Why the "Greater Good" Isn't a Defense

Classical Theodicy in Light

of the Biblical Genre of Lament[1]

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ALTHOUGH THE TERM "THEODICY" WAS COINED AT THE END OF THE SEVENTEENTH century by Gottfreid Wilhelm von Leibniz in his famous response to the tragedy of the Lisbon earthquake, concern with the relationship of evil to divine power and goodness considerably antedates Leibniz.[2] Plato addressed the issue of theodicy in Book II of the *Republic* and Epicurus is thought to have posed the clas sic terms of the dilemma. Although Epicurus' text is lost to us, David Hume alludes to it in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X, when he writes:

> Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?[3] (Hume 1947:198)

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society at the University of Calgary, in Calgary, Alberta on June 7, 1994.

[2] Although Leibniz published his *Essais de théodicée* in 1710 (six years before his death), he mentioned the proposed work and its title in a letter of 1695. For an English translation, see Leibniz 1985.

[3] Epicurus's statement of the problem is preserved also in Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, chap. 13 (written 313–314 CE). For a translation see Lactantius 1965:92–93.

Within the Christian tradition, the responses to this dilemma have been legion. The most famous, and the most influential, is certainly Augustine's "free will defense" in his early work, *De Libero Arbitrio*, begun in 388 C.E., two years after his conversion from Manicheanism to catholic Christianity, and completed in 395, after a hiatus during which he was ordained Bishop of Hippo.[4] What is crucial to Augustine's argument in *De Libero Arbitrio* is not simply that he appeals to human freedom as the "cause" of evil (*De Libero Arbitrio*, III.22.63). Rather, central to Augustine's early theodicy is his claim that the misuse of freedom (a putative evil) is balanced by God's retributive punishment, resulting in the "just" suffering of the soul (*De Libero Arbitrio*, II.16.43), which guarantees a good outcome overall in God's providential ordering of the cosmos. It is the punishment of evil by the imposition of suffering that serves, in Augustine's theodicy, to rectify this evil and thus to justify God.[5]

Few would follow Augustine anymore in the *particulars* of his argument, for we are inclined to view suffering itself as evil—something Augustine explicitly denies. However, Augustine's *strategy* in constructing a theodicy has become standard in Western, and especially Christian, intellectual history. I therefore agree with John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love* when he describes Augustine as the "fountainhead" from which all scholastic, reformation and enlightenment theodicies have flowed, and I therefore am willing to speak, with Hick, of a dominant "Augustinian" type of theodicy (Hick 1977:iii-v, 3, 37). What I dispute, however, is Hick's well-known claim to have developed an "Irenaean" theodicy, taking its inspiration from Irenaeus of Lyons, as an alternative to the "Augustinian." Here I side instead with David Ray Griffin in *God, Power, and Evil*, not

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[4] Augustine recounts the circumstances surrounding the writing in *Retractiones*, I.9.1.

[5] According to Augustine, if anyone sins, suffering is immediately imposed "lest for a single moment the beauty of the universe would be defiled by having the uncomeliness of sin without the comeliness of penalty" (*De Libero Arbitrio*, III.14.44). In a more extended explanation, he comments: "The voluntary state of being sinful is dishonourable. Hence the penal state is imposed to bring it into order, and is therefore in itself not dishonourable. Indeed, it compels the dishonourable state to become harmonized with the honour of the universe, so that the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin" (III.9.25). In other words, suffering imposed on sinners "contributes to the perfection of the universe" (III.9.25). (All translations from Augustine 1953)

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only when he agrees with Hick that the problems inherent in later theodicies are present at least implicitly in Augustine, but also when he places Hick, despite his disclaimers, squarely in the Augustinian camp (Griffin 1976:17, 72, 116, 131, 174–175; also Gooch 1991).

THE STRATEGY OF THE GREATER GOOD DEFENSE

What could avowed opponents like Augustine and Hick possibly have in common? Certainly not the specific arguments of their respective theodicies. What unites them is a common strategy. This strategy is described by Keith Yandell in an important 1974 article as the "greater good defense" (Yandell 1974; also Yandell 1984:214–45). Although he does not make explicit mention of either Augustine or Hick, Yandell advances the claim that anyone who desires fidelity to the Christian tradition and attempts to resolve the problem of evil is constrained to argue that any evil present in the world is ultimately necessary, from God's point of view, for the production of some greater good that would not be possible without this evil.[6]

Yandell's precise statement of the greater good defense is as follows: "Every evil is logically necessary to some good which either counterbalances or overbalances it, and some evil is [in fact] overbalanced by the good to which it is logically necessary" (Yandell 1974:4).[7] Whereas Augustine's explicit position in *De Libero Arbitrio* is that the world is no worse for all the evil in it, due to God's providence (technically, that all evil is "counterbalanced" by good), by the time we get to his later *Enchiridion* Augustine boldly claims that "God judged it *better* to bring

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[6] According to Melville Y. Stewart, in his recent book-length study of greater good theodicies, "Most if not all theistic attempts to resolve the problem of evil make use in some way of the greater-good defence" (Stewart 1993:56).

[7] In a recent article Yandell has explored to what extent his theodicy is compatible with the existence of gratuitous or morally unjustified evil. Although he seems to allow this possibility in the course of his argument, he nevertheless makes a distinction between the existence of gratuitous evil and the existence of evil which an agent would be gratuitous or morally unjustified in permitting. In the end Yandell denies that there are any evils that God would gratuitously permit to exist (Yandell 1989:30). And he affirms at the outset, as a standard theistic position, that *"Necessarily, if God allows an evil to exist, then He has a morally sufficient reason for allowing it to exist"* (Yandell 1989:17; emphasis his).

good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist" (*Enchiridion* VIII, 27).[8] The present world with all its evil thus constitutes a greater good, overall, than a world without evil. Evil is here "overbalanced" by good.

Augustine, of course, nowhere uses Yandell's terminology of counterbalancing or overbalancing, nor does he speak of evil being "logically necessary" to good, as Yandell and many contemporary writers on theodicy do. There are, however, at least two ways to phrase a greater good defense. On the one hand, we may begin with the specific good to be attained (e.g., free will, moral character, union with God) and claim that evil is *logically necessary* to its attainment. This is the more modern formulation. On the other hand, we may begin with a particular case of evil and claim that if it occurs, then some good is *inevitably produced*. This is typically Augustine's approach.

