

Wrestling with God and with Evil

Philosophical Reflections

Edited by

Hendrik M. Vroom



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Coping with Evil

Challenging the Western Christian Approach

Marisa Strizzi

Abstract

The biblical Christian call to overcome evil with good seems to be at the foundation of the achievements of the last centuries of Western culture. It appears paradoxical that, at the same time, the problem of evil, in spite of its gruesome persistence, has been neglected in Western formal thought. This article argues that the discourse of ethics provides for a way of coping with evil that not only produces the paradoxical result referred to above but favors some of the expressions of evil that torment our present, such as religious fundamentalisms and social discrimination and exclusion. Reading about the deconstruction of ethics as portrayed in the work of John D. Caputo and reflecting on his contribution to a poetics of obligation is suggested as a new perspective for perceiving the matter. It is evil suffered by others that is focus here of the problem of evil. Obligation, a disquieting inhabitant of ethics, is regarded as a call to responsibility towards victims—which in most cases are victims of the evil we produce. Caputo's motifs of the "jewgreek," the "wholly other," "disaster," and "the flesh" are examined in order to illuminate our way.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"

Christians are called to cope with evil by conquering it with good, and I do not think I am too mistaken if I assert that overcoming evil with good has been the underlying motive of human achievement throughout the last centuries of Western culture. The subject that has brought us together here and now shows that—in spite of centuries of toiling on this issue—evil does not seem to be losing any momentum. There were two remarks in the introduction to the theme of the conference on religion and evil that I kept in mind as I wrote this article. It was stated, first, that "in recent Western thought the problem of evil has not received as much attention as it should have" and, second, "evil is a bigger problem

than the official Western culture has so long thought." Born and raised as a Christian in the Western hemisphere, I venture to say that we have heeded the call in Romans 12:21 in a somewhat too triumphalist way, and it is because of this that we can now observe this paradoxical result: a long period of certain oblivion and underestimation of the problem of evil.

My argument here is that ethical discourse—indebted as it is to the Western metaphysical tradition and reinforced by modernity—provides a way of coping with evil that not only produces the paradoxical result mentioned above but favors some of the expressions of evil that afflict the present, such as religious fundamentalism and social discrimination and exclusion. I will argue as well that a poetics of obligation, as proposed by John D. Caputo, allows us to consider the matter from a different, thought-provoking perspective. Consequently, for the purposes of this brief article, I have chosen to approach the topic of religious ways of coping with evil from a deconstructive point of view as portrayed in the work of the philosopher John D. Caputo. The position I will develop here constitutes a reading exercise on the deconstruction of ethics as introduced in his *Against Ethics* (1993). Nevertheless, I will also refer to some of his other works, including *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) and *More Radical Hermeneutics* (2000).

A Few Words on Metaphysics and Deconstruction

The Western metaphysical tradition reveals the enormous intellectual accomplishment of Greek thought whose preeminence has lasted to our time. The logical interpretation of and ideal ordering of reality beyond "concrete reality"—characteristic of this philosophical tradition—could be compared to a screen that hides a large laboratory where the concealment of "the real"¹ is forged. Since the intelligibility of the world is shaped by our metaphysical assumptions, our language and thoughts are structured according to its logic in a way that we perceive as "normal." However, we

¹ I am not saying here that "the real" is some sort of truth to be reached and, for this reason, likely to be revealed or concealed. I am alluding simply to the materiality of concrete life that is made intelligible under speculative logical categories, which tend to erase their own traces in the process.

are not generally aware of the camouflage that goes on constantly in our very way of thinking because its naturalization is also an attribute of metaphysics.

Different thinkers have confronted this tradition, beginning with the early arguments of Heraclitus against the Eleatics down to the later dissimilar efforts of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. At present, one important attempt to expose the concealing processes of Western metaphysics is deconstruction. This challenge to the Western canon portrayed in the work of Jacques Derrida is an unending effort to reveal what lies buried under the foundations of such tradition. According to him, this project is possible because the procedures of metaphysics leave their traces inscribed in its corpus. In that sense, the discourses, codes, and texts that ground Western institutions are inevitably fissured from their very conception and ask for a deconstructive reading. Deconstruction, as introduced by Derrida and presently portrayed by John D. Caputo, is

... an analytical and interpretive style that inhabits such structures as religion or science, or literature or politics, exposing in a painfully close and scrupulous way the complex and unsettled character of these discourses and of the communities and traditions that grow up around them. (Caputo 2000: 200)

The deconstruction of the main patterns of Western thought discloses that metaphysics has always aimed at smoothing over the difficulties of existence. Metaphysical conceptions do not allow room for *aporias*, contradictions, or any irruption of otherness in their system — a system confined within the limits of a language incapable of naming such disturbances. All particulars that do not fit these structures and the antinomies in philosophical views are hidden by an ethico-teleological drive towards non-contradiction, unity, totality, identity, cohesion, and plenitude. Under the lens of deconstruction principles such as origin, being, truth, good, reason, presence, possibility, etc. — especially when capitalized — turn out to be merely suspicious, destabilized notions. Among the most sophisticated works of metaphysics we find the conception of the subject as a coherent unity present to itself, placed at the center of the production of knowledge and meaning. This notion was developed intensively throughout the Enlightenment, culminating with the crowning of a rational person pursuing universal knowl-

edge, freedom, progress and happiness. Nevertheless, a deconstructive look at this metaphysical design shows that the subject is not what it says it is, i.e. sovereign, autonomous and always "in control."

In his proposal for a radical hermeneutics, Caputo takes hold of deconstruction in order to remain faithful to the difficulties of life, to "restore the difficulty of things" and to expose us "to the ruptures and gaps, let us say, the textuality and difference, which inhabits everything we think, and do, and hope for" (Caputo 1987: 1-7). Hence, he elaborates on the re-situating of the Western conception of the subject under the heading "On Not Knowing Who We Are," a formulation that recognizes the constrained situation in which we face the problem of evil: "Nothing demonstrates more forcefully the limitation of the 'conscious subject' and human powers than blind and fortuitous violence" (Caputo 1987: 278).

In concluding this section, there are some points we should keep in mind. Caputo refers to the metaphysical system as a "Greco-German" account of the history of philosophy from the ancient Greeks to the late Germans. These philosophical gestures, even in their most critical fashions (Nietzsche and Heidegger included), tend to propose an illusion of a primordial beginning to which we should aspire or to a majestic height of being imperturbable before the insignificant trifles of real life. On the other hand, and following Derrida, Caputo recognizes the inevitability of metaphysical conceptions: we cannot escape metaphysics, we are "always already Greek," because we are constitutively immersed in this way of conceptualizing. Still, alongside this is the important Jewish element, present in the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western culture, which Caputo introduces at the heart of his deconstruction of ethics. In that sense, he speaks of the "jewgreek," a conception to which we will return below.

The Deconstruction of Ethics

The deconstruction of the grounding of our conceptions makes both our ways of knowing as well as our ways of taking action in the face of the difficulties of existence problematic. Confronted with this, Caputo presents us with the questions: "How are we to act?" "Where does action find its guidelines?" Since the critique of Western metaphysics also means the critique of every meta-

physical ethics, he poses the question of the possibility of an ethics *after* metaphysics, of a post-metaphysical ethics (Caputo 1987: 236). In his *Against Ethics*, Caputo explores this (im)possibility intensively.

We are reminded that ethics is philosophy, and philosophy is metaphysics. Consequently—as part of the Western metaphysical tradition—ethics tends to make things look easier, to appease the turmoil of existence. Claiming direct contact with good and eternal truth, ethics lays the foundations for principles and provides criteria for making judgments certain—i.e. “guardrails along the slippery slopes of factual life.”² However, the deconstruction of ethics shows how unclear and uncertain judgments are—in spite of the handbook that ethics hands us. Deconstruction reveals that decisions are always haunted by indecision and warns us about the risky conditions under which we act. When ethics says that everything is going to be all right, deconstruction cautions us that “the ground may at any moment shift beneath our feet.” Ethics acts as a safety net under the decisions we have to make in everyday life. However, we are reminded that, like any metaphysical conception, the “net” of ethics is already torn from the start. When we affirm that ethics makes us safe, attention is called to the fact that ethics is inhabited by its own impossibility. Caputo proposes, instead, some contribution to a “poetics of obligation,”³ depicting obligation as an element that unsettles the discourse of ethics, as a *skandalon* for ethics. Ethics—despite its endeavor to honor obligation—cannot make obligation safe; what is more, obligation ignites the deconstruction of ethics.

What is the character of obligation? Which are its main features? I will summarize below what Caputo argues and refer as well to some related concepts that enter in as underlying motives

² By “factual life” Caputo refers (2000: 42) to “the young Heidegger’s project of a ‘hermeneutics of facticity,’ the attempt to begin with the factual or hermeneutical situation in which we find ourselves, the concrete, pregiven world in which and by which we are formed, with all of its difficulties and impasses.”

³ Caputo (1993). I am referring to the subtitle of this work that reads: *Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*.

of obligation. I will add a last warning, which I judge important to our interest.

Obligation

First, while ethics provides a comprehensible discourse resting on the notions of agency and autonomy of the subject, obligation is not a rational, intelligible utterance worthy of being obeyed. We do not deduce that we have obligations according to some rational logical process; in fact, obligation has to do with the sensible and not with the intelligible: "It is more like a *pathos* that I feel ..." (Caputo 1993: 27).

Secondly, obligations do not ask for our consent. Therefore, obligation binds us against our autonomy; obligation seizes us from outside. While ethics operates within the circle of autonomy and veils as unity, cohesion, and sameness, obligation disturbs its quiet kingdom with heteronomy. Obligation is something that perturbs and disrupts the I, its understanding and desires dragging the I out of its sameness.

Thirdly, while ethics loves universality, obligation is devoted to singularity. Obligations care for individuals and proper names, but this is "well below the range of philosophical conceptuality" (Caputo 1993: 72). Individuals have always been a problem for metaphysics, since for it the *telos* of the individual is to fall in line with the universal. Consequently, the same can be observed regarding ethics: ethics surrenders before singularity, that is, before existence—because singularity is the birthmark of existence.

Fourthly, unlike ethics, "obligation does not mean answering the call of Being, or of the History of Being, or of the History of Spirit, or the Voice of God" (Caputo 1993: 5). Obligation is a superficial-horizontal communication between one human being and the other—"other" being a category that includes all living things. Obligation is always related to the action of evil upon the other.

Lastly, obligation happens. It is a call, "a linguistic fact," a "prescriptive" that finds us always already at the receiving end, and we do not know for sure where the call comes from. We are born, formed and shaped within the "language game" of obligations and are caught up in the play of this game that plays us, and our place is always the receiving end. However, there are prescriptives to follow and prescriptives to resist, and "[t]he decision

to obey or to disobey is a choice about the effects of obedience or disobedience ..." (Caputo 1993: 27). In relation to this, we need to be reminded that obligation is not safe: "Obligation happens ... but it is not a necessary truth Obligation calls, but its call is finite" (Caputo 1993: 15).

Knowing and understanding do not necessarily lie at the bottom of our actions. We are not straight citizens of the realm of ethics; such a category — if available — is constantly boycotted by the unsettling maneuvers of a misadjusted inhabitant. Obligation is always already there to remind us that decisions are made in uncertainty. Our relationship to others places us in situations that cannot be apprehended by the table of contents of our manuals. Nevertheless, this economy is unavoidable: we need to hear the call of obligation in order to break through the stiffness of regulations that are blind to the overwhelming complexity of concrete life and, at the same time, be aware that these calls are limited, punctual, finite.

Motives of Obligation

Perhaps we need some help in visualizing complexity. We are eager for the security of truth but at the same time are persistently awakened by reckless passion. We have a natural inclination for that which is like us but are constantly pursued by that which is unlike us. We aim for impartiality but are confronted by outrageous injustice. We fight to pull ourselves together but are continually in danger of dissolution. The situations of concrete life constantly demand decisions that involve both obedience and disobedience. I will underscore some ideas in Caputo's work that illustrate the above; some are intertwined with our western Judeo-Christian tradition, others with our human condition. A motive is not only a "motif" but also an instigator.

On being jewgreek: The motive of the "jewgreek"⁴ is illustrated by Caputo confronting Abraham with the philosophers. As we have noted, ethics is philosophy, and philosophy is metaphysics, which is Greek. This sort of Greek collective subsists in the

⁴ In adopting this term, Caputo alludes to the conclusion of Derrida's essay on Emmanuel Lévinas where he quotes from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "GreekJew is JewGreek." Cf. Derrida: 1967.

element of autonomy: "I, Plato, am the Truth. I, Hegel, am the Spirit. I, Kant, am Reason ..." (Caputo 1993: 14). Obligation, on the other hand, is Jewish, Abrahamic, and belongs to heteronomy. Abraham is the one who makes his way to obligation without the protection of ethics, of the universal.⁵ For that reason, observes Caputo, Hegel thought him an ugly man. Abraham ventured into the "land of un-philosophy"; he did not seek protection under the shelter of truth, the spirit or reason. Since we cannot refuse the fact that the Greeks are the fathers of us all (because "we are always already Greek"), it is important to remember that Abraham is also our father.

The wholly other: Resuming his views on the end of ethics, Caputo declares that "everything turns on a specific affirmation ... of the 'other,' the affirmation of ... 'the wholly other' ..." (Caputo 2000: 175),⁶ and this "term of art" can have several senses. On the one hand and in a future sense, the wholly other refers to something unexpected, something that "exceeds our horizon of expectation," "something radically new," something that can be identified with the messianic. The affirmation of the wholly other in this case is related to justice and the knowledge that the present order can never be called just. On the other hand, the wholly other has to do with singularities, with that which lacks precedents and is "rather marked by its idiosyncrasy, its idiomaticity, its uniqueness, its anomaly, its unclassifiability, its unrepeatability" (Caputo 2000: 179). The wholly other is an utter singularity that resists schematization and claims for our response — despite our not having the recourse of universal rules in order to make our decision

⁵ Caputo refers to the *Aqedah* (the "binding" of Isaac). Abraham's disposition to sacrifice Isaac, the child of the promise, is presented as a paradigmatic example of how ethics ought to be sacrificed in the name of obligation. Caputo read the interpretation of this event in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* just a short time before Derrida's analysis of the same text appeared in "Donner la mort" (Derrida: 1992).

⁶ Although the theme of the other was already introduced in *Against Ethics* (1993), in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997) and *More Radical Hermeneutics* (2000) that Caputo starts using the expression "the wholly other" with reference to Lévinas' and Derrida's *tout autre*.

—and to which we should respond, i.e. be *responsible* in a deep and radical way.

On disasters: “Disaster” refers literally to the condition of being cut off from the star that protects us from misfortune (*dis-astrum*). While there is an economy of pain and suffering that is part of our pact with life—in which pain is something we work through and leads to personal growth—disasters only refer to an unrecoverable loss. There is no possibility for compensation within the economy of disasters and for this reason, disasters are events that ethics cannot contain: it cannot be a *ratio redenda* for utter loss. “The suffering of a child is not a part of the progress of the Spirit or the History of Being. It cannot be led to a result.” Disasters have to do with beings (and not with Being): “disasters’ means singularities ...” and “... obligation is a matter of being bound (*ligare*) to a disaster ... it makes the search for a result an obscenity” (Caputo 1993: 28-30).

The call of the flesh: Caputo affirms that the flesh is “the surface to which obligation clings,” the site of obligation: “Obligation happens—in and with and as flesh.” (Caputo 1993: 193). In addition, he makes an interesting demarcation between body and flesh. “Body” is a very Greek, philosophical construction, with an intentional life as an organized agent in the world. “Flesh,” rather, is the “stuff of a body.” Under suffering, the body contracts into the immanence of flesh; the site of suffering lies in the reduction to flesh: “When the intentionality of the body breaks down, when the agent body collapses upon itself, then you get to the level of the flesh. That is where the disaster is” (Caputo 1993: 204, 206). In order to reinforce the disruptive character of obligation Caputo observes that, within the economy of obligation, the I is always “body” while the other—towards which the I is obliged—is always “flesh.”

There is a sort of detection of “flesh against flesh” that allows us to understand in our flesh that the body of the other is made of flesh as well. We are reminded here that “[f]lesh is flesh in human and non-human beings, wherever there is *zoe*” (Caputo 1993: 210). Caputo calls this an “immemorial carnal operation” that is not an act performed by the I but a “transaction” that takes place entirely within the realm of flesh. We are flesh and this is from of old, and the other poses an “irresistible carnal approach.” This carnality of the other is never neutral and it is what solicits the I, awakening

the flesh within it: the I, which is structurally an active agent, knows that the other is always structurally vulnerable to being reduced to flesh, and it is that to which the call of obligation clings. The I poses a threat structurally to the flesh of the other but, nonetheless, it is in the flesh where the I can be touched, moved to avoid or end the suffering of the other as well.

Last warning on prescriptives: Lest we forget the one important characteristic of obligation, Caputo presents us with his “Several Lyrical-Philosophical Discourses on Various JewGreek Parables and Paradigms” (Caputo 1993: 134-93). In one of them he touches on the lack of safety in obligation as an aspect that rests on the very embodiment of obligation into prescriptives. Deconstructing the narrative of the *Aqedah* by retelling it as the story of Sarah, Caputo lets us hear the voice of a woman: Johanna de Silentio. The story of Abraham as the “knight of faith” (Kierkegaard) is then exposed in its “virile violence” as operating within the “madness of the blood economy” characteristic of sacrificial religions—even when the life of the son is spared, the blood of an innocent ram is spilled. Our attention is drawn to the hard fact that when someone “hears voices” without mediation—claiming blind obedience above the realm of interpretation—a door is open to fanaticism and violence. There is always the risk that the call we receive is a call we have to disobey; we cannot assume that the voice we hear is the voice of God or of *the* Truth.

Obligation means the obligation to reduce and alleviate suffering, not to produce it, not to augment it, not to spill blood in the name of the voices one hears. Sometimes prescriptions have to be followed by disobedience. (Caputo 1993: 145)

Motives and warnings situate us before the evil suffered by others and our responsibility of responding to victims. They help us to discover that whatever enables us to respond is constitutively related to that which leads us to victimize. The fragility of others summons the best and the worst in us. It appears that good doses of agency are needed when the time comes for alleviating the suffering of others, and a mindful trimming when its excess threatens to blind our actions.

Between Good and Evil

Our postmodern condition, as introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard, is one with no confidence in *les grands récites* (Lyotard 1979). Lacking the connections to the origin, to the eternal truth, deconstruction always recommends starting wherever we are: in factual life, where we face the ills and evils that plague our existence. Caputo pictures our situation in the twenty-first century:

Suppose the times have been anarchized by a powerfully pluralizing, disseminating, dissenting plurivocity that makes it impossible to agree on the *arche*? Suppose the Good has become not just diffusive of itself, which is the classical thesis, but just plain diffuse, disseminated, splintered, fragmented? Suppose we lack the *logos*, suppose we cannot start from above, suppose we do not have a *principium*, a principle, and cannot begin at the beginning? Then where do we begin? (Caputo 1993: 32)

Caputo agrees with the axiomatic formulation that evil is the lack of good but at the same time reminds us that in our condition we have been forsaken by Being and *the Good*. In the absence of a supreme good, where shall we get “the *logos* to define Evil as its privative lack ...?” Since we are stuck in factual life and being obliged does not depend on principle, we have to recognize that we cannot be *beyond* good and evil. Caputo’s presupposition is that we pass our days *between* good and evil. His salutary recommendation is that we be open to the many goods “of which there are always too many and more to come” but also have our ears open for the singular claim of victims “who are usually victims of somebody’s (capitalized) Good.” And evil? It keeps producing the same landscape of victims, the victims that are not hidden or aligned with a universal, victims that have names, proper names — and those are the only sacred names we are left.

Overcomings

After ethics (which is metaphysics) meets deconstruction, we can, aware of the fact that “obligation is unsafe,” observe how the shelter of ethics has operated in the history of Western Christian culture.

First, we can see that the soothing regulations of ethics, the arranged order of principles, show us a picture of reality that is

not so and produce a kind of anesthetic action, easing our minds in the face of obligation. We can go to sleep with a good conscience. In confronting this, Caputo endorses “bad conscience as a structural feature of ethical life” (Caputo 2000: 178). Secondly, the recourse to *the* Truth—a capitalized truth that conceals an autonomous call—has more frequently than not justified the enforcement of the “call” of the strong upon the weak. Thirdly, the hunger for universal coherence and sameness abiding at the heart of ethics, renders it impossible to make room for what disturbs its patterns. Difference is not allowed: the dominating models of Western Christian culture victimize those who “do not fit,” be it ethnically, biologically, economically, sexually, or any other variant we may think of. Lastly, the aseptic procedures of norms and regulations induce us to forget that we are made of flesh, and that, for better or worse, “immemorial carnal operations” cannot be subdued by rules.

However, we are made aware that the call that obligation wedges into the circle of ethics to avoid its closing-off is always contingent. Since we cannot get rid of ethics—as we cannot escape from metaphysics—deconstruction just makes us conscious of the conditions under which we act.

Perhaps one of the most provoking ideas is the fact that “Western Christians” are and will always be jewgreek—i.e. always mingled together—and placed in the (im)possible space between obligation and ethics so that we can hear the biblical call in a different way. With “fear and trembling,” (to keep reading and re-reading Kierkegaard, who honored Abraham but missed the point with Sarah and the ram, biblically) Caputo asserts that one of the most honorable and ancient religious projects of deconstruction is “dehellenizing Christianity” or, more generally, “dehellenizing biblical faith” (Caputo 1997: 5). After all, were not the acts of Jesus the Jew always undoing the closing up of religion into rigid institutions: favoring individuals against the universality of the law, touching the unclean, healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners and tax collectors, consorting with women of dubious morals, calling attention to the needs of the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, and so forth?

Sent back to the difficulties of life, immersed in a disastrous condition, not knowing who we are, presented with obligation, overtaken by the singular and wholly other, aware of the indeci-

sion that permeates every step we take, we should not, however, necessarily be led towards nihilism or irresponsibility, towards the road of “anything goes.” The suffering of the other “in the flesh” and the call for every day decisions—leaving room for what is new and different—keeps us in a realistic consideration regarding good and evil. “We Shall Overcome” is our hymn of passion, but as we toil here “from below,” overcoming is always a contingent act, finite and fragile.

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Reasons for Having No Reason to Defend God

Kant, Kierkegaard, Levinas
and their
Alternatives to Theodicy

Claudia Welz

Abstract

Kant, Kierkegaard, and Levinas see it as a wasted effort to try to justify God in view of human experience of evil, sin and suffering. Which are their specific reasons for having no reason to defend God? And how do they try to cope ethically with the practical dimension of the theoretically unsolved problem of theodicy? These are the two guiding questions for the following investigation. The different models of a "critique of theological reason" are outlined in a comparison and exemplified by the respective Christian and Jewish approaches to the biblical figure of Job. They reveal the difficulty of finding adequate ways to address a theme that not only requires philosophical thematization and self-correction but also points beyond the limits of philosophical discourse to the task of finding a personal and interpersonal modus vivendi with and despite the wound of negativity; ultimately, it demands an existential commitment in solidarity with the suffering—a language that surpasses what can be said. With regard to Kant, Kierkegaard and Levinas, three possible forms of this are portrayed.

Introduction

The term "theodicy" goes back to Leibniz' *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (1710). It was coined by combining the Greek words *theos* (God) and *diké* (justice). In its standard Enlightenment version, "theodicy" stands for the process in which God, the creator of the world, is charged with the imperfection of the world, defended and justified before the tribunal of human reason. The problem of theodicy deals with the question of how the theistic belief in an om-

nipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God is compatible with the indisputable experience that there is evil in the world. In its simplest classical form, the problem can be articulated as follows: If God is willing but not able to prevent evil, then he is impotent; if he is able but not willing, then he is malevolent. But if he is both able and willing, whence then is evil?¹

Interesting parallels regarding this problem can be found in the works of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the Danish existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995): the two Christians and the Jew reject all theoretical efforts to justify God in view of the evil we suffer or do. What are their reasons for having no reason to defend God? How do they try to cope ethically with the existential and practical dimensions of the problem of theodicy? These are the two guiding questions for our investigation.

The different models of a “critique of theological reason” shall be exemplified with the respective approaches to the biblical figure of Job.² In the Bible Job is described as an upright man who shunned evil and enjoyed a prosperous life as God’s friend—until he experiences a disastrous series of misfortunes that befall him through no fault of his own: all his property is destroyed, all his children are killed, and his body is stricken with sores from head to toe. He cannot help considering God to be responsible for inflicting great harm upon him, although he can not understand why God should have done that. His friends try to excuse God and accuse Job of being responsible for his suffering himself. But they turn out to be wrong.

After the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 and all the more after Auschwitz, the optimism of all theodicies has become suspect. They harmonize the most horrendous evils with God’s supposed goodness and argue in the abstract for the intelligibility or even necessity of evil in general. One of the first critics of

¹ This is a shorter version of Epicurus’ formulation of the problem, which David Hume put into the mouth of Philo in Part X of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

² For a Jewish interpretation of the book of Job see Verbin 2007.

such a rational demonstration that all is well with this world was Kant.

Kant

In his 1793 essay "On the Failure of all Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy,"³ Kant distinguishes between two different forms of theodicy, namely "doctrinal" and "authentic." "Doctrinal theodicy" is defined as "a defense of the wisdom of the world's creator in view of the charge reason brings against his wisdom on account of that which contradicts the purpose of the world" (Kant 1964: 116; cf. 105, 105-15). God's *wisdom* comprises his holiness as legislator, his goodness as sovereign and his justice as judge. Evil and sin contradict his holiness, pain contradicts his goodness and the fact that not all crimes are punished contradicts his justice. The final *purpose* of the world is seen as "the highest Good," a correspondence between natural and moral law, which means that happiness is proportionate to virtue. The destiny of moral agents will fit their deeds. To assure that morality can attain its end, Kant postulates human freedom, the idea of God, and the immortality of the human soul. Let us have a closer look at these three postulates.⁴

In his preface to the first edition of *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which was published in the same year as the essay on theodicy, Kant holds that morality springs from *human freedom*, which grants the autonomy of practical reason. Since practical reason gives us the law that orients and motivates our action, it is also concerned with the effect of the action it directs. The idea of a final purpose thereby functions as a "compass," so to speak. Morality is not founded on religion but leads to religion (Kant 1960: 3) because only *God* can bring about the final purpose of the world. It is he who coordinates the moral and the natural order. However, their correspondence is not obvi-

³ I will refer to the German original "Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee" (Kant 1964), providing my own translations.

⁴ A postulate is a theoretical but unprovable principle, connected inseparably with a practical law that is valid unconditionally and *a priori*, i.e. apart from sense perceptions. Cf. Kant 1990b: 141.

ous on earth. Therefore Kant introduces the postulate of the *immortality of the soul*.⁵ It implies that this world, where even the virtuous sometimes suffer from evil and pain, is only a prelude to the afterlife in which the scales of justice are balanced. If the final purpose of the world could never be realized, this would put the wisdom of its creator in question. Although the possibility of its realization must be postulated for practical reasons, its actual realization cannot be proved in theory.

In theodicy, as Kant puts it metaphorically, God is on trial. The one who defends God must refute all grievances against him by proving either that there is nothing inappropriate in the world, that it is necessary or that God is not responsible for it. Kant shows that this defense is both presumptuous and speculative because we cannot deduce God's will from what we experience in the phenomenal world. How we experience this world is dependent on the information that our physical senses provide our minds and the process of synthesis that organizes the sensory information according to categories. Since we do not have any sense impressions of God we cannot experience him. Kant points to the limits of human reason: it has no insight into the relation between God's wisdom and what happens in the world. We cannot comprehend the way in which the supernatural (*mundus intelligibilis*) might underlie the sensuous world we perceive (*mundus sensibilis*). This relation could be judged by us only on the condition that we had an overview of both the world and the plans of its creator. The creature would then adopt the role of its creator and judge him by whom it itself will be judged.

However, while it is better not to attempt to defend *God's* justice, which can never be empirically proved to be true or false, *we* should strive for justice ourselves. In the biblical Job Kant finds an example of so-called "authentic theodicy" (Kant

⁵ This latter postulate is implied negatively in the note to the above-mentioned preface (cf. Kant 1990a: 7) and is made explicit in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (cf. Kant 1990b: 140, 152, 159). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul were understood to be incentives for moral resolutions *and* their execution (see Kant 1998: 845), while in his book on religion Kant writes that religion only removes that which hinders moral resolution (cf. Kant 1990a: 5f.).

1964: 116-23). It is defined as an interpretation of God's will not by *theoretical* reason but by God himself who allegedly speaks through human *practical* reason. It entails the *a priori* idea of an almighty God who sees to it that moral action is rewarded and wrongdoing punished. In Kant's eyes, Job lost everything except the clear conscience of his unjust suffering. He emphasizes that God confirmed the judgement of Job's conscience in the end and showed him his unfathomable wisdom secretly at work in his creation. Moreover, God condemned Job's flattering friends who defended *God's* justice by ignoring *Job's* and thereby attributed sin to the just. For Kant, Job is exemplary in two respects. First, Job was sincere in doubting whether God is just. Lacking any objective criterion of truth, he could not know if what he said about God was true (*wahr*), since he could not compare the linguistic content of his statement with God as he is "in himself." But Job was truthful (*wahrhaftig*) in measuring it by his own subjective conscience, which checks whether he has at least intended to speak the truth. Secondly, he did not base morality on belief but believed in morality and founded his faith on that.

Kant's "authentic theodicy" thus turns out to be an "anthropodicy," that is, not a justification of *God's* justice but of *human* righteousness before God. However, if eternal bliss depends on our morality, it might not apply to any one else except Job. According to Kant, everyone lacking moral perfection has no reason to *defend* or to *accuse* God, let alone hope for a happy end. Kant's anthropology becomes more and more pessimistic⁶ and thus questions, against his wishes, not only doctrinal but also authentic theodicy. At the end of his essay he admits that we can even distort the judgment of our own conscience. Therefore, the outcome of Job's story is to be assessed as an ideal case, but the widespread applicability of such an anthropo-

⁶ Kant not only knew that we might fail to act morally but declared us incapable of moral perfection in this life (cf. Kant 1990b: 140). Note that neither God's goodness nor God's justice in the sense of *iustitia distributiva*, i.e. retributive justice, repaying everyone for his or her deeds, are understood as unconditioned grace, which *makes* persons just and enables them to do the good. See Kant 1964: 108 n.

dicy—and, when all is said and done, worldwide progress—is not to be expected.

Under these circumstances, it is uncertain whether Kant's three postulates achieve their aim of motivating moral action in support of the good. More likely, they aggravate the problem of moral evil: although the factual misuse of *freedom* does not jeopardize the ideal, it radicalizes the discrepancy between the moral ideals and their possible realization. Due to the admitted inclination to evil in human nature (Kant 1990a: 28ff), it is not probable that anyone will be able to improve his way of thinking and to change through continuous striving, as Kant suggests (Kant 1990a: 51f.). Besides, Kant's interpretation of the book of Job is dubious insofar as *God's* voice is identified with the voice of human reason, which thereby gains a quasi-divine status. The biblical Job finds himself vis-à-vis a God who is *not* at our disposal, whereas Kant's postulate of God functions as a means to moral ends (cf. Kant 1990a: 174f.; 1990b: 5), which, nevertheless, can not bridge the "moral gap."⁷ The postulate of *immortality* postpones the accord of virtue with happiness until the coming of the Kingdom. It sounds like an indirect excuse for the present disharmony and the apparent ineffectiveness of God's justice and, ultimately, like a self-defense of reason's rationality.

Preoccupied with Job's completely innocent suffering, Kant leaves us alone with the complexity of evil. His call for the self-determination of the will in conformity with the formal criterion of the categorical imperative ignores the problem of the ambivalence of particular evils. Evil is not "something" that "has" a certain appearance or has a characteristic "look" to it. Rather, it appears only by means of something else and in relation to someone for whom a certain state of affairs appears *as* evil with regard to certain concerns. It cannot but appear differently relative to the angle from which it is seen. Even if it were possible to contrast its multiple forms with one good in general that can be willed by everyone, it would still remain difficult to put the good in concrete terms—all the more so in situations where what one person experiences as good is evil for another. In the

⁷ Cf. Hare 1996: 1 on the gap between the demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it.

very struggle against evil, evil tends to perpetuate itself: for example, when one person finds compensation for the evil she suffered through inflicting suffering on the evildoer. Sometimes one becomes, *nolens volens*, entangled in something that turns out to be evil. Even the good that is intended can have unintended side-effects that blur the distinction between victim and culprit. If good and evil are interwoven in this way, we are also faced with the problem of how to deal with guilt and the evil that no one has willed. Willing the good is not enough. Nevertheless, although Kant's alternative to a "doctrinal theodicy" is not convincing, although his attempt to cope ethically with evil does not offer a satisfying solution, his epistemological argumentation as well as his turn to the practical challenge of the problem of theodicy has become historically important.

Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard nowhere uses the term "theodicy" himself, but his journal entries show that he studied Leibniz' *Théodicée*⁸ intensively. Kierkegaard rejects theodicy mainly for theological reasons, namely on account of his apophatic theology of gift.⁹

⁸ His notes on this were written in the years 1840 (Pap. III A 98), 1842-43 (Pap. IV A 11; 12; 14-18; 25; 29; 31; 36; IV C 9; 12; 29-41; 62; 72; 126) and 1850 (Pap. X,2 A 403). As there is no English translation available, I will refer to the Danish editions (Pap. = Søren Kierkegaards Papirer, cf. the respective volumes of Kierkegaard [1968-78] designated by Roman numerals; the entries of the 1840s can also be found in Kierkegaard 2001). It was Kierkegaard's wish that the opinions of persons speaking in his works published pseudonymously not be attributed to himself; cf. Kierkegaard 1992: 625-27. In the following I will refer only to his journals and to discourses published in his own name.

⁹ The motif of gift is central in Kierkegaard's four discourses upon James 1:17 (three written in 1843 entitled "Every Good Gift and Every Perfect Gift Is from Above" and one in 1855 entitled "The Changelessness of God"), in his 1843 discourse on Job 1:20-21 ("The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed Be the Name of the Lord"), and in *Works of Love*, his 1847 Christian ethics in rhetorical form. Cross-references and allusions can be found in many more of Kierkegaard's so-called *Up-building Discourses* and *Christian Discourses*. I will summarize the main arguments of the above texts and also refer to Kangas 2000: 106-08, 112-20.

