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Redefining Theodicy

Expanding the Boundaries

"That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men."[1]

The term *theodicy* has been prone to misapprehension and misinterpretation. Some see it as empty technical jargon: a word reserved for specialists, disconnected from real life, which reinforces the perceived disjunction between the academy and the real world. Whatever theodicy might mean, it is something elusive and abstract, a topic for think tanks in ivory towers, not for the average person. For others, particularly experts on the subject, theodicy has a precise purpose and purview: it refers to the logical attempt to reconcile God's nature with the reality of evil. It operates in an amorphous

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1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.24–26, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

theistic zone between theology and philosophy. Most people, academics and nonacademics alike, define theodicy as a narrow, technical, specialized area of scholarly inquiry.

These impressions, however, misperceive the simplicity of the project at its core: to make sense of suffering.[2] Although the *term* itself might mystify and stratify, it merely signifies an intellectual process that happens all the time in all segments of society. We all encounter troubles and hardships. We all observe the suffering that besets the world, where each new day evil manifests itself in new ways. The task of theodicy is to interpret the reality of evil: to situate it within a meaningful theological matrix. Theodicy simply tries to explain evil. These explanations vary in intellectual sophistication, as Peter Berger aptly observes in *The Sacred Canopy*, but they all have the same basic objective, viz., to comprehend and thereby domesticate and defuse the ubiquitous reality of evil, injustice, and misfortune.[3] In this chapter I propose that we expand the narrow definition of theodicy that has dominated the theological and philosophical landscape since the eighteenth century to include the plurality of encounters and engagements with evil that we find in "real life."

Furthermore, theodicy has been situated primarily within the field of philosophy. The term itself was developed by a philosopher, and most scholarly treatments of it occur in books and courses on philosophy, the philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, and the like. Theodicy, however, belongs *primarily* to theology and only *secondarily* to philosophy, in my view. Questions about God's goodness and justice, which the term denotes, fall within theology's purview, but theology has often been content to abdicate them to its

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2. For a detailed examination of the theoretical task of theodicy, see Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8–22.

3. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 53.

nearest disciplinary neighbor: philosophy.[4] Theology, then, ought to reclaim theodicy for itself by shaping the discourse with its distinctive methodologies and theorists. To be clear: I do not repudiate philosophy's involvement with theodicy. In fact, theodicy benefits from the conceptual nuance and precision that philosophy brings to the question. Furthermore, overlap between theology and philosophy engenders productive interdisciplinary dialogue. Philosophy need not renounce its legitimate claim on theodicy; rather, theology needs to reassert its claim on the question and revisit its responses.[5]

What Is Theodicy?

Let us begin with the traditional definition of theodicy. *Theodicy* itself is a neologism, that is, an invented term. It fuses two Greek nouns: θεός (God) and δίκη (justice).[6] At the beginning of the eighteenth century, G. W. Leibniz transliterated them into the French word *théodicée* (German: *Theodizee*) in his book on the subject: *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*. So the term itself was invented by a philosopher to describe a philosophical enterprise. It has retained its original sense of the vindication of divine justice, as Immanuel Kant's definition illustrates: "By 'theodicy' we understand the defense of the highest wisdom of the creator [providence] against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive (*das Zweckwidrige*) in the

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4. Tensions often arise between near neighbors, both because of their familiarity and the desire to clearly demarcate the boundaries between them. Theology and philosophy have a long history of cooperation and tension. Despite their similarities, both with respect to their major theorists and the types of questions they address, they often strain to differentiate themselves, not unlike, to switch metaphors, close siblings.

5. René van Woudenberg, "A brief history of theodicy," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 177–91.

6. Sarah K. Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 2–3.

world."[7] Theodicy, in its narrow, classic, technical sense, explores logical strategies to vindicate God from moral culpability for evil. In short, theodicy seeks to "justify the ways of God to men."[8] It does not simply refute the accusation of injustice, it demonstrates God's justice: "A theodicy is not simply an attempt to meet the charge that God's ways are unjust: it is an attempt to exhibit the justice of his ways."[9] Theodicy tells a "story" about how God and evil logically coexist.[10]

> **THEODICY: The technical term *theodicy* signifies the defense of divine justice in the face of evil. It employs logical strategies to "justify the ways of God to men," that is, to vindicate God from moral culpability. More broadly, theodicy denotes the attempt to explain or make sense of suffering.**