In both cases, however, no actual instance of evil in the world can in fact make the world worse, since either it will be "counterbalanced" by an equal good which results from it (Augustine's position in *De Libero Arbitrio*) or it will be sometimes counterbalanced and sometimes "overbalanced" by a surpassing good which results from it (the later Augustine of the *Enchiridion*).

Let me now illustrate briefly the greater good defense in action from three contemporary theodicies. The first is Alvin Plantinga's widely discussed "free will defense," which he proposed both in an article by that name (published in two versions in the mid-sixties) and in his later book, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Plantinga 1965; Plantinga 1967; Plantinga 1977:7–64. Cf. Plantinga 1974: chap. 9).

Although Plantinga does not use the terminology of a "greater good" in developing his own argument, he does speak of God having a "good reason" for creating a world with evil. He is constrained to speak of this by his desire to answer the "atheological" charge of J. L. Mackie and others that there is a logical incompatibility among the following three propositions (Mackie 1955):

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Evil exists.

[8] Translation taken from Augustine 1955. David Ray Griffin has analyzed Augustine's later theodicy, particularly as found in *De Civitas Dei* and *Enchiridion*, in some detail, paying special attention to the tension between human free will and God's omnipotence and predestination (Griffin 1976:55–71).

Plantinga argues that these propositions are inconsistent only if God has no "good reason" to allow evil (Plantinga 1977:26, 31).[9]

This notion here of a good reason or, in current terminology, a "morally sufficient reason," for evil is the functional equivalent of the "greater good" which justifies God allowing evil.[10] The greater good or morally sufficient reason that Plantinga suggests is the possession and right use of free will. Although free will is logically impossible without evil, Plantinga argues, it is such a great good that it outweighs, and thus justifies all the evil extant in the world (Plantinga 1977:30).

Without resolving the question of whether the content of Plantinga's account of free will is significantly different from or homologous with Augustine's, it is clear that the *strategy* of Plantinga's theodicy is essentially Augustinian.[11]

But then so is the strategy of John Hick in his now classic *Evil and the God of Love*. Although Hick claims to propose a theodicy that follows not Augustine, but Ireneaus and that provides an alternative to Augustinian theodicy, his resolution of the problem of evil constitutes another version of the greater good defense. In Hick's case, the greater good or morally sufficient reason for God allowing evil consists in the process of "soul making" or character building which results from our struggle with evil and which cannot be attained without such evil. Soul making, which logi-

[9] Although Mackie, following Epicurus and David Hume, cited the above three propositions, Plantinga, following the trend of much contemporary theodicy—which has an ancient precedent in Marcion (as quoted by Tertullian in *Contra Marcion*, 2.5)—cites as an additional fourth proposition that God is omniscient. I do not believe this changes anything essential in either the strategy of his argument or my critique.

[10] Although Augustine speaks of the "sufficient reason" why God gave us free will, despite all the evil that has resulted from it, in *De Libero Arbitrio*, II.1.3, Nelson Pike seems to have been the first contemporary philosopher to use the expression "morally sufficient reason" in the context of theodicy in his essay, "Hume on Evil" (Pike 1964:88). The notion of a "morally sufficient reason" for evil has now become commonplace in theodicy discussions.

[11] For my purposes I am not distinguishing here, as Plantinga does (1977:26–28), between a *defense* (wherein the possibility that God has good reasons for allowing evil is argued for the purpose of refuting an "atheological" charge) and a *theodicy* (wherein the actual reasons why God allows evil are advanced as a positive position). That Plantinga suggests the right use of free will as God's *possible* morally sufficient reason, one which is *compatible* with

cally necessitates evil, is such a great good that it justifies God in allowing this evil (Hick 1977:213–214, 336, 363–364, *et passim*).[12]

Yet another version of the greater good defense is provided by Eleonore Stump. Building explicitly on both Plantinga and Hick, (and also Richard Swinbourne) Stump argues that the significant exercise of free will is logically necessary for the process of being redeemed from one's own evil and thus for attaining union with God. The required sort of exercise of free will, Stump asserts, the sort that results in union with God, "is of such great value that it outweighs all the evils of the world" (Stump 1985:416).

THE EXPERIENCE OF IRREDUCIBLE EVIL

Whereas the *motivation* of the greater good defense is admirable in that it attempts to retain an orthodox doctrine of God as both good and providentially sovereign in the face of evident evil, it is the *strategy* that is problematic. For to claim that every evil in the world contributes to some equal or greater good which would be otherwise unattainable means quite simply that there is no *genuine* evil. Genuine evil, as David Ray Griffin has cogently argued, requires, as a minimum, the criterion that without it the

God's goodness, omnipotence and the existence of evil (as opposed to claiming that this in fact is the reason God allows evil), does not affect my analysis of his greater good strategy. Whatever the epistemic status of the particular reasons Plantinga suggests, it seems that he believes God does in fact have "good reasons" for allowing evil, or that if God did have such reasons, this would be unproblematic for orthodox faith. It seems to me, therefore, that Plantinga is committed, minimally, to the formal structure of the greater good defense *at least while he is mounting his argument*. It is possible, however, that the matter is not so simply resolved. Indeed, my position here is contested by Terrence Tilley both in an article (Tilley 1984) and a book (Tilley 1991:130–31) with which I am in fundamental sympathy, as well as in private correspondence (October 10, 1995). According to Tilley, a *defense* (as practiced by Plantinga) is a significantly different sort of speech-act from a *theodicy* and is not subject to my critique (which in some ways is quite similar to his own).

[12] For a comparison of Yandell's and Hick's greater good arguments, see Stewart 1993:123–143.

universe would be a better place. Otherwise it would not be genuine, but only *prima facie* evil (Griffin 1976:21–29).[13]

Prima Facie versus Genuine Evil

Take the following example. It is a beautiful spring day as I sit at my desk struggling to write this paper. Suppose I experience this struggle as a *prima facie* evil, in the sense that I initially disapprove of it. I think it ought not be this way. I would prefer to be out-of-doors riding my bicycle. However, because I value the completion of this paper as an important good which outweighs both the struggle and my staying indoors, I judge this *prima facie* evil (all things considered) to be worth it. So I affirm it as a good thing and I commit myself to the task at hand.

Many such examples of *prima facie* evils could be given, from the parental discipline of children to the amputation of a leg to save someone's life. It is even possible that some cases of chronic illness or severe financial hardship are justified by some greater good which they produce, though I would stress the word *some* and would not dare make such a judgement glibly.

