

# Introduction

Does God exist? When Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) addresses the foundational question of theology in his *Summa Theologiae*, he first entertains the strongest possible objection to God’s existence. On the surface, he says, the reality of evil undermines the concept of God:

It seems that there is no God. For if one of two contraries were infinite, the other would be completely destroyed. But by the word “God” we understand a certain infinite good. So, if God existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. But we do encounter evil in the world. So, God does not exist.<sup>1</sup>

With peerless precision, Aquinas expresses the lethal theological force of the problem of evil. God and evil cannot coexist, he says, at least not without further theological explanation. As ontological antitheses, the reality of one should cancel out or preclude the reality of the other. Put simply, we presuppose that God, as the infinite good, would prevent evil. And yet, experience clearly reveals that he does not, which begs the crucial question: Does God exist at all?

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.2, a.3, *ob* 1 in *Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae Questions on God*, eds. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24.

## Where Is God?

If God exists, where is he? Why does he not intervene to stop at least the worst of evils? When we observe the plethora of evils in the world around us and in the pages of history, God seems like an absentee landlord. Divine absence in the face of evil suggests divine nonexistence, does it not? The slow decay of time has not abated the force or blunted the edge of this abiding question. It remains the gravest threat to the Christian doctrine of God. It is aptly called the formidable “rock of atheism,” that is, the intellectual stronghold of atheism.<sup>2</sup> Despite its intractability, however, not all Christian theologians have declared it insuperable. Aquinas, for instance, refutes the atheological argument from evil by appealing to a general “greater goods” theory of evil.

As Augustine says, “Since God is supremely good, he would not permit any evil at all in his works, unless he were sufficiently powerful and good to bring good from evil” (*Enchiridion* 11, *PL* 40.236). So, it belongs to the limitless goodness of God that he permits evils to exist and draws good from them.<sup>3</sup>

For Aquinas, as for Augustine, evil does not negate God’s goodness because God brings good out of evil. The question for theology, of course, is whether or not the ensuing good justifies God’s permission of evil. Theodicy, as the rational attempt to reconcile the reality of God with the reality of evil, employs various configurations of Aquinas’s cost-benefit analysis.

In Aquinas, then, we find an instructive entry point into a broader reconsideration of the problem of evil and the plurality of theodicies

2. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 431: “Why do I suffer? This is the rock of atheism. The slightest throb of pain, even if it stirs merely in an atom, makes a rent in creation from top to bottom.’ Georg Büchner, in his play *Danton’s Death*, attributes these sentiments to Thomas Paine.”

3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.2, a.3, ad 1, p. 26.

it evokes. Aquinas classically formulates the problem as a logical tension between God's goodness and the experientially verifiable reality of evil and its existential counterpart, suffering. Moreover, he identifies the high theological stakes of the problem: nothing less than God's existence is on the line. Finally, he offers a blueprint for theodicy, to find, as far as possible, the various ways in which God brings good out of evil. In our exploration of theodicy below we will frequently encounter his basic theological framework.

Hans Küng expresses the personal stakes of the question, beyond the mere logical implications. Suffering calls into question the ultimate meaning of our lives: "In suffering man reaches his extreme limit, the decisive question of his identity, of the sense and nonsense of his life, of reality as a whole."<sup>4</sup> Suffering cuts to the core of faith, calling it into question, and creating a spiritual crossroads where some turn away from God, while others turn toward him: "For many a person concrete suffering has been the occasion of his unbelief, for many another the occasion of his faith."<sup>5</sup> Hence, the problem of evil threatens the intellectual viability of Christian theology as well as the personal viability of Christian faith in the face of suffering.

Christian theology has too often dismissed the project of theodicy as unproductive and insoluble. Since we cannot solve the problem of evil, we must abandon it.<sup>6</sup> These hasty dismissals are misguided and dangerous. As I will argue in chapter 2, Christian theodicy does

4. Küng, *On Being Christian*, 431. Theodicy, as I have argued elsewhere, attempts to restore cosmic coherence in the face of the destabilizing reality of evil through a complex process of meaning-making, which I call navigation. See Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 1: "Theodicy as Navigation: Toward a Theoretical Paradigm," 8–22.

