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"Theodicies and Defenses" Revisited

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Many theologians and philosophers have ignored or dismissed the crucial distinction between theodicies and defenses. The distinction was and is of theological and philosophical importance not only to avoid conflating crucial issues in accounts dealing with the goodness and power of God and the reality of evil, but also to getting the challenges of evil to belief in God rightly located. This article revisits the distinction I discussed more than forty years ago in "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy." The present article analyzes problems in the rhetoric and logic of recent works and their concerns with structural and cultural (social) evil. It focuses on major titles in philosophical theology: Marilyn McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors*; Ross McCullough,* Freedom and Sin*; and Karen Kilby,* God, Evil and the Limits of Theology. *Along the way, it seeks to clarify some issues I have taken up, especially in* The Evils of Theodicy.

Keywords: theodicy, defenses, structural and cultural evil, rhetoric

Introduction

More than four decades ago, this journal published my article, "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy."[1] Since then, many theologians and philosophers have ignored or dismissed the crucial distinction drawn there between two very different forms of argument. *Theodicies* are justifications or explanations (why God[2] permits evil in the world God created). *Defenses* are particular rebuttals to philosophical atheists' attacks (that belief in God is logically incompatible with genuine evil in the actual world).

[1] Terrence W. Tilley, "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy," *Horizons* 11, no. 2 (1984): 304–19.

[2] Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, "God" will refer to *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, who has the attributes of omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence.

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Not surprisingly, this pattern was foreshadowed at the initial presentation of a version of the essay to the Society of Christian Philosophers.[3] The first comment after my presentation raised a useful point. The second conflated theodicies with defenses. The third commentator said that he thought the distinction between theodicies and defenses was so obvious that he thought my article was unnecessary—until he heard the second comment.

In this article, I revisit the distinction I made in the earlier article—perhaps its force was not clear enough then; explore the significance of the specific "antitheodicy" position I held; identify a significant confusion in one influential and rich attempt to recast theodical discourse; and engage in conversation especially with the work of Karen Kilby and other recent writers. Throughout, I am concerned with cultural and structural evil, often overlooked in theodical discourse.

Defenses and Theodicies

A theodicy is an explanation of the reasons that can be ascribed to an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God to allow evil in the world. Perhaps the most clear example of a modern theodicy was the first edition of John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*.[4] In the revised edition, Hick modified his preference for an Irenaean approach over an Augustinian approach to the problem of evil to try to render it as a form of "defense" rather than as a "theodicy." This camouflage, alas, was not entirely successful. His position was a form of an "Irenaean," "soul-making," view that argued that suffering was or could be good for humans because it was a necessity for them to develop "higher" epistemic, moral, and theological virtues; for instance, one could not develop virtues such as forgiveness unless there were sins (evils done to one) to forgive.

As Marilyn McCord Adams successfully argued, however, horrendous evils devastate both Irenaean and Augustinian forms of theodicy.[5] For example, the early victims of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (as an Episcopal priest, Adams ministered to communities of AIDS victims) suffered horrendous evils. Whatever "good" might come out of that suffering and those many

[3] "Theodicies and Defenses," Eastern Regional Meeting, Society of Christian Philosophers, Notre Dame, IN, March 1984.

[4] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1966); revised edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

[5] See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Adams names John Hick as one of her mentors in the dedication of the latter book.

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deaths (so far, a treatment, not a cure, for people who are HIV positive is a general benefit resulting from the plague) was not a higher good that somehow paid off those who suffered and died. Christians, McCord Adams cogently argued, could not reasonably view the horrendous evils of the AIDS epidemic as willed by God or permitted by God in a world God created for some good purpose. Horrendous evils could not be reasonably believed to be good for all the souls who suffered from soul-destroying evils (such as, for example, the Shoah, child abuse, spousal abuