robert Farrar Capon's *The Third Peacock*, provided the space to think and work by not plunging me repeatedly into emotional distress on every page.²⁹

The place of affect in reasoning has been undervalued in theodical literature. Traditional theodicy has acted as if we could encounter these stories of horrific suffering whilst still analysing in a dispassionate fashion. Using these stories to sensitize theodicians to suffering in the world is like trying to sensitize a piano player's fingers to the keys by using a hammer. Nor can we simply override our affective responses.³⁰ Increasingly the place of affect in rational cognition is being recognised as the dominant, and not subordinate, partner in thought. "The affect comes first, the thinking later," writes Iain McGilchrist. "We make an intuitive assessment of the whole before any cognitive processes come into play, though they will, no doubt, later be used to 'explain,' and justify our choice."³¹ Jonathan Haidt represents affect as a great elephant,

²⁸ Hilary Ison, "Working with an Embodied and Systemic Approach to Trauma and Tragedy," in Warner et al., *Tragedies and Christian Congregations*, 52.

²⁹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*; Robert Farrar Capon, *The Third Peacock: The Goodness of God and the Badness of the World* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1971). It is this very consideration that made me concentrate most of my work on non-human animal suffering in evolution—we do not stand in the presence of the victims of those evils. We assume that our words about them will not make their suffering worse.

³⁰ If we could, then trained counsellors would likely be the best placed individuals to hear stories of trauma and know cognitively how to deal with the stress. Yet, burnout amongst counsellors and psychiatrists remains high. Lisa Alfrey, "The Experience of 'Burnout' in Counselling Psychologists," (doctoral thesis, Regent's University London, 2014).

³¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 184.

and rationality as a small rider on top. The rider can react—and to some extent direct—the movements of emotion, but it does not initiate cognitive processes and certainly will lose any battle of the will.³² The place of affect, then, and embodied responses to reading stories of horrific suffering (whether mirror neurons firing or the pumping of adrenaline and cortisone or numerous other possible stress responses) can no longer be treated as peripheral to the central analysis of theodicy. Emotions are the wellspring of cognitive responses and therefore the emotional impact of theodical writing needs to be taken seriously. We cannot act as if the use of stories of horror can be separated from their emotional content.

Both for reasons of objectification and for the cognitive effect of these stories, such illustrations should be abandoned. Since the purpose of a compassionate theodicy is not to tell stories or make sense of the stories “out there” in the world, such graphic illustrations of suffering, whether historical or fictitious, are not needed. The purpose of compassionate theodicy would be to help people tell their own stories, to construct meaning in their own case—or to join with God in the activity of meaning making. If a proposed concept is incomprehensible to the reader, then it clearly does not help them find language, and can happily be discarded. If a concept does resonate with the reader, then they will be able to provide illustrations from their own life story.

This may seem like a backwards move: ground theodicy more deeply in reality by not giving concrete examples. Yet, that is the whole point—the most concrete examples for the reader or listener are the examples they carry within them, the questions they are asking. By giving other examples for them to consider, one actually draws them away from the life situation that brought them to theodicy in the first place. I imagine the work of compassionate theodicy to be like the work of a midwife: midwives help usher another person’s work into the world. The goal of compassionate theodicy is not to be a brilliant theodicy oneself, but to help others construct a theodicy of their own. Of course, to do this well will likely involve the guide being an expert in multiple pathways of theodicy, making the professional theodicy still (a) necessary (evil).³³

Second, a compassionate theodicy would need to drop the jargon. If it is to be written for those who suffer, then it has to be accessible to those outside the academy and its highly detailed (and confusing) terms. There is no need to speak or write of evidentialist vs. aporetic, no inscrutability argument, no trilemma of Epicurean origin. Just plain words. It would talk about mystery and hope and pain and God, about healing, resurrection, and at worst, redemption. It does not need to mention eschatology, but should talk about life beyond death. If theodicy is going to be able to reach beyond the confines of the academy it needs to overcome the barriers that make it inaccessible through technical language or logical forms of argument. Certainly, there is no shortage of popular level books on suffering. The works of Kate Bowler or Philip Yancey fill an important need in this respect.³⁴ However, they all attempt to advance a particular point of view, to defend a position and take apart others.

³² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin, 2012).

³³ C.f. Mark S. M. Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

³⁴ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved* (London: SPCK, 2018); Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995); Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1998).