5. Küng, *On Being Christian*, 431.

6. For a representative example of the rejection of theodicy, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991): "My conclusion is that theodicy as a discourse practice must be abandoned because the practice of theodicy does not solve the problems of evil and does create evils" (5). We will expound on these types of objections in chapter 7.

not search for solutions; it searches theological resources to respond to the problem of evil. A properly chastened theodicy does not audaciously offer exhaustive answers, but only pathways, imperfect and partial ways of interpreting evil within a Christian theological framework. Theodicy honestly acknowledges the mystery of evil, but that acknowledgment does not mark the end of the conversation. If that were so, other Christian doctrines shrouded in mystery—the Trinity, the human and divine nature of Christ, the relationship between providence and free will—would foreclose conversation rather than stimulate it, and the history of theology has shown us otherwise on these controversies. There is too much at stake to walk away from the conversation, and theology has resources to speak to the problem even if it cannot “solve” it. The language of “solution” befits mathematics and the other hard sciences, not Christian theology.

### **Map of the Book**

The book unfolds in three stages. First, we begin with two methodological chapters. Chapter 1 frames the discussion by exploring the nature and problem of evil, shifting the focus from ontology to theology. Chapter 2 examines the definition, modes, questions, and criteria for theodicy, setting the methodological agenda for the subsequent chapters. Second, in chapters 3–5, we examine three constructive models—the free will defense, soul-making theodicy, and process theodicy—and analyze their theological sustainability and relevance. Finally, in chapters 6–8, we discuss important trajectories in theodicy. In chapter 6 we focus on the cross’s contribution to the problem of evil, and the possibility of redemptive suffering. In chapter 7 we note the intellectual and moral objections to theodicy and the practical turns they have initiated, and

chapter 8 explores how appeals to the afterlife and to mystery inflect theodicy. While the parameters of the study preclude an exhaustive account of every facet of theodicy, we cover enough ground to give the reader secure footing as we chart the inner logic and disputes of each facet.

I do not adopt or promote a particular theodicy in my analysis of the major constructive perspectives on theodicy. Instead, I present them in as fair and sympathetic light as possible, letting them speak on their own terms and from within their own contexts. After detailing their salient features as generously as possible, I invite the reader into conversation in the dialogue section, where I assess their strengths and weaknesses. I do not conclude these chapters with an authoritative pronouncement on the tenability of the particular theodicy, only with the major problems and prospects one must consider before subscribing to it or deploying it. My study seeks to spark conversation rather than foreclose it with prescriptive judgments.

Although I do not advance my own theodicy in this book, I do make several constructive moves. First, I call for theology to reclaim the problem as central to theological reflection, rather than dismiss it as unanswerable or abdicate it to philosophy. I also enumerate several criteria for assessing theodicy. Moreover, I demonstrate the dialogical nature of theodicy, arguing for the insufficiency of any single theodicy. Finally, I recommend an approach to theodicy rather than a particular theodicy in the conclusion. Hopefully my dialogical approach, which tries to give each voice a fair hearing within a theological framework for understanding the task of theodicy, will reinvigorate stalled, sterile debates, and help blaze new pathways forward in theodicy.

### Punishment Theodicy

In the backdrop of the theodicies we discuss below lurks the specter of punishment theodicy, which has haunted theological discourse on evil.<sup>7</sup> Punishment theodicy argues that God employs suffering to punish sin.<sup>8</sup> Pain functions as divine discipline, God's cosmic belt that serves multiple purposes: "Defenders of the punishment theodicy have argued that pain can be good for one (or more) of four things: *rehabilitation, deterrence, societal protection, and retribution.*"<sup>9</sup> Punishment, then, restores personal, social, and cosmic harmony and justice, which sin upsets. Not all suffering, however, results from wrongdoing, so punishment theodicy does not exhaust the possible explanations for evil. Whether taught with malicious or benevolent intent, the simplistic correlation between suffering and punishment causes emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress, and clouds the constructive project of theodicy. Not only does it compound suffering by blaming the victim, it withholds the salutary resources available in Christian theology to ameliorate suffering. Punishment theodicy brings judgment, not comfort, or hope. Unfortunately, it has been the default theodicy throughout the history of Christianity: the uncritical theological reflex for many pastors, priests, chaplains, and theologians.