Note, however, that in the case of a merely *prima facie* evil, although sorrow might be quite appropriate, we ought not attempt to prevent it from occurring. This is illustrated in Jesus' rebuke of Peter for suggesting that he try to avoid the cross, notwithstanding his own agony over his approaching death, or the weeping of the women at the foot of the cross.

Indeed, for Christians the paradigm case of *prima facie* evil is certainly the crucifixion. Without denying Jesus' suffering or taking away any of the pain of his death, the Christian tradition has judged that, in view of what his death accomplished (the reconciliation of the world to God), Christ's death was ultimately *good*. In view of the redemption God has

[13] Hick openly admits that from the perspective of the eschaton even the most radical evil "will not have been merely evil" (Hick 1977:364). But this is implied throughout *Evil and the God of Love*, in his constant emphasis on the importance of the early Easter Liturgy (5th-7th century), known by its first line, *O felix culpa quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemporem* ("O fortunate crime which merited such and so great a redeemer"). Hick claims that this notion of evil as a "fortunate crime" is the heart and cornerstone of Christian theodicy (Hick 1977:176–77, 239, 244, 364), correctly noting that this applies equally to Augustinian theodicy (239).

effected, the death of Jesus was worthwhile. That is why Christians praise God for the cross. Their overall attitude to the event is one of affirmation that it was right and good that it happened.

The trouble with the greater good defense is that it would require this attitude of us in regard to *every* case of evil. To put it rather bluntly, the greater good defense, in Augustine or elsewhere, requires us to affirm as good (all things considered) not just Christ's death, an amputation to save a life or parental discipline, but also three hundred years of the West African slave trade, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, tribal slaughter in Rawanda, and the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau. If the greater good defense is true, although we might feel sorrow over these events when viewed in isolation, nevertheless we ought ultimately to praise God for them, since seen in their proper perspective they are necessary to some greater good which could not be accomplished without them.

From the point of view of the greater good defense, then, Elie Wiesel's moving response to evil in his book *Night* is, to say the least, inappropriate. Not only is it not logically required to give up belief in God in the face of evil, a proponent of the greater good defense might argue, but the fifteen year old Wiesel (or Wiesel's narrative persona) should in fact have praised God for what he saw (and smelled) that fateful night in 1944. But I will let Wiesel have his say.

> In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. We had arrived—at Birkenau, reception centre for Auschwitz...
> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
> Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (Wiesel 1982:26, 32).

Now the objection may indeed be raised that I have uncharitably attributed claims to proponents of the greater defense that they do not make.

First of all, then, let it be remembered that Augustine has no place in his scheme for innocent suffering. All suffering is justly deserved and thus good (*De Libero Arbitrio*, I.11.22).

But, further, if we were to interrogate contemporary proponents of the greater good defense, the claims become quite explicit. Yandell, for example, grants "the psychological forcefulness of appeal to infant mortality and geriatric disability," yet he maintains that this detracts in no way from the logic of his theodicy. In fact, the problem with such appeals, he argues, is that they obscure clear philosophical thinking on the matter (Yandell 1974:13).[14]

Eleonore Stump is more sensitive to the "psychological force" of such appeals. But, like Yandell, she believes such appeals have no logical force. Stump writes:

> The suffering of children is in my view unquestionably the instance of evil most difficult for the problem of evil, and there is something almost indecent about any move resembling an attempt to explain it away.... With considerable diffidence, then, I want to suggest that Christian doctrine is committed to the claim that a child's suffering is outweighed by the good for the child which can result from that suffering (Stump 1985:410).

Does Stump understand what she is saying here? Most definitely. Right after she delivered a shortened version of her paper on "The Problem of Evil" at Cornell University in September 1985, a young Jewish student, voice trembling with emotion, asked Stump if she meant to imply that God had some morally sufficient reason for allowing the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews. She said after some hesitation: "Yes." He said, "Fuck you," picked up his knapsack, and walked out.[15]

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[14] This downplaying the importance of experience leads Yandell to state that "one's *feeling* that God's existence cannot be compatible with the apparently gratuitous evils that obtain in our world *is not by itself worth anything* unless it unpacks in arguments that are sound and valid" (Yandell 1989:30; emphases added).

[15] Stump's paper was presented in the Graduate Christian Forum lecture series at Cornell University, September 26, 1985. I was sitting a few rows behind the student in question.

That exchange illustrates vividly the first problem with the greater good defense, namely that it does not take our experience of evil seriously enough.[16]

Implications of Believing the Greater Good Defense

Let me be clear what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that proponents of the greater good defense are insensitive to human suffering or that they universally downplay the radical nature of evil. And I am certainly not saying that all proponents of the greater good defense claim that every putative evil ought to be treated as if it were really good. My point is the more modest one that such treatment is implied in their position. Or, to be perhaps even more precise, that such treatment would be the practice of anyone who consistently *believed* the greater good defense.

This criticism concerns, in other words, the inner logic of the position. The greater good defense simply cannot account for human experience of irreducible evil. And, as a result, I want to argue, if it were genuinely believed, it would undercut our ability to deal redemptively with such evil.

Whereas some would claim that the question of the existential value of the greater good defense as a comfort in the face of suffering and grief is logically distinct from, and therefore irrelevant to, its validity as a rational argument, I am inclined to side with Irving Greenberg in his famous comment about Auschwitz: "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children" (Greenberg 1977:27).[17] This means I also take seriously the question once put to me by a young black theological student about my pro-

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[16] For a profound analysis and critique of the Enlightenment discourse of theodicy that has significant overlap with my own, see Terrence Tilley's aptly titled *The Evils of Theodicy*. Tilley explains: "I have come to see theodicy as a discourse practice which disguises real evils while those evils continue to afflict people. In short, engaging in the discourse practice of theodicy *creates* evils, not the least of which is the radical disjunction of 'academic' philosophical theology from 'pastoral' counsel" (Tilley 1991:3).

[17] Greenberg's essay documents both the horrors of the Holocaust and attitudes toward these horrors, with profound theological reflection on the theodicy question that takes both God and evil with the utmost seriousness.

posed resolution of a particular theological issue: "That's all well and good, but can you *preach* it, brother?"[18]

The pastoral impact or relevance of the greater good defense to situations of either counseling or preaching is not limited, however, to whether this defense exacerbates the grief of a bereaved person, for it does far more than that. If the greater good defense were truly believed, it would undercut motivation for both petitionary prayer and redemptive opposition to evil by generating a self-deceptive apathy instead of a biblically inflamed passion for justice and shalom. My question about the greater good defense, therefore, is not whether you can preach it, but whether you can *believe* it.