God's self-giving love as the origin and purpose of the world is identified with the good beyond being and phenomenization. It surpasses the entire domain of cognition and experience not just because human capacities are limited but because of its structure as the absolute. Our relation to God is due to God giving himself—as the “medium” through which we relate to him, who gives the condition for receiving the gift along with the latter (Kierkegaard 1990: 134f.). However, in coming-into-existence, the good becomes ambiguous and appears at best as a good from some perspective. All that is given to us in space and time is exposed to the doubt of whether it is a good gift from above or not. Since the Good is invisible in itself and present *incognito* in the world, it cannot be demonstrated (Kierkegaard 1990: 131f., 135f; 1998: 271f.). Thus Kierkegaard has a *reasonable* reason *not* to defend God. Like Kant, he makes clear that we cannot know anything about God's relation to good and evil by drawing conclusions from the physical world. But instead of discussing religion within the limits of reason alone, he agrees with Leibniz that faith is *beyond* reason, although it is *not against* reason.

However, he criticizes Leibniz' idea of an all-embracing order, for if any single person has cause for complaint, the universe does not offer any help (cf. Kierkegaard 2001: 390, 392). As God's *universal* love—love which is believed to be present in what we can understand and also in the dark riddles of life (Kierkegaard 1993: 268)—cannot be proved, Kierkegaard's discourses aim at strengthening the *individual's* belief in love: Although we are not “required to be able to understand the rule of God's love,” we shall “understand that he is love” (Kierkegaard 1993: 268).

This entails the practice of willing *and* doing the good. The good is defined formally as self-correspondence while evil is “at odds with itself, divided in itself” (Kierkegaard 1993: 34; cf. 7-154). How can we identify the good? In a remarkable “phenomenology of the invisible,” Kierkegaard shows that *what* we see with our eyes depends on *how* we see with our heart. For example, the eyes of the one who mistrusts “are sharpened and armed”; his outlook becomes prejudiced so that “he sees evil in everything, impurity even in the purest” (Kierkegaard 1995: 286). By contrast, love is the “power from above that translates

evil into good" (Kierkegaard 1990: 61). Only the person who loves can "see" the good. Love is not only a category through which we perceive reality but even more a power to transform it, since love is associated both with actuality and with potentiality. To love means to hope for oneself and for others, to "relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good" (Kierkegaard 1995: 249). Even if the good is far from obvious, love presupposes that it is there, loves it forth, forgives what goes wrong and gives no further occasion for doing evil.

Therefore, to love or not to love is a choice of ethical significance. Becoming a loving person is the only adequate means to stop the proliferation of evil. Kierkegaard's Christian ethics qualifies the duty to do the good in terms of the double commandment to love God and one's neighbor. A "moral gap" opens only in abstraction from God, the "source of all love in heaven and on earth" (Kierkegaard 1995: 3). Like a hidden mirror, he is present in all our interpersonal relationships and reflects our mode of "seeing": if we are indignant with people who wrong us, we are indignant with God permitting it to be done; if we accept it "from God's hand" (Kierkegaard 1995: 384; cf. 234, 295, 299, 376) as a good gift, we will not be indignant towards them. This shows that how we imagine the invisible God has far-reaching consequences for the way we interpret events in the visible world.

For Kierkegaard, unlike Kant, Job is exemplary not because of doubtful deliberations but because he, in mourning, traced everything back to God, seeing *him* and not despair. Looking not at the given and the lost but at the *giver*, he could even take loss as a gift. Job at the moment of loss said first of all "The Lord gave," "as if it were not the Lord who took it away but Job who gave it back to him" (Kierkegaard 1990: 116f.; cf. 114f., 121). What is left is not Job's clear conscience but his praise. Kierkegaard describes his sincerity not as rebellion against God's apparent injustice but as thankfulness owing to the vivid idea of God's goodness in his soul. This idea might well exceed human notions of morality. Let us compare the following statement with Kant's idea of a final correspondence between virtue and happiness:

Is there no harmony between what happens in heaven and what happens on earth! This is the way you may have talked in your heart's bewilderment You wanted God's ideas about what was best for you to coincide with your ideas, but you also wanted him to be the almighty Creator of heaven and earth so that he could properly fulfill your wish. And yet, if he were to share your ideas, he would cease to be the almighty Father ... as if you would be benefited if God in heaven did not know better than you yourself what was beneficial for you. (Kierkegaard 1990: 35-37)

In the final analysis, Kierkegaard's theology results in both the self-determination and self-limitation of human reasoning and willing in accordance with the trust in God's inscrutable will willing the good for us, even if the good, for the time being, looks bad in our eyes. Kierkegaard's argumentation starts off with the ambiguity of human existence and provides us with strategies to convert whatever we experience as evil into something for which we can be thankful. This approach has the advantage of helping us to make our peace with what is inevitable. However, it raises the question of whether the protest against evil is not silenced too quickly. Should we accept the unacceptable?

Kierkegaard often emphasizes the transformative power of prayer but makes clear that the process of praying might be a long struggle—which “does not change God” but “the one who prays” (Kierkegaard 1993: 22). Not already in the beginning but in the end is the one who prays aright “victorious—in that God is victorious” (Kierkegaard 1990: 377; cf. his discussion of this point), i.e., he understands God and himself differently—in a mutual understanding “that is in the realm of the ununderstandable” (Kierkegaard 1990: 394). His transformation (*Forklarelse*) consists in living without demanding an explanation (*Forklaring*) for the inexplicability of life; rather, he himself is “being explained,” transfigured (*forklaret*) in God (Kierkegaard 1990: 400). While there is no reason to defend God, “there is always reason to thank God” (Kierkegaard 1990: 400).

Kierkegaard's abovementioned discourse on Job arrives at the same conclusion. It is based mainly on verse 1:21 and is one-sided insofar as it ignores the bitter complaints of the biblical Job (cf. Job 10) and the fact that God, at the end of the story,

confirms that Job, unlike his friends, has spoken rightly about him (cf. Job 42:7f.), which implies that he has indeed suffered through no fault of his own. By contrast, Kierkegaard takes it as a consolation that *in relation to God*—not necessarily to human beings!—*all human beings, except for Christ, always* suffer as guilty people (cf. Kierkegaard 1993: 269). However, “one human being has no right to say this to another,” as Job’s friends did to Job (Kierkegaard 1993: 287). That this consideration is not intended to excuse God but rather to function as an anti-theodicy argument appears from Kierkegaard’s explanation: When “before God one suffers as one who is altogether innocent, then it seems as if God were against one, then one is ... abandoned by God” and “it seems as if the struggle were about justifying God” (Kierkegaard 1993: 273). In contrast to such an unjustifiable justification, the certainty that God *makes* everything good for everyone who trusts him helps one to receive joy and sorrow as God’s good gifts and refers us to faith, hope, love and patience as *our* human tasks.¹⁰

It cannot be overlooked that Kierkegaard’s discourses contain a whole string of classical pedagogical and teleological arguments—as, for example, his “Gospel of Sufferings” (Kierkegaard 1993: 213ff.) shows, with titles like “The Joy of It That the School of Suffering Educates for Eternity.” Hardship is viewed not as “a difficulty *on* the road” but as the road itself that “must lead to something” and therefore cannot be taken away (Kierkegaard 1993: 292, 296f., 302). These arguments could easily be misused for a defense of God by upgrading and thereby playing down sin and suffering. However, if the discourses actually accomplish what they are written for, namely to transform *one’s own suffering* into *acting for the good of others*, one might turn a blind eye to them—or, better, try to do without them.