As we saw earlier, the logical problem of evil has a syllogistic structure: If God is good, he would be *willing* to prevent evil. If God is omnipotent, he would be *able* to prevent evil. Evil exists. God, therefore, does not exist, at least not in the standard theistic sense. David Hume famously encapsulates the logical problem of evil: "Is he [i.e., God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil (*unde malum*)?"[11]

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7. Immanuel Kant, "On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy," in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [2003]), 17. Later he describes the task of theodicy as "the vindication of the moral wisdom of the world-government against the doubts raised against it on the basis of what the experience of this world teaches" (23). And also: "All theodicy should truly be an *interpretation* of nature insofar as God announces his will through it" (24).

8. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.24–26, p. 4.

9. Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

10. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 7, 65.

Theodicy confronts this logical "trilemma": (a) God is good; (b) God is omnipotent; (c) Evil exists. Through highly nuanced and complex—almost mathematical—calculations, it endeavors to affirm divine goodness and omnipotence in the face of evil. These reflections, often undertaken by philosophers and philosophical theologians, try to prove the compatibility between God and evil. Although they address a perennial problem that affects all humanity, they strike many readers as cold, dispassionate, and overly abstract.

Traditional theodicy defends theism from the intellectual threat of the logical problem of evil. It is, therefore, fundamentally defensive: it responds to the intellectual and existential force of the problem of evil. Where is God? Why does God permit suffering? Why does God not intervene to stop the wicked and to help the innocent? God sits in the dock of the cosmic courtroom, as it were, on trial for the misfortunes and miseries of the world.[12] A cursory glance at the evidence suggests that God, the Creator of the cosmos, is morally culpable for evil. The prosecution makes their case against God: the depth and breadth of evil in the world problematizes, or undermines, theistic beliefs. The defense gives exculpatory reasons why God allows evil. Afterwards, the jury must render a verdict. At stake in the theological and philosophical trial, therefore, are the credibility of the traditional theistic doctrine of God and, thus, the viability of faith.

11. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X, ed. Martin Bell (New York: Penguin, 1990), 108–9.
12. Kant, "On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy," 17: "The author of a theodicy agrees, therefore, that this juridical process be instituted before the tribunal of reason; he further consents to represent the accused side as advocate through the formal refutation of all the plaintiff's complaints."

Expanding the Definition

Why expand the boundaries of theodicy? How does it advance the project of theodicy? First, it follows as a natural corollary to the expansion of the problem of evil beyond the strictly logical problem of evil. If the problems have expanded, so must theodicy. Theodicy must find new ways to speak to these new formulations of the problem of evil. That does not entail abandoning traditional theodicies any more than the new formulations of the problem of evil entail the abandonment of the logical problem of evil. It remains in full force, as do the theodicies that have arisen to neutralize it.

Second, we must expand the definition of theodicy in response to contemporary critiques of traditional theodicies.[13] As we will discuss in chapter 7, recent work in theodicy has leveled serious criticisms against traditional theodicy, which run along two lines. First, they believe that the classic problem of evil cannot be solved. Second, they argue that traditional approaches fail to attend to the experiential reality of suffering. Critics of traditional theodicy call for a rejection or reconfiguration of theodicy. They recommend a transition from the theoretical to the practical, from the abstract to the concrete, from the global to the particular. Suffering, they say, poses an existential problem *before* it poses an intellectual problem, and traditional theodicy has lost sight of the human experience of suffering in their rarefied ruminations on the reality of evil.

These criticisms of traditional theodicy, combined with the multifaceted nature of the problem, engender the necessity of redefinition. Theodicy, in an expanded sense, moves beyond syllogistic, rationalistic, philosophical solutions to the logical problem

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13. See, as representative examples, Sarah K. Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust*, Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), and Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986 [2004]).

of evil to creative, diverse, experientially grounded analyses of the many problems of evil. It invites new methodologies, especially from Christian theology. More specifically, it draws from the often-untapped insights of systematic, historical, practical, pastoral, and moral theology, as well as other disciplinary lenses, to enrich and enhance the study of theodicy. These subfields intersect and overlap in several ways, but they all open new vistas for reimagining the task of theodicy to meet contemporary theological concerns.