The matter of petitionary prayer is relatively clear. If I genuinely believed that any particular case of evil that I encounter is allowed by God for some equal or greater good that could not be produced without it, why would I ask God to remove or modify this evil? What would be the point, in that case, of Jesus' abrasive parable about the insistent widow who badgered the judge until he dispensed justice to her (Luke 18:1–8)? Jesus says the parable is about prayer, but does God ever *not* dispense justice? The possibility is never considered in its full force in classical theodicy.

The case against actively opposing evil is similar. If evil is necessary to some good, from whence would the motivation to oppose it come? If I really believed the greater good defense, what would generate the sort of holy dissatisfaction with the way things are that is the *sine qua non* of redemptive action? Believing the greater good defense would result in nothing less than ethical paralysis.

But, what is perhaps worse, is that this paralysis is rooted in a profound prospect of self-deception. This may be illustrated by way of an important parallel between the greater good defense and just war arguments. In both cases some putative evil is deemed necessary to, and therefore justified in light of, some greater good. In the case of just war arguments, some of the inevitable suffering caused by war is justified in light of a particular military objective.

Let us take the 1991 Gulf War as an example. This war has the merit not only of being relatively prominent in our memories due to the on-the-

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[18] This question was originally asked about the content of my doctoral research on the *imago Dei*, but is equally applicable to theodicy. On the *imago Dei*, see Middleton 1994b and Middleton and Walsh 1995:108–27.

spot coverage it received in the Western news media, but also because it is evident that at least *during* the actual war President Bush, along with the majority of the North American public, believed this was a "just war." That is, they believed that the greater good of liberating Kuwait from Iraqi occupation constituted a morally sufficient reason for the death and suffering that were necessary to accomplish this. It is an open question whether North Americans would have persisted in their belief that the war was just if they were continually confronted in the news media with its actual cost in terms of the massive loss of human life and wanton destruction that were occurring.

Certainly, to maintain the public's conviction that the war was in fact just required language that downplayed human suffering. Hence the antiseptic technical jargon of "sorties," "ordinances" and "degradation of defensive perimeters." This jargon, combined with strict censorship of the media—especially censorship of video footage of any actual fighting—made it relatively easy for us to watch the nightly TV newscasts without too much guilt and certainly without any passion. This is in marked contrast with the explicit footage of the Vietnam War that bombarded American viewers through their television sets and which is often credited with the growing sense of outrage that developed against that war.

It is probably an overstatement to say that in the case of the Gulf War the benevolent hand of Big Brother took us dangerously close to an Orwellian world where we were lulled and numbed into believing that "War is peace" (and that evil is good).[19] Yet Orwellian doublespeak might well be evident in the White House news release about President Bush's state of mind the morning the war began. "The President is at peace with himself," declared the release, to which one commentator wryly responded that peace was the *last* thing on the President's mind that morning.

[19] Orwell has Winston, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, reflect: "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality, was tacitly denied by their philosophy.... The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears" (Orwell 1954: 67–68). There is a striking similarity between this analysis and my claims about the greater good defense.

While the Gulf War may be over, the world still persists in terrible evil. Believing the greater good defense, I would contend, is like living in the midst of a never-ending war, where one has continually to con oneself into accepting its justness. Given our existential experience of irreducible evil, this constitutes a massive project in self-deception. Such self-deception leads inexorably to apathy and cuts the nerve of any possibility for opposition to evil and the transformation of the present order. I do not think it is mere coincidence that the one place where Plato attempts to resolve the theodicy problem is in the *Republic* (Book II, 377b-380c), where its function is precisely to legitimate social control in the ideal commonwealth by *preventing* questioning of divine justice.

THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

Is it also mere coincidence that three of the examples I have chosen to illustrate people taking evil seriously—Wiesel, Greenberg and the student at Cornell—are Jewish? It may certainly be argued that these examples all deal with the Nazi Holocaust and since this is a terrible, even paradigmatic case of evil which was perpetrated primarily against Jews, it is natural that Jewish response to this event will be dramatic, even extreme.

But there is a further consideration. I believe Martin A. Bertman is on the right track when he suggests: "The Hebrew attitude toward the apparent existence of evil in the world has generally been to adopt the principle that the individual ought not to deny his own experience" (Bertman 1975:43). This goes back, well beyond recent Jewish experience of the Holocaust, to the Hebrew Bible itself. As I intend to illustrate, it is more likely that the biblical writers, and those whose consciousness is shaped by biblical sensitivities, would daringly *question* rather than glibly affirm God's justice or goodness in the face of a putative case of injustice. The experience of evil in the Hebrew Scriptures, in other words, is typically taken as veridical.[20]

[20] Unless otherwise specified, the biblical quotations that follow are from the NIV, except that I have substituted "Yahweh" for "LORD" throughout.

Audacious Biblical Texts

How else do we explain Abraham's audacious question to God, prefaced by the sort of hortatory remarks one might make to a child, in Genesis 18:25?

> Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Does Abraham really think God needs this kind of condescending reminder about right and wrong? Evidently, yes, in the face of what he perceived as obvious evil—God's proposed wholesale destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, if there are righteous people living there.

But this outright questioning of God's justice is not limited to Genesis 18. It is found also in the prophets and throughout the Psalms, and pervades Job's speeches in chapters 3–31 of that book. A few examples are in order.

Both Habakkuk and Jeremiah explicitly raise the theodicy problem in direct address to God, paradoxically combining affirmation of God's justice with questioning of that very justice. First Habakkuk 1:13.

> Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
>   you cannot tolerate wrong.
> Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
>   Why are you silent while the wicked
>   swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

Also Jeremiah 12:1.

> You are always righteous, O Yahweh,
>   when I bring a case before you.
> Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
>   Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
>   Why do all the faithless live at ease?

What these two prophets have done is first to affirm, respectfully, what is supposed to be true about the God with whom they have to do, and then to question that affirmation in light of their undeniable experience of evil.