Levinas

The Jewish philosopher Levinas, originally from Lithuania, was one of the first intellectuals to introduce the work of Husserl

¹⁰ See Kierkegaard 1990: 40, 42, 99; 1993: 277; 1995: 301; 1998: 271, 281 and the repeated allusions to Romans 8:28.

and Heidegger to France—and to criticize their preoccupation with ontology and epistemology at the expense of what is transcendent, exterior, beyond and other than the totality of being or knowledge. His project of phenomenological ethics¹¹ is a response to the cruelties that occurred in the twentieth century. Most members of his family were murdered by the Nazis and Levinas himself became a prisoner of war in Germany. He understood the “reference to Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted” as an “explicitly Jewish” moment in his thought (Levinas 1988: 175). How can one speak of morality, then, after its failure?

Levinas proceeds from an interpersonal phenomenology of suffering (see Davies 2002: 167-85; Bernstein 2002: 252-67). He describes the evil of suffering as being “for nothing,” non-sense, non-assumable passivity more passive than sensual receptivity, a pure undergoing despite consciousness, vulnerability, helplessness, abandonment, absurdity: “The vortex—suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering, his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc.—stops at me” (Levinas 1981: 196, n. 21; cf. Levinas 1998b: 92f.). He distinguishes between suffering *in me*, which can take on a meaning in becoming compassion, and the suffering *of someone else* whose senselessness solicits me to non-indifference and attention (cf. Levinas 1998b: 94, 100). Theodicy, however, seeks to avoid “the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering in the other” (Levinas 1998b: 94) and theorizes it instead. For Levinas, the justification of someone else’s pain is “the source of all immorality” (Levinas 1998b: 94). He has no reason to defend God because on no condition whatsoever does he want to defend meaningless suffering.

¹¹ I will focus on the following essays or chapters: “Finite Freedom” (in: Levinas 1981: 121-29), “Transcendence and Evil” (in: Levinas 1998a: 175-86), “Useless Suffering” (in: Levinas 1998b: 91-101), “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” (in: Levinas 1998b: 103-21), “A Religion for Adults” (in: Levinas 1990: 11-23), “Loving the Torah more than God” (in: Levinas 1990: 142-45), “Enigma and Phenomenon” (in: Levinas 1996: 65-77), “Substitution” (in: Levinas 1996: 79-95). I will also refer to the interviews “Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas” (in: Levinas 1984: 47-70) and “The Paradox of Morality” (in: Levinas 1988: 168-80).

Therefore, Levinas proclaims the end of theodicy and in an uncompromising manner refuses *all* of its explicit and implicit forms that integrate needless pain into a meaningful whole, a coherent economy or counterbalance of good and evil. Contrary to Kant's postulates and Kierkegaard's faith, Levinas finds it impossible to await action "from an all-powerful God" (Levinas 1998b: 94), to announce "compensation or recompense at the end of time," to explain evil by a "grand design," "metaphysical finality" or a "kingdom of transcendent ends, willed by a benevolent wisdom," a "supernatural goodness" or a goodness invisibly disseminated in nature and history (Levinas 1998b: 96).¹² He disregards these suprasensible perspectives, advocating altruistic ethics without concern for reciprocity (Levinas 1998b: 100f.). How the other reacts is not my business; I should not expect gratitude for good done or apology for harm suffered. Levinas does not conclude "that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law" but sees it as independent of the "Happy End" and introduces an idea of asymmetry: "I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other" (Levinas 1988: 176). In opposition to the sentence "God is love," since it might imply that one's own salvation is the primary thing, he defines faith as "believing that love *without* reward is valuable" (Levinas 1988: 176f., emphasis mine). Unlike Kant and Kierkegaard, he rejects any kind of eschatology or teleology (cf. Levinas 1984: 66) and focuses not on God's task but only on our human tasks.

Like Kant but unlike Kierkegaard, Levinas does not wish to base ethics on religion. Instead of presupposing belief in a loving God, he holds that "belief presupposes ethics" (Levinas 1984: 59; cf. 56f., 61) and that the devotion directed towards God is diverted by him toward the fellow human being for whom we have to respond: "For-the-other-man and thereby unto God!" (Levinas 1998c: xv). Only in the concreteness of sociality shall the word "God" come to the tip of our tongue (Levinas 1998c: xivf.). Maintaining that he is not speaking theologically at all but nevertheless referring to the Bible, Levinas points to

¹² Although Levinas' objections also concern Kierkegaard, he mentions only Kant's postulate of a benevolent God guaranteeing "the concord of freedom with nature" (Levinas 1998a: 176, cf. 183).

encounters where God's descent is said to take place—in the form of an ethical order inscribed in the face of the other person, the commandment to charity (Levinas 1998b: 108, 110).¹³ Levinas holds that the invisible God will never come into sight himself. Instead, Levinas explores the situation in which God is approached indirectly. Via a detour is the only possible way: "Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision," "an optic, such that everything I ... reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression." Levinas does not talk of a vision that we can see physically but uses a metaphor that transforms visibility into action: "seeing God" means doing what he commands. That is why Levinas interprets the attributes ascribed to God, above all his love and justice, as commandments: "To know God is to know what must be done" (Levinas 1990: 17).

In a fundamental critique of theological reason, he claims that the relationship with a God who cannot appear like a phenomenon but remains an "enigma," "the absolute He" (Levinas 1996: 77) or "Illeity," is not cognition or disclosure. It is obvious that a God who preserves his *incognito* and withdraws in a "trace" that has passed before it could signify (Levinas 1996: 70) cannot be summoned before a court. Levinas transfers the legal metaphor to subjectivity, "enigma's partner," (Levinas 1996: 74), so that it is not God transcendent but *me* who is summoned to appear, the self in the accusative prior to the ego taking a decision, answerable for everything and to everyone, responsible even for what I did not will and before having done anything (Levinas 1996: 88, 90, 93f.). In contrast to Kant, Levinas founds ethics not on autonomous freedom but on being affected, on susceptibility and responsiveness, passivity or passion that assumes the suffering and failing of the other (Levinas 1996: 95; 1984: 62f.). He stresses that it is through this anthropological condition that there can be "compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world" (Levinas: 1996: 91). Since we can experience suffering, we are obligated not to cause suffering (cf. Levinas 1988: 172) and to care for those who do suffer.