On the one hand, punishment theodicy has some direct biblical justification. In Deuteronomy 28, for instance, God clearly outlines the covenantal expectations for Israel and the consequences for disobedience. Deuteronomy 30:15–20 expresses the correlation between righteousness and reward on one side and wickedness and

7. Michael J. Murray, "Theodicy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 360–62.

8. For an examination of punishment theodicies in the Bible, see James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 117–31.

9. Murray, "Theodicy," 360–61.

punishment on the other. Throughout the Old Testament God punishes Israel for its infidelity and individuals for their sins. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus sometimes associates suffering with punishment for sin. For example, after healing an invalid, Jesus tells him: “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you” (John 5:14), which suggests a link between his physical and spiritual condition. Moreover, to shift from the biblical to the sociological, we often observe natural consequences for sin, as when addicts suffer from their addiction, or criminals receive a penalty for their crime. These natural consequences might fit within the theological matrix of punishment theodicy, if they are interpreted as part of a cosmic system of restorative justice and remedial rehabilitation.

On the other hand, punishment theodicy tends to overdraw a symmetrical correspondence between sin and suffering, and righteousness and blessing. The Book of Job, the *locus classicus* for reflection on the problem of evil in the Old Testament, problematizes the unnuanced version of the doctrine of retribution. In chapters 3–37, Job’s friends attribute Job’s egregious sufferings to his wrongdoing, but Job maintains his innocence and God ultimately vindicates him (Job 42:7). In the Gospel of John, when the disciples assume that a congenitally blind man’s impairment was the result of sin, Jesus rejects their assumption, and tells them that his blindness served a divine purpose that he did not discover until that moment (John 9:1–3). These texts, and other related passages (see Luke 13:4), subvert the simplistic doctrine of retribution, which mistakenly argues that *all* suffering results from sin, and that the righteous receive their just desserts.

It does not require special insight to see that the wicked often prosper and that the good often suffer. A cursory glance at history and the world around us confirms that conclusion. Punishment theodicy

globalizes a theory of evil, applying it to particular cases, to the exclusion of other possible theological perspectives. Ultimately goodness will be rewarded and wickedness will be punished, but not until the afterlife, according to Christian eschatology, so we cannot expect the scales of justice to be balanced in this life. Punishment theodicy, in short, gives an insufficient and potentially harmful account of evil, myopically opting for only one of the many possible explanations for evil. In contradistinction to punishment theodicies, which have a destructive bent when universalized and disconnected from the doctrine of divine grace, our study focuses on constructive perspectives that move beyond simplistic, facile, and trite explanations.

Now that we have framed the core question of theodicy, detailed the stakes of the problem of evil, outlined the map of the book, and identified a hidden interlocutor, we are prepared to embark on the first stage of the journey: evil. What is evil? How does it manifest itself in the world? How has it been portrayed in Christian theology? What are some helpful ways to categorize evil, and to formulate the problem of evil? And, finally, how should theology rethink the classic narratives of the nature and problem of evil? These considerations will set the stage for the task of theodicy, and the constructive perspectives we entertain afterwards.



**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Why study the problem of evil/theodicy? What do you hope to gain?
2. What theological presuppositions do you bring to the study of theodicy?
3. What is at stake in the problem of evil for you, personally and academically?
4. What are some of the major questions you begin with as you embark on the study?
5. Who will be your dialogue partner(s) throughout your study of theodicy?