Often, however, the affirmation is omitted, as when Jeremiah cries out in anguish to God: "O Yahweh, you deceived me, and I was deceived; / you overpowered me and prevailed" (20:7). Similarly audacious lines occur in other prayers of Jeremiah. "Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, /like a spring that fails?" he asks on one occasion (15:18). And on another he pleads, "Do not be a terror to me" (17:17).

In most Christian circles it would not be regarded as theologically correct to ascribe such deception and terror (in other words, evil) to God, yet such ascriptions are typical of the so-called "complaints" or "confessions" of Jeremiah which intersperse his prophetic oracles throughout the middle part of the book. These complaints fall into the literary genre of *lament*, a genre common also in the book of Job and in the Psalter. Indeed, more that one-third of all biblical psalms are either entirely or largely constituted by this genre.[21]

Such psalms are prayers which involve regressive speech, since the psalmist's situation is so desperate. Instead of opening with a piling up of reverential titles for God, such as Most High, Lord of Hosts, etc., lament psalms typically take a more direct approach: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) Instead of praising God for his goodness evident in the world, lament psalms complain to God about what is wrong, usually in the psalmist's own life. And, perhaps, most significantly for our purposes, in lament psalms the supplicant often does not hesitate to accuse God directly of injustice or evil and ask for rescue from this intolerable situation.[22]

Although not all lament psalms directly implicate God in the suffering of the supplicant, Psalm 39:9–10 is not atypical.

> I was silent; I would not open my mouth,
>   for you are the one who has done this.

[21] Bernhard W. Anderson lists sixty such psalms in Anderson 1983:239–42 ("Appendix B: Index of Psalms According to Type"). On the centrality of lament in Job, see Westermann 1977:vii. On Jeremiah's complaints, see Gerhard von Rad 1983:88–99.

[22] For an analysis of the typical components of a psalm of lament, see Brueggemann 1984:54–57 and Westermann 1981:52–71. Both Brueggemann and Westermann follow with modifications the ground-breaking form-critical work of Herman Gunkel on the psalms (see Gunkel and Begrich 1933; Gunkel 1967).

Remove your scourge from me;
   I am overcome by the blow of your hand.

Such explicit accusations of God coupled with petition for rescue are found also in the book of Job. In the midst of Job's concluding speech in chapters 26–31 he prays:

I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer,
   I stand up, but you merely look at me.
You turn on me ruthlessly;
   with the might of your hand you attack me.
                (Job 30:20–21)

But Job's accusation of God is not merely incidental. It is inextricably linked throughout the book with his protests about his own innocence, as, for example, in his response to Bildad in the second cycle of speeches.

Then know that God has wronged me
   and drawn his net around me.
Though I cry "I've been wronged!" I get no response;
   though I call for help, there is no justice.
He has blocked my way so I cannot pass;
   he has shrouded my paths in darkness.
                (Job 19:6–8)

Indeed, during his final speech Job protests his innocence with a telling oath:

As surely as God lives *who has denied me justice*,
   the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul,
as long as I have life within me,
   the breath of God in my nostrils,
my lips will not speak wickedness,
   and my tongue will utter no deceit.
I will never admit you are in the right;
   till I die, I will not deny my integrity.
I will maintain my righteousness
   and never let go of it;
my conscience will not reproach me
   as long as I live.
              (Job 27:2–6)

There are two surprising points about these Joban texts. First of all, Job claims his integrity of speech while ascribing his suffering to the hand of God. We as readers, however, know from the prose prologue (chapters 1–2) that it is the hand of Satan that afflicts him. Yet even the prologue does not treat these as incompatible. There Satan tells God to stretch out *God's* hand to strike Job and God agrees by telling Satan that Job is in *Satan's* hand (Job 1:11–12; 2:5–6). Presumably if God is ultimately responsible for allowing Job's suffering, it would be quibbling to deny that such suffering was from God.

But the second surprising thing about Job's accusations is that he is never corrected or reprimanded by God about uttering them. On the contrary, at the end of the book Job is vindicated, while his friends, who had consistently upheld God's justice and accused Job of suffering deservedly, are reprimanded.

After Yahweh had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because *you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has...* My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. *You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.*
              (Job 42:7–8)

It is interesting that in the epilogue the strictly orthodox speech of Job's friends is described as "folly" (*nᵉbālāh*), whereas in the prologue Job describes his wife's urging him to curse God as "foolish" (from *nābāl*), the adjectival form of the same word (Job 2:10). A tension is therefore indicated in the very structure of the book between different directions in which speech for God may move. While it is clear that the option of cursing God is illegitimate and therefore not much attention is paid to it, the book of Job makes the profound statement that a rationalistic orthodoxy which seeks to have the relationship of God's justice to suffering and evil neatly packaged is also inappropriate.[23] Could the greater good defense be considered a variety of this rationalistic folly?

[23] While differing on some of the interpretive details, Terrence Tilley nevertheless comes to a conclusion about Job similar to my own, suggesting that the book warns us against inappropriate ways of speaking about God (Tilley 1991:109–110).

The way of wisdom, however, is the way of lament. Far from being condemned here, prayerful struggle with God about perceived injustice is vindicated—even if it means persistently questioning God's justice in the context of a faithful relationship of trust. The question of Job, as Gustavo Gutierrez frames it in his insightful commentary on the book, is "the question of *how we are to talk about God*. More particularly: how we are to talk about God from within a specific situation—namely, the suffering of the innocent" (Gutierrez 1987:xviii; his emphasis).

Of course, Job does not lament forever. After Yahweh speaks to him from the whirlwind (chapters 38–41), Job repents "*of* (not *in*) dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Although this is a notoriously difficult verse to interpret, it has been suggested that its meaning is that Job changed his mind about his stance of dust and ashes, that is, about his complaining or lament, and moved on to praise and thanksgiving—though only after a profoundly personal, yet numinous encounter with God.[24]

The point of the book of Job, however, is not simply that one should move on from lament to praise. That point would not have required so long and torturous a book, meandering as it does between Job's nine speeches and those of his three friends (three speeches each, except for the third, Zophar, whose final speech is missing either by intent or textual corruption). The speeches of Job's friends drive him to increasing degrees of frustration as they rehearse the old truisms about suffering as punishment for sin or discipline for growth. (Could it be that Zophar's third speech is missing because he simply ran out of steam?) Even the introduction of a fourth character, Elihu, with an inordinately lengthy speech (chapters 32–37), following Job's reduction to silence, adds nothing essentially new.[25]

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[24] The text of 42:6 literally says "of" or "concerning" ('*al*) dust and ashes, and not "in" dust and ashes, as most English translations have it. On this, see Patrick 1976:369–71, Habel 1985:583, Curtis 1979:497–511, and Wolters 1990:116–19. Even if Wolters's textual emendation of one vowel is correct—such that "of" ('*al*) becomes "a child [of]" ('*ul*)—this does not substantially alter my point, that Job does not simply repent of his lament, since it is his *speech* that is explicitly vindicated by God (42:7–8).