Accordingly, Levinas' approach to Job is twofold. On the one hand, he stands with Job who "refuses theodicy right to the end" and is preferred to those who "would make God innocent before the suffering of the just" (Levinas 1998b: 241, n. 9), ap-

¹³ Levinas refers here to Numbers 11:17; Exodus 19:18; Matthew 25.

proving of Job's faithfulness to God and to ethics. On the other hand, he criticizes Job for speaking of his suffering as though it could have been understood had he only done something to deserve it (Levinas 1981: 122). Levinas rejects any notion of justice that proceeds from a morality of reward and punishment. Job's so-called friends thought as he did: "in an orderly world one is responsible only for one's *own* actions," and he could have understood his misfortunes had they been the result of his faults—but then he learns that, entering too late into a world created without him, "he is responsible over and above what he experiences" (Levinas 1996: 93). Does this insight help one to cope with inexplicable evil and to bridge the "moral gap"? How is a trauma transformed into a struggle against evil?¹⁴

Levinas follows Philippe Nemo in characterizing evil first in conjunction with modalities of anguish—like physical pain, "a dying that is lived,"¹⁵ solitude, humiliation etc.—as excess, as the inability to be integrated into a larger whole and as transcendence leading to a beyond. Secondly, in connection to Job's story, he characterizes it as an aiming-at-me, as the intentionality of God who causes pain; and, thirdly, as what strikes me in my horror of evil and thus reveals or is my association with the good and my waiting for it (Levinas 1998a: 181, 183).¹⁶ The

¹⁴ Interestingly, Levinas does not opt for non-resistance to evil; he immediately adds the idea of equity, the concern for the third, who is also my neighbor, to his central idea of an "asymmetry of intersubjectivity," and supports just institutions. Cf. Levinas 1998b: 105.

¹⁵ Levinas is probably referring here to situations in which the one suffering has lost all *joie de vivre* and feels sick to death of life. See Levinas 1998a: 181, 183.

¹⁶ This characterization raises the following questions:

1. In his book reviews relating to anti-theodicy, Levinas seems to support the notion of a much more personal God than he does normally in philosophical contexts with the concept of God's "illeity" and his anonymous "trace." How does this go together? It might be due to the biblical background of some texts and to the fact that Illeity and the trace (dis)appear nowhere else than in interpersonal relations. In reply to Zvi Kolitz, he (1990: 145) holds that "God is real and concrete not through incarnation but through Law But only the man who has recognized the hidden God can demand that He show Himself Loving the Torah even more than God means precisely having access to a personal God against Whom one may rebel—that is to say, for Whom one may die."

latter must not be mistaken for a passage from evil to the good by an attraction of contraries or a simple inversion of evil, since evil is not just a negation. Rather, Levinas interprets it as a movement resulting in a theophany, as ethical transcendence culminating in a breakthrough of the Good *in* evil, namely in the moment when the horror of the evil that addresses *me* becomes the horror of the evil suffered by *another* person. "This Good does not please, but commands and prescribes No failure could free one from this responsibility for the woe of the other man" (Levinas 1998a: 185).

Levinas rightly rejects attempts to comprehend the "monstrosity" of evil, that which is "disturbing" and "foreign" in itself (Levinas 1998a: 180). However, even though God's goodness has become doubtful it is problematic to describe evil with the same vocabulary as the alterity of the human or divine Other, namely as "transcendence" disrupting order, as if otherness and evil were exchangeable terms. Moreover, does he manage to avoid a circular argumentation when it comes to the motive for altruistic action? He admits that it is motivated by something beyond human nature and refers to God as "the other who turns our nature inside out, who calls our ontological will-to-be into question" (Levinas 1984: 61). Does belief presuppose ethics and ethics belief? The claim that it is the desirable God who orders us to the non-desirable neighbor (cf. Levinas 1996: 141) presupposes at least our desire to approach alterity—and our need for a "Good beyond being," which then awakens our desire to do the good in this world.

The God approached through the Torah is personal insofar as he speaks through the face of the other.

2. Levinas' terminology is not consistent. Does he concur with Nemo's idea that God, as a You, hurts us in order to tear us from the world? He notes that Nemo's reflection on the You does not venture to the point of thinking a beyond being in him but is, rather, subordinate to ontology. He criticizes theodicy as "a way of conceiving God as a reality of the world" (Levinas 1998a: 181) and agrees with Nemo that the ontological difference is preceded by the difference of good and evil, both of which go beyond the world. Does this imply a metaphysical dualism? This is improbable because the transcendence of evil towards a beyond still implies the priority of "the Good beyond being." Moreover, Levinas speaks elsewhere of the possibility of evil in human beings as "the order of being pure and simple," while going toward the other is called an "other-wise than being" (Levinas 1998b: 104; cf. Levinas 1988: 175).

Levinas' philosophy points beyond its own limits. It warns us against an instrumentalist view on God and his alleged plans, and frees us from the illusion that we could ever witness to him appropriately. *Nothing* said or known can be an adequate response: "sincerity would be saying without the said" (Levinas 1981: 143). This extreme statement questions even the most sophisticated theory of God and evil—and itself, as long as it is merely stated. Emphasizing the gesture of one-being-for-another and the pragmatic dimension of giving testimony more than the information and propositions it conveys, which must be unsaid and corrected again and again, Levinas ultimately aims at a non-theoretical "thinking" that "does *better* than thinking" (Levinas 1998b: 153) and is not simply the convergence of speech with acts.

Inconclusive Conclusion

To sum up the various reasons against theodicy: Kant's *epistemological* argument shows the limits of theoretical reason regarding God's will and morality's finality; Kierkegaard's *theological* counterargument is based on the invisibility of God's love, which is hidden in what seemingly contradicts it; Levinas' *phenomenological* argument focuses on the ethical effects of God's non-appearance and seeks to avoid any justification of suffering whatsoever.

The crucial point in the different attempts to cope ethically with the theoretically insoluble problem is *sincerity*: Kant describes Job's sincerity as his conscientiousness and honesty, Kierkegaard as his regained thankfulness and loving trust, and for Levinas, sincerity lies in compassion and the continuous correction of claims that are made. For all of them, sincerity is not an attitude given once and for all but the tested task of a lifetime.

They searched not only for a personal and interpersonal *modus vivendi* with and despite the "wound of negativity"¹⁷ but also for a language that takes time seriously. Kant, for example, stresses Job's ongoing protest against the injustice he experienced. The rhetorical virtue of brevity (*brevitas*), naming sorrow

¹⁷ I am using this metaphorical expression for experiences that hurt but can neither be avoided nor easily accepted as meaningful, for experiences with negativity—both in the sense of something that should be there but is not, i.e. privation, and of something that is there but should not be. This use differs from how it is used in the text from which it is taken. See Kierkegaard 1992: 85.

and joy in a single second and sentence, can become a vice if it conceals the long distance that lies between them. In solidarity with the suffering, Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses* patiently, in forbearance (*longinquitas*), accompany the reader on this way (cf. Hagemann 2001: 66, 94, 96, 106, 129f.). Levinas repeatedly tries to unsay and resay what has been said.

Every answer implies new questions and questions both our questions and our answers. With the questions we pose we take a position that itself remains questionable.¹⁸ No matter if we charge, defend or refuse to defend *God's* love, justice and power—what is, after all, in question is *our* faith, love, justice and powerful or powerless sincerity, *our* solidarity with the suffering, *our* existential commitment. The best theory is that which keeps the wound and the questions open and provokes the continued search for what can heal what is hurt. We need a refusal rather than a refutation of evil (cf. Davies 2002: 177).

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¹⁸ Cf. the aphorisms of Benyoëtz (2000 183f.):

*In seinem Elend fordert Hiob
Gott zur Antwort auf –
"Deine Frage ist berechtigt",
sagt Gott zu ihm,
"bist du aber berechtigt
zu dieser Frage"*

(From the depths of misery, Job asked God to answer him—"Your question is justified," God replies, "But are you justified in asking it?")

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