Redefining theodicy in experiential, practical directions does not negate the utility or urgency of traditional theodicies, however. Contrary to many antitheodicists, I do not reject classic theistic treatments of the logical problem of evil, nor do I think that they are universally guilty of detached intellectualization. Traditional theistic theodicies remain vital to academic discourse on theodicy, particularly in philosophy and religious studies. Rather than reject them, theology should interface them with more theologically grounded theodicies that respond to the experiential reality of suffering. Interfacing traditional theistic models with theologically and experientially grounded models would be mutually beneficial. Traditional theodicy would benefit from the practical slant of the new perspectives in theodicy, while these new perspectives, especially in theology, would benefit from the history and logical rigor of traditional theistic approaches.

Expanding theodicy in these directions gives it a distinctly ethical edge. Theodicy no longer simply explains evil, its key theoretical function; it also strives to overcome and transform it through various practical responses. It identifies instances of violence, oppression, and exploitation in society and works to ameliorate those conditions. So theodicy in this redefined sense shades into the realm of ethics. Ethics, then, becomes a new frontier of theodicy, but it need not abandon

its traditional location in theology and philosophy. These diverse approaches to theodicy are complementary, not antithetical.

We see the results of expanded versions of theodicy at work already. Practical theology and philosophy have already begun to move in this direction. Pastoral theology has long recognized the need to connect theodicy to real-life experiences of suffering. Examples of theodicy in an expanded sense include what I call "theodicy at the margins," which attends to the oppression of the marginalized, such as women, the poor, and ethnic minorities.[14] Theodicies at the margins, exemplified by feminist, liberation, and black theology, have a practical, particular, experiential focus. Theodicy, then, is slowly migrating from the exclusive realm of philosophy to the realm of real life. The task of theology is to chart new pathways forward in theodicy that unite philosophical treatments with concrete experiences within a clearly defined theological matrix. These pathways will move in different directions and at different paces, but they will have the same theological grounding, as we will discuss in the final chapter.

Modes of Theodicy

Thus far, we have defined theodicy and explored constructive ways to expand the definition. Now, to further refine the task of theodicy, let us examine the different modes or ways of doing theodicy. Theodicy involves intellectual engagement with the problem of evil, but it happens in strikingly different ways and in drastically different contexts. These distinctions, though not mutually exclusive, reveal the diverse pathways traversed in theodicy, which frequently have

14. Mark S. M. Scott, "Theodicy at the Margins: New Trajectories for the Problem of Evil," *Theology Today* 68, no. 2 (2011): 149–52.

distinct methodologies, presuppositions, objectives, strategies, interlocutors, and audiences.

First, theodicy typically takes place in the academy. Academic theodicies explore the problem of evil from within clearly defined disciplinary boundaries, employing their distinctive theories and methods to illuminate the problem. Academic research on theodicy occurs in several sectors of the social sciences and humanities. It may even take place in the hard sciences. Most commonly, academic theodicies are found in philosophy, religious studies, and theology. Let us explore its various manifestations in each of these.

Philosophy departments have been the most common location for research on theodicy in the academy. Within philosophy, theodicy might be examined from the standpoint of logic, the philosophy of religion, the history of philosophy, or constructive proposals. These are not mutually exclusive lenses, but research has become increasingly specialized. Philosophy explores theodicy as a matter of intellectual history and coherence, utilizing the insights of its major thinkers, such as G. W. Leibniz, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and, more recently, John Hick, Alvin Plantinga, and others.

Religion departments also explore theodicy from multiple vantage points. Religious Studies might explore the theory of theodicy, that is, how it functions in religion generally, or it might examine the theodicy of a particular religion in a particular thinker or text. Alternatively, it might take a comparative approach, interfacing theodicies from different religious traditions, tracing significant points of convergence and divergence. Subfields of Religious Studies interested in theodicy include religious studies theory, philosophy of religion, history of Christianity, and comparative religion.

Finally, academic theology (in contrast to confessional theology) obviously takes a keen interest in theodicy. It might research the theodicy of a particular theologian in his or her historical context,

such as the Apostle Paul, Irenaeus, Perpetua, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Dorothee Sölle, or Jürgen Moltmann. We would classify this as historical theology. Alternatively, academic theology might explore how theodicy intersects with and impacts the major tenets of Christian faith. We would classify this as systematic theology. Or, finally, academic theology might critically engage or craft constructive proposals in dialogue with major thinkers and themes in theodicy. We would classify this as constructive theology. These, again, are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories (this book utilizes all three), but they are distinct points of entry.