[25] On Elihu, I am in agreement with Pope 1975:xxix-xxx, contra Hengstenberg 1972:105–6, who believes Elihu's speech contains the key to the message of the book.

Indeed, if there is an aesthetic correspondence of form and content here, the very length and repetitiveness of the dialogue may indicate that the book of Job is about the torturous *process* of moving from the disorienting shock of experienced evil, through its articulation in lament (with its dimensions of grief and complaint), to a new orientation that neither denies nor forgets evil, yet does not allow it to have the final word. This process is rendered particularly difficult in the face of an orthodoxy which seeks to stymie the first move by defending God at all costs, even at the cost of denying the evil one is experiencing.[26]

Biblical Versus Classical Theodicy

Although there are many more biblical texts that could be adduced, these are sufficient to elucidate a basic biblical approach to evil, even, perhaps, a biblical approach to theodicy.[27] But it is an approach fundamentally at variance with the greater good defense. Indeed it is difficult to imagine how any proponent of the greater good defense could do justice to biblical texts such as those cited. These texts and classical theodicies seem to inhabit different conceptual worlds altogether. And if a theodicy fails to do justice to a central strand of biblical texts, its claim to do justice (*díkē*) to God (*théos*)—who, Christians confess, is revealed in these texts—is seriously in doubt.

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[26] For an illuminating discussion of orientation/disorientation/new orientation as a grid for interpreting the Psalter, see Brueggemann 1984:19–23. Brueggemann has also examined more formally the central hermeneutical significance of the tension between orientation and disorientation within the Old Testament as a whole (Brueggemann 1985, 1985b). On the fruitfulness of Brueggemann's hermeneutical grid for understanding popular culture and the crisis of modernity, see Middleton and Walsh 1993 and Middleton and Walsh 1995, which are indebted to his categories. For an analysis of the limitations of Brueggemann's hermeneutics, however, see Middleton 1994a (and Brueggemann 1994 for his response).

[27] Other relevant biblical texts include the book of Lamentations and the prayers of Moses embedded in the Pentateuchal narratives. On these prayers, see Balentine 1985. Balentine's concluding comment could be applied equally to all of the texts we have examined: "In this respect prayer emerges as an important resource, heretofore little appropriated, for understanding the various concerns relating to theodicy in the Old Testament" (1985:72).

The second problem, therefore, with the greater good defense is that it does not take the Scriptures seriously enough. At least it does not take seriously that strand within Scripture which articulates and embraces pain and is ruthlessly honest about suffering.[28]

This is not to say that there is no continuity whatsoever between the Bible and classical theodicy. One point of overlap which they do share (and that distinguishes them from process theodicies) is that in both the omnipotence or sovereignty of God is affirmed. The genre of lament is predicated on the expectation that God can and will rescue the supplicant. While this does not exactly amount to the philosophical doctrine of omnipotence as propounded by classical theism and as utilized in the greater good defense, it does imply sufficient power on God's part to eliminate evil. This, taken together with the supplicant's accusation that God has permitted or caused the evil in question, strongly suggests that on the point of God's sovereignty the Bible sides with classical theism and not process thought.[29]

Nevertheless, it is the *differences* between the greater good defense and the Bible that are striking. If the biblical genre of lament may be said to embody a "theodicy," then that theodicy may be fruitfully contrasted with the greater good defense.

[28] Walter Brueggemann has extensively and fruitfully explored this strand within the Old Testament prophets in a number of accessible studies. See his classic statement in Brueggemann 1978: 44–61 (chap. 3: "Prophetic Criticizing and the Embrace of Pathos"), as well as Brueggemann 1986 and Brueggemann 1982:40–66 (chap. 3: "The Disruption for Justice").

[29] Whether a strong sense of God's sovereignty or omnipotence is ubiquitous in Scripture is a complicated question, for it involves a whole cluster of issues that cannot be addressed in any detail here. These include the typical biblical emphasis on human agency and responsibility, alongside a range of texts that seem to indicate God overriding such agency by hardening people's hearts (for example, Exodus 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17; Joshua 11:20; Isaiah 6:9–10, quoted in Mark 4:11–12 and Acts 28:26–27; Romans 9:16–18, 22–23; 11:7–8). Many of these texts, like the genre of lament, tend to ascribe what we would regard as evil to God's direct agency. Other texts make universal ascriptions of both good and evil to God (for example, Job 2:10; Lamentations 3:38; Isaiah 45:7; cf. 1 Samuel 2:6; 16:14–23; Amos 3:6), while parallel texts ascribe the same action first to God (2 Samuel 24:1), then to Satan (1 Chronicles 21:1). Interesting substantive studies on the above issues include Carson 1981; Lindström 1983; Kluger 1967; and Fretheim 1984:60–78 (chap. 5: "God and World: Presence and Power").

Whereas theodicy texts in the classical tradition take the form of apologetics and attempt to defend God's justice, biblical theodicy texts take the form of prayer (or at least alternate between prayer and other forms of complaint) and question, even assail, God's justice. Whereas in classical theodicy God is discussed abstractly in the third person and the apologist is expected to answer to others about God, in biblical theodicy God is addressed in direct second person speech and is expected to answer the supplicant. Whereas classical theodicy results, I have argued, in deception about the nature of evil and leads to passivity *vis-à-vis* the status quo, biblical theodicy is radically honest about evil, is rooted in passion, and questions the present social arrangements in the world.[30]

Biblical theodicy, therefore, is not content with contemplation—neither the rational contemplation of philosophical arguments nor the contemplation of prayer, even lament. Such theodicy thus moves from lament, not only to thanksgiving and praise (that is, to celebration and anticipation of God's coming shalom), but also to discipleship and ethical action—to practical engagement with the world animated by a vision of that shalom.