Third, theodicy would need to drop the pretension of having the answer. In compassionate theodicy, as with trauma, the rule is “the survivor is the expert.”³⁵ The compassionate theodicy comes like the therapist with resources of mind and heart, but not with a better understanding of the person’s situation than the person themselves. Johann Baptist Metz, commenting on the theological use of Elie Wiesel’s poignant story of realising that God swung on a gallows with a small child in Auschwitz, writes:

*Who really has the right to give the answers to the God-question—“where is God? Here he is—he hangs on the gallows?” As far as I am concerned, only the Jew threatened by death with all the children in Auschwitz has the right to say it—only he alone . . . If at all, this can be done only by the Jew imprisoned together with his God in the abyss—it can be done only by him who himself finds himself in that hell . . . Only he, I think, can alone speak of a “God on the gallows” not we Christians outside of Auschwitz . . .*³⁶

We do not need to look at the darkest moments of human history to find suffering to which we do not have the right to give answers. Whether we think of tragedies like stillborn children or betrayals and abuses in human relationships, what right does the theodicy have to “give the answers to the God question”? Compassionate theodicy would attempt to return the agency of decision making to the sufferer by providing theological resources, not answers. Suffering is not general or abstract. It is radically particular, personal, and situational. There is no “one-size-fits-all,” but the academic resources can provide approaches and intellectual resources that could be catalysed by the sufferer to weave a new narrative around suffering. Each theodicy must therefore be bespoke, as unique as the individual it serves.

With compassionate theodicy the reader becomes the theodicy of their own situation as they discover the meaning of their own pain. An approach like this would avoid the critique that theodicy simply muffle the voices of the suffering—rather they would be trying to give language and help them find their voices. This is why, as discussed before, it would not be full of examples and illustrations of the worst suffering. The only suffering that is relevant is the suffering of the individual. Surin writes: “If . . . only the victims can truly understand what suffering and sacrifice mean, then theodicy must necessarily be articulated from the standpoint of the victims themselves.”³⁷

Amber Griffioen has written of the need to develop “therapeutic theodicy.”³⁸ She envisions that as practitioners we (the theodicy) will “relinquish our attempts to generate justificatory reasons from the perspective of the abstracted divine [God’s-eye view] (or, minimally, to refrain from thinking that if we occupied the God’s-eye view, we would be in possession of such reasons) in favor of imaginatively taking up the standpoint of Job in his concrete suffering.”³⁹ While I am wholly in favor of the possibil-

³⁵ Carrie Clark, Catherine Classen, Anne Fourt, and Maithili Shetty, *Treating the Trauma Survivor: An Essential Guide to Trauma-informed Care* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 34. Cf. Christy Gunter Sim, *Survivor Care: What Religious Professionals Need to Know about Healing Trauma* (Nashville, TN: Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2018).

³⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, “Facing the Jews: Christian Theology After Auschwitz,” in *The Holocaust as Interruption*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 29–30.

³⁷ Surin, *Theology*, 52.

³⁸ Amber Griffioen, “Therapeutic Theodicy? Suffering, Struggle, and the Shift from the God’s-Eye View,” *Religions* 9, no. 99 (2018): 1–8 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040099>.

³⁹ Amber Griffioen, “Therapeutic Theodicy?,” 6. Griffioen is not alone in advocating a shift away from a “God’s point of view” approach. Cf. Schönbaumsfeld, “On the Very Idea of Theodicy.”

ity of a therapeutic theodicy, I am concerned that Griffioen's approach may be simply one more projection onto the needs of the suffering individual. I am not Job, and my imagination may not be able to accurately portray his experience and may therefore miss all sorts of relevant factors in his suffering. Why try to answer Job's situation at all, when his concerns are long since gone into the grave? Griffioen is extremely careful and sensitive about the way she goes about trying to set out the need to understand, to extend sympathetic trust, and so on. But even then, the assumption is that the theodicy will understand, and will then be able to construct a useful approach. She writes: "This [therapeutic theodicy] will involve an attempt at understanding the depth of others' suffering, even if one cannot oneself experience it." I take a slightly different stance: I do not think I need to understand the situation and the complexities of the person who is suffering—the only needful thing is that they should understand it themselves. The most useful solutions may look radically different from their perspective than what I think the most relevant factors to be from my perspective (a point Griffioen acknowledges).

Consider divine control. Numerous studies, including Aten's, have shown that some people in times of distress gain considerable comfort from the idea that God is in exhaustive control of traumatic situations and a conscious act of surrender to divine control brings a deep sense of relief.⁴⁰ Yet, there has also been an equal and opposite sense of help from the writings of someone like Thomas Jay Oord, whose book *God Can't* outlines exactly the opposite theology.⁴¹ The role of the compassionate theodicy is not to say which of these is right, as if she had access to that knowledge, but to offer resources to the one who has a particular view that no longer serves their good, by providing other options. When the "survivor is the expert" it means that they are the ones to whom the exercise is directed. If it works for them, it works. This is not dissimilar to Marilyn McCord Adams's view that if enduring a horror is considered worthwhile by the one who suffers, then their view that it was worthwhile makes it worthwhile.⁴² The relevant factor is the suffering person's first-person experience and their evaluation of the meaning of the experience, not mine.