Next, theodicy also takes place in the realm of apologetics. Apology here does not mean the expression of remorse and regret; it refers to the defense of Christian faith. Apologists defend Christianity against intellectual threats, so naturally it takes an interest in the problem of evil. Apologetic theodicies are theologically invested, confessional, and evangelical in the sense that they seek to uphold the integrity of the gospel through the profession of the coherence of faith.[15] Apologetic theodicies have varying levels of intellectual sophistication, but the intent remains the same. They have many atheistic counterparts, which seek to undermine faith by exploiting the problem of evil.[16]

Recent work in theodicy examines pastoral perspectives on the problem of evil.[17] Clergy are on the front lines of theodicy. They provide comfort, hope, and succor to their parishioners as they

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15. See, for example, N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006); Os Guinness, *Unspeakable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil* (New York: HarperOne, 2006); John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2001 [1940]).

16. For instance, Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) as well as most books by the New Atheists.

undergo traumatic life experiences, such as illness, abuse, loss, and other forms of suffering. They are called to preach on the problem of evil and to guide their parishioners through times of crises. Moreover, chaplains at hospitals, in the military, and in other venues directly encounter the problem of evil on a routine basis. For clergy of all descriptions, evil represents an intellectual, experiential, and spiritual dilemma that they confront daily. Pastoral perspectives look at the ways some clergy have failed to speak wisdom in these moments of suffering and how they might draw from the resources of theology to preach, counsel, and write on the problem of evil and suffering with more compassion, theological sophistication, and practical relevance.

Theodicy also takes place at the personal level, as the existential effort to make sense of suffering in one's own life. People strive to situate their experiences of suffering within a coherent personal narrative. These self-rationalizations or self-theodicies occur at mental, verbal, or written levels, but they all involve the integration of painful experiences into a meaningful framework. These theodicies might never be spoken or written, but they still operate invisibly in the person's innermost thoughts. We most frequently encounter these personal theodicies in our interactions with people in crisis and in autobiographies where the person recounts their suffering and explains how they ultimately came to terms with their pain, confusion, and despair. Personal theodicies rarely rely on academic theodicies. More often than not, they draw on the spiritual resources of their tradition, perhaps as taught by their clergy or respected friends.

Personal theodicies might take the form of artistic expression. Perhaps looking for theodicy in the arts pushes the boundaries of

17. For two examples, see Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), and John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

theodicy too far. But what if theodicy ranged beyond the purely logical engagement with the problem of evil? What if theodicy, which always tries to make sense of suffering, utilized artistry instead of argumentation? What might this look like? In point of fact, it already exists. We find theodicy in music, literature, art, TV, film, and other artistic mediums. These give expression to theodicy artistically, and through their artistry they find new pathways to interpret experiences of evil and to integrate them into a broader meaningful matrix. The problem with pastoral, personal, and artistic theodicies, however, is that they are prone to become overly subjective and therapeutic, which strays too far from theodicy's logical, rationalistic roots.

Questions of Theodicy

Theodicy explores several interrelated theological and philosophical questions about evil. Theodical models or systems address all of them, to varying degrees, in different ways. Theodical themes or trajectories, on the other hand, address only a few of them, and are found in virtually all theodical models as component parts. The next three chapters explore major models of theodicy, while the final three address key themes or trajectories in theodicy. These are the five essential questions of theodicy.

1. Origin of evil: How does evil originate? Who is responsible?
2. Nature of evil: What is the ontology of evil? How does it exist?
3. Problem of evil: How does evil pose a problem for theology?
4. Reason for evil: Why does God permit evil? What is the morally sufficient reason?
5. End of evil: How will God end evil and/or ultimately bring good out of evil?

Theodicy need not address these questions sequentially, nor does it need to have definitive positions on them, especially since the origin and end of evil are inherently speculative. Nevertheless, a complete theodicy will respond to all five questions.