Lament, Trust and the Processing of Evil

But these moves are neither immediate nor easy. Job's move from complaint to thanksgiving does not come until the forty-second (and final) chapter of the book. Like Job, most psalms of lament also evidence a shift in perspective and conclude in thanksgiving for rescue experienced or anticipated. Psalms 39 and 88 are, however, two glaring exceptions in that no such move comes within the body of either psalm. Both of these psalms push the lament form to the boundary.

Although in both cases the supplicants continually cry out to God with increasing passion for healing, Psalm 39 ends not in praise, but with the desperate plea, "Look away from me, that I may rejoice again" (verse 13), while Psalm 88 ends in darkness. Its last poignant words are:

[30] On the insightful connection between theodicy and the legitimation or critique of social power arrangements both in the Bible and in the contemporary world, see Brueggemann 1984:168–76 (chap. 5: "A Retrospect: Spirituality and Theodicy") and Berger 1967:53–80 (chap. 3: "The Problem of Theodicy").

> Your wrath has swept over me;
> 　your terrors have destroyed me.
> All day long they surround me like a flood;
> 　they have completely engulfed me.
> You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
> 　the darkness is closest friend
> 　　　　　　　　　(Ps 88:16–18).

The psalmist is simply being true to experience. Evil, seemingly from the hand of God, is what he knows. Salvation has not yet appeared. So the prayer ends honestly, in the darkness.

Yet neither Psalm 39 nor 88 is a prayer of despair. On the contrary, they are—like all prayers of lament—bold acts of trust and hope. Such prayer, even when it is a lament at the extremity, on the boundary of despair, nevertheless *addresses God*. Here the psalmists put their experience of evil and the moral incoherence of the world at the feet of Yahweh in the form of prayer. It is not simply that the act of articulating pain brings order out of chaos or that voicing pain as one's own is cathartic. This is undoubtedly true.[31]

But the hope intrinsic to lament is found in the fact that even at the extremity, the psalmist refuses to give up on God. Having looked fully into the abyss, the psalmist now looks to God—*from* the abyss. Lament thus combines, paradoxically, both uncompromising honesty about evil—including the suspicion that God, because God is sovereign, might be at fault—and trust in that same God.

This paradoxical stance is illustrated in an illuminating rabbinic story about the Holocaust told by Elie Wiesel.

> Three rabbis—all erudite and pious men—decided one winter evening
> to indict God for allowing His children to be massacred.... after the
> trial at which God was found guilty as charged, one of the rabbis
> looked at the watch he had somehow been able to preserve in the
> kingdom of night, and said: "Oy! It's time for prayers." And the three

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[31] As Michael Fishbane puts it, "speech organizes the swirl of indiscriminate sounds and silence, and creates a world—a cosmos—with words" (Fishbane 1979:100). Brueggemann has explored how the lament form of prayer gives shape to suffering, in Brueggemann 1977.

rabbis—"all erudite and pious men"—bowed their heads and prayed (Brown 1983:154).

Such spirituality is, I maintain, not foreign to a biblical faith nurtured in the gritty genre of lament.

But prayers of lament transcend despair in yet another way, that goes beyond the trust expressed or implied by the act of prayer. Lament psalms have their roots, ultimately, in the exodus, the central and founding event of the Old Testament, when Yahweh delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Central to the story as it is told in the Bible is the Israelites' primal scream of pain to God. Between centuries of accumulated suffering and God's decisive intervention, we find this remarkable statement:

> The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for
> help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with
> Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.
> 　　　　　　　　　(Exodus 2:23–25)

This agonized cry of pain at the heart of the exodus echoes resoundingly throughout the psalms of lament. Lament is redemptive, therefore, not simply because the supplicant clings to God in desperate faith, but more fundamentally because lament is rooted in the very pattern of the biblical story, at the hinge between bondage and deliverance. This is true both in the Old Testament and in the New. For as the Gospels tell it, Jesus prayed on the cross a psalm of lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1) In the words of the Apostles' Creed, he "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, buried, he descended into hell." The passion of Jesus, as portrayed in the New Testament, was a spiraling descent into the abyss of abandonment and suffering. And from the abyss Jesus, like the psalmists before him, looked to God. And three days after his lament—his cry of abandonment on the cross—God acted decisively, defeating the power of death and raising him from the grave.

This biblical model of the move from bondage to deliverance and from cross to resurrection constitutes for Jews and Christians a grounding for eschatological hope. It is this hope that is structurally anticipated in the typical intra-psalmic move from lament to praise. This hope is further

echoed in both Lukan and Matthean versions of Jesus' beatitudes: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21); "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:5). Indeed, the notion of Christ's resurrection as the "first fruits" of the new creation (1 Corinthians 15:20–24) encourages Christians daringly to expect a transformation of the abyss into the Kingdom of God.

Yet eschatological hope can sometimes be cold comfort to those suffering in boundary situations of the abyss, especially if that suffering seems interminable as in Psalms 39 and 88, or in the book of Job before Yahweh's intervention. The heightened contrast between future promise and present reality can, in fact, intensify suffering and serve to foster despair.

There are important biblical indications, however, that there is hope and comfort in the cross itself, a hope and a comfort that do not depend exclusively on the eschatological anticipation of resurrection. What is only dimly foreshadowed and hinted at in Old Testaments texts such as the fourth servant song of Isaiah (52:13–53:12) and the strange shift of person within Jeremiah from the prophet's lament to God's anguished utterances of sorrow over the people's sin (for example, the prophet: 8:12–9:2, 13:17; God: 14:17–18), becomes explicit in the gospel.[32] The New Testament boldly proclaims what is no less a mystery for all the boldness of the proclamation, that God has personally known the darkness. "God was in Christ," asserts the apostle (2 Corinthians 5:19), poured out in compassion on behalf of the world, suffering with us and for us—bearing the weight of our own evil.[33]

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[32] On the theme of God's pathos in the Old Testament, see Fretheim 1984, and the older but seminal work Robinson 1955. On God's pathos in the prophetic literature, see Heschel 1953 and Heschel 1962.

[33] In one of the many poignant stories he relates in *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells of the torture and then public hanging by the SS of a young boy who was beloved of all the prisoners. When the noose was placed around his neck, Wiesel heard someone behind him ask, "Where is God? Where is He?" Half-an-hour after the chair was tipped over the boy was still alive, dying in silent agony due to his light body weight. Observing him, Wiesel heard the same voice behind him asking, "'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows'" (Wiesel 1982:61–62). From the perspective of biblical faith, perhaps Wiesel's answer was truer than he knew.