Although Amber Griffioen's suggestion of a "therapeutic theodicy" seems quite close to what I am advocating, hers is a wider umbrella term. I am proposing compassionate theodicy as the way we create and communicate theodicies. She calls also for an emphasis on listening to those who suffer, and embracing the role of a knight of compassion—one who is "moved to *resist* such evil and to stand together with and for those who suffer."⁴³ She rightly condemns those who disassociate from suffering and abstractly render the lived problem of evil as no more than a philosophical game, as if evil is a particularly intractable level of intellectual Tetris. Griffioen's wider approach is closer

⁴⁰ Aten, "God Images," 253; See also: Brenda S. Cole, "Spiritually-focused Psychotherapy for People Diagnosed with Cancer: A Pilot Outcome Study," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 8 (2005): 217-26; Ana Wong-McDonald and Richard Gorsuch, "Surrender to God: An Additional Coping Style?," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 2 (2000):149-61; Brenda S. Cole and Kenneth Pargament, "Spiritual Surrender: A Paradoxical Path to Control," in *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners*, ed. William R. Miller (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), 179-98; Andrea D. Clements and Anna V. Ermakova, "Surrender to God and Stress: A Possible Link Between Religiosity and Health," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (2012): 93-107.

⁴¹ Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2019).

⁴² My thanks to Mark Wynn for pointing out this connection. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴³ Griffioen, "Therapeutic Theodicy?," 6.

to that of the practical theodicians in that she advocates the same sort of acts of resistance to evil as those forwarded by John Swinton and others.⁴⁴ In my approach, compassionate theodicy *stands alongside* the practices of lament and resisting evil but is interested specifically in the question of how people's mental representation of God (their "folk theodicy") affects their experience of suffering.

I suggest that there is still a place for theodicy as the intellectual endeavour of wrestling through the contrasting experiences of divine love and intense suffering. However, in order to avoid imposing meaning the theodician needs to give up being the one with the answers. Whether justifying belief in God or asserting divine withdrawal and hiddenness, the theodician should take a stance that the meaning of suffering can only be determined by the person who is suffering. The sufferer is always the theodician, not the academic professional. What place, then, for the professional? The professional has the advantage of listening to many stories, in print and in person. They can take on a new role, not of determining whether the evil suffered by another is justifiable or not, but they can become a coach to help others make that call. The professional theodician's job becomes one that provides language and pathways of possible meaning that the person suffering can choose.

A Practical Attempt at Compassionate Theodicy

So far, this article has explored the methodological and theological underpinnings of compassionate theodicy. What could it look like in practice? One critique of practical or anti-theodicians, like Surin, is that they are "still talking about a pre-eminently theoretical activity."⁴⁵ Their audience continues to be the professionals in the academy and in the church. By contrast, I have attempted to develop these theories into a practical resource.⁴⁶ In terms of advancing the discussion of practical theodicy, this is putting my practical attempt on the table, moving beyond the theory into the actual practice of compassionate theodicy.

The resource follows a similar model of reading to the "Choose Your Own Adventure" novels that emerged in the 1970s. Those books were children's stories where the child could make key decisions in the plot and discover different endings based on their decision making. At a particular junction, the reader would be asked to choose from several different possibilities, and then turn to specific pages to decide what comes next. My book, *Why is There Suffering?*, follows a similar flow with forty different choice points, guiding the reader through a variety of approaches to the questions of God and evil, including approaches such as providential control ("God is in control"), inscrutability ("we must live with mystery"), open and process accounts ("God is limited in power"), religious naturalisms ("God does not care"), and atheist approaches ("There is no God").

None of the chapters include graphic stories of evil or suffering. Even in the depiction of heaven and hell, the illustrations use dragons, leaves, and rocks rather than people in eternal conscious torment. The tone is intentionally light whilst hopefully still carrying the seriousness of the topic. The following excerpt is what the reader arrives at after picking that they think God is a God of love:

"God is love" writes John (1 John 4:8). In one way, that tells us all that we need to know about God. In another way, that might tell us very little. After all, love can

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ Wetzel, "Can Theodicy Be Avoided?," 3.