Criteria for Theodicy

In the dialogue section of every chapter we will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the theodical model and trend we investigate. At the outset, therefore, let us establish an explicit set of criteria that will function as our rational, practical, and theological litmus test for theodicy. These are our five criteria for a sound *Christian* theodicy.[18]

QUESTIONS OF THEODICY: Theodicy explores five interrelated theological-philosophical questions: (1) the origin of evil; (2) the nature of evil; (3) the problem of evil; (4) the reason for evil; and (5) the end of evil. These questions often overlap in the development of theodicies.

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18. John Hick enumerates two primary criteria for theodicy: "The two main demands upon a theodicy hypothesis are that it be (1) internally coherent, and (2) consistent with the data both of the religious tradition on which it is based, and of the world, in respect both of the latter's general character as revealed by scientific enquiry and of the specific facts of moral and natural evil" (John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 38). These correspond, roughly, to my first three criteria. Similarly, Sarah Pinnock proposes four "guidelines" for theodicy from the perspective of practical theology or ethics: (1) epistemic humility, (2) moral sensitivity, (3) religious practice, and (4) narrative memory" (Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy*, 139). Her guidelines correspond, roughly, to my first, third, and fifth criteria.

CRITERIA FOR THEODICY: In order to assess the cogency and credibility of theodicy, we must delineate explicit criteria. To facilitate our analysis in the dialogue section of each chapter, then, we will utilize five criteria: (1) Fidelity; (2) Coherence; (3) Relevance; (4) Creativity; and (5) Humility.

1. Fidelity: Does it utilize the sources of theology, especially scripture and tradition?

2. Coherence. Does it make sense logically? Is it internally consistent?

3. Relevance. Does it speak to contemporary experiences of evil?

4. Creativity. Does it creatively engage the problem of evil?

5. Humility: Does it recognize and respect the limits of theodicy?

These five criteria are not equally weighted. Some count more decisively than others in determining the overall effectiveness and cogency of the theodicy. They are listed (roughly) in order of importance. To assign a relative value to the criteria (1=40%, 2=30%, 3–5=10% each, for instance), however, would be artificial and arbitrary. There is no precise theological algorithm for theodicy. Nevertheless, the first and second criteria are primary, while the latter three are secondary, which does not diminish their value; it simply subordinates them to the definitive criteria of fidelity and coherence. All five will factor into our analysis of the viability of theodicial models and trends.

Conclusion

Evil shatters lives and theoretical systems in a single blow. Theodicy tries to put the pieces back together through plausible explanations of

why God permits evil.[19] Why redefine theodicy? First, the expansion of the *problems* of evil necessitates a corresponding expansion of theodicy to respond to new configurations of the problem. Second, expanding the definition in experiential and practical directions addresses the perennial critique that theodicy intellectualizes an existential problem; in other words, that it does not sufficiently attend to the experiential reality of suffering. Third, we must expand the narrow formulation of theodicy, typical in philosophical circles, to make room for new methodologies, new insights, and new voices, particularly in theology.

Academic theodicy has been primarily the trade of philosophy for far too long. The time has come for theology to reclaim the problem of evil for itself and to draw from its own diverse intellectual heritage to speak to it in new ways and with new voices. Theology's reclamation of theodicy does not mean the dismissal of generic theistic theodicies or its isolation from philosophical engagements with the problem of evil. Quite the contrary: theology would be wise to appropriate and utilize the insights of philosophy as it breaks new ground in theodicy, clearing its own *theological* pathways forward. Discussion of theodicy should not transpire in hermetically sealed intellectual silos. Disciplinary insularity stultifies work in theodicy. Instead, theology should promote and welcome vibrant, dynamic, respectful, interdisciplinary dialogue. Before theology can contribute

19. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Wolterstorff poignantly expresses the shattering experience of evil and the task of theodicy to somehow put the pieces back together: "I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing . . . I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess" (67–68).

to these discussions, however, it must find its own voice, or, rather, *voices*.[20]

> **Questions for Discussion:**
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> 1. Does theodicy belong to theology or philosophy or both, and why, in your view?
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> 2. What are the risks and rewards of expanding the traditional definition of theodicy?
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> 3. Which mode of theodicy most interests you and why?
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> 4. Which question of theodicy strikes you as the most important and why?
>
> 5. Which criterion of theodicy strikes you as the most important and why?

20. "There is no single uniform appropriate faith response to suffering and evil, nor should there be. Responses to evil and suffering take on different configurations appropriate to different religious communities, given the complex dynamic of coping with evil" (Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy*, 144).