The passion of Christ, and—through Christ—of *God*, thus constitutes the genuinely intrinsic hope of biblical lament. It is a hope rooted not in apologetic argument, but in the love of God, as the link between *pathos* and *compassion* aptly illustrates. Instead of a rational solution to a philosophical problem, Scripture offers us nothing less than the participation of God in our sufferings. Although this is, of course, never divorced from the promise of resurrection, it may be that in the most extreme boundary situations of evil it is this compassionate participation in our sufferings, and not hope of God's eschatological victory, that renders faith—even in the abyss—a live option.

Beyond the negative claim, then, that the greater good defense is untenable as a solution to the problem of evil, this paper proposes that the Scriptures contain the resources and provide a paradigm for our existential struggle with evil. In particular, the genre of lament articulates what may be termed an alternative theodicy, which allows for the processing of the disorientation that arises from the lived experience of evil (Middleton 1994c).

CONCLUSION

Far from constituting a "solution" to the problem of evil, biblical theodicy represents an intensification of the problem, in that it allows for, even calls for, questioning of God's justice. If the major negative conclusion of this paper stands—concerning the failure of the greater good defense—it then becomes an open question whether the problem of evil can ever be rationally solved. Indeed, without denying the reality of *genuine evil* (as classical theodicy implicitly does by the greater good defense) or the *omnipotence of God* (as process theodicy explicitly does by its redefinition of divine power), the theodicy problem looks logically intractable.[34]

It might be suggested, on the basis of the audacious texts cited in this paper, that a biblical theodicy ought to resolve the problem of evil by denying not God's omnipotence, but God's *goodness*, but this does not seem adequate to the biblical witness, which tirelessly proclaims the goodness and trustworthiness of God. The fact that this pervasive proclamation

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[34] The varieties of theodicy in process thought is a topic outside the scope of this paper. On this see Griffin 1976 and Whitney 1985.

exists side by side (in tension, certainly) with the genre of lament, suggests that the reification into a doctrine of a supplicant's questioning of God's justice is inappropriate. Such reification ignores the dialogical context of prayer in which the questioning occurs.[35] The suspicion, therefore, that God might not be good may legitimately be voiced *to God*, but is illegitimate as a systematic theological statement.[36]

It is thus difficult to resist the conclusion that the theodicy problem constitutes a rational *aporia,* which itself exacerbates the problem of evil for those who are interested—as I am—in theological rationality. This suggests one final criticism that may be made about the greater good defense (a criticism which may apply equally to process theodicy), namely, that it takes rationality far too seriously, privileging the deliverances of first-order logic over the testimony of both experience and the Scriptures. If indeed we are confronted with the dilemma of either 1) concocting a morally sufficient reason for God to allow evil in order to render God's goodness and power logically compatible with the existence of evil, thus "solving" the theodicy problem,[37] or 2) rejecting entirely the possibility of its rational solution, I believe we must choose the latter. For why must we have rational consistency at all costs? Logic is certainly an important value, but is it the most important value in all situations?[38] Perhaps, like Job, who

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[35] On the dialogic, covenantal character of relationship to the biblical God, which invites lament and complaint, see Middleton and Walsh 1995:165, 185–86.

[36] The systematization of this suspicion is precisely the problem in the theodicies of John Roth and Fredrick Sontag, included as chapters 1 and 5 in Davis 1981. It also mars the otherwise provocative exploration in Blumenthal 1993. For one of the earliest and most famous accounts of God as evil, see Jung 1969. Also relevant to this question are Carson 1981; Lindström 1983; Kluger 1967; and Fretheim 1984.

[37] Or even concocting the notion that there must be such a reason, whether or not we know what it is.

[38] In particular, two considerations may be advanced in support of not holding fast to logical consistency in the case of theodicy. The first is that language about God is typically subject, as Ian Ramsey has extensively shown, to what he calls "logical impropriety" or oddness. That is, our speech about God is not always subject to standard logical rules (Ramsey 1957:53, 103, 105, 110, 123, *et passim*). This, combined with the consideration that evil may well be absurd, and thus ultimately inexplicable, converges on an aporetic conclusion to the theodicy problem.

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even after his encounter with God received no rational justification of his sufferings, we need to live with a healthy dose of agnosticism concerning theodicy.

This does not mean that we should never grapple intellectually with the problem of evil. There is certainly no scriptural or other warrant for heading off a budding theodicist at the pass with *a priori* warning that the way is blocked. Indeed, the example of Job suggests that the aporetic nature of the theodicy problem is something to be learned by experience, through genuine struggle, and not proclaimed at the outset by fiat. Rational attempts to solve the problem of evil, like the torturous process of Job's lament, may be the only way to come to an honest understanding of the logical insolubility of the problem, in much the same way as Job—through the crucible of his experience—came to an acknowledgement of the inscrutability of the ways of God. The only warning sign necessary for an intrepid traveler is the rigorous condition that, like Job, one speak the truth about God, and—I would add—about evil.

Biblical theodicy thus provides an alternative, not only to classical theodicy, which expects a neatly packaged rational solution to the problem of evil, but also to the premature appeal to mystery, coupled with a simplistic call to believe without trying to understand.[39] Biblical theodicy allows—even expects—one to move from untested faith to understanding, without any guarantees, however, that such understanding is attainable or indeed that faith will remain unchanged. Yet even the failure of understanding remains within the context of a God-relationship and can itself be articulated in lament.

But the failure of understanding in the realm of theodicy is not real failure. Despite its interim success and widespread popularity, it is the greater good defense that ultimately fails precisely for maintaining a semblance of rationality when the admission of ignorance would be more honest. Indeed, if the account of theodicy presented in this paper stands, the question arises as to why God allowed the greater good defense to be so suc-

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[39] Barry Whitney refers to this latter option as the "faith solution" and rightly judges it inadequate (Whitney 1989:8–16). Whitney wrongly, however, attributes this solution both to the book of Job (see my discussion above) and to Paul's acknowledgement in Romans 11:33 of God's ultimate inscrutability (p. 27). What Whitney does not seem to realize is that Paul's acknowledgement comes at the *conclusion* of three chapters (Romans 9–11) of his struggle with the theodicy problem in relation to the question of Jewish unbelief.

cessful. Far from constituting a solution to the problem of evil, the greater good defense, on the contrary, is part of the problem. The question for our theodicy thus becomes: Why would a good God allow the greater good defense? This question, too, must be taken up into our lament.

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