⁴⁶ Bethany N. Sollereider, *Why is There Suffering? Pick Your Own Theological Expedition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, forthcoming 2021).

mean all sorts of things. I can love my friend, but I can also say that I love my hamburger. My “love” for my hamburger will lead to me eating it, but hopefully that is not true of my friend!

Generally, when we say God is love—that God loves us—we mean that God wants the best for us. God wants things to go well with us. We could even add that God wants to be in a relationship with us, since knowing God is part of what is best for us.

So far so good.

But when we look around at the world, it doesn’t seem like what is best for us is what actually happens. We certainly don’t see a world where all people are in a loving relationship with God or with each other. Quite the contrary. So, what has gone wrong?

There are four possible choices about God at this point.

The first is simply to continue to say that God is indeed all-powerful and all-knowing, and there is confusion somewhere else in the picture. Maybe God has a plan to use evil for good. Maybe the reason God allows evil is simply too hard for us to understand, and our job is merely to hold on in faith. But whatever the case, nothing has actually gone wrong in God’s plan. All power and all knowledge sit with God eternally.

The second option is to say that because God loves us, God gives us the freedom to choose actions that don’t lead to the best outcome for ourselves or others. We can even refuse relationship with God, if we so choose. Love gives freedom, even when it hurts. Our freedom can upset God’s good plans for us.

The third option is that God’s power is limited because of some other reason. Maybe God just isn’t all-powerful in the first place. God wants good to happen but doesn’t have the ability to bring the best outcomes. Maybe God has an opponent (like Satan) who gets in the way and messes things up. Or perhaps, it is not in God’s nature to coerce or control at all. God’s power is not the kind of power that controls stuff and causes things to happen—rather it is empowering and allows others to cause things to happen.

Finally, there is the possibility that God doesn’t know the future. While traditional Christianity has usually said something like “God sees everything—past, present, and future,” what if, in order to have a real relationship with people, God has given up that eternal vantage point? Just as Jesus became a human with all a human’s limitations, so God chose to experience time with us, and therefore creates the future with us. When bad things happen, they are not part of God’s plan, but God’s will *turn them into* part of the plan by the end of time. Like Rumpelstiltskin, God can spin gold out of straw, so not knowing and planning the future is not really that important. It is more important to God that there is real give-and-take, real response in relationship with us.

God is all powerful and all knowing. (Turn to p....)

We have the freedom to upset God's plan. (Turn to p....)

God's power is limited. (Turn to p....)

God does not know the future. (Turn to p...)

The reader can explore, turn back, and re-choose. The reader has the agency to make decisions in the book. The only limits are the limits of my own expertise as a writer; a comprehensive approach would include more than a Christian-atheist spectrum and would draw from other world religions. Every position is argued for—the reader is not led down paths that turn out to be “wrong,” so there is no apologetic or argumentative agenda. It is the reader who is left to decide what makes sense to them, and readers are encouraged to develop their own lines if the categories and paths I have mapped out are not adequate.

One of the most common and important questions I am asked is whether this approach is mere pragmatism. I do not think it is. Without launching into a full-scale discussion on epistemology, it is enough to say that people's own situations will inform and define their needs, and there are different rationalities that apply to different situations.⁴⁷ Each image of God can usefully correct another. So, God as a loving father is a useful description, and likely “more true” than the image of God as a fortress in many relevant ways. Yet, for the person from a home with an abusive father, the image of God as fortress may be immeasurably more useful and, from their perspective, more true. It is similar with theism itself. Some types of atheism may be closer to the truth than certain damaging forms of theism and abandoning one received form of theism may actually open up the possibility of someday discovering another form of theism.⁴⁸ Compassionate theodicy provides space and content where theodicy can be practiced.

A Renewed Theodicy?

Compassionate theodicy may offer a way to recapture much of the original impulse that inspired the authors of many of the models of theodicy we now use. Kenneth Surin complains that the ahistorical approach used by philosophical theodiscists prevents their seeing the original context of discussions about evil. Hick, for example, speaks of the “Augustinian approach” but, Surin says: “A historicizing investigation . . . will show that the appropriate context of Augustine's treatment of the causes and nature of evil, and (absolutely crucial for Augustine) the means of its transformation and overcoming is that of *conversion*, of the soul's ascent to God.”⁴⁹ The aim of compassionate theodicy to effect a transformation in the reader is in some part a renewal of that previous discourse on evil: an attempt to help the distressed discover grace. Compassionate theodicy is not really a new thing, but an old thing renewed.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Alister McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ Life stories of converting from some form of Christianity to atheism and then rediscovering Christianity are common, including: Alister McGrath, Francis Collins, Elizabeth Anscombe, and C.S. Lewis to name a few.

⁴⁹ Surin, *Theology*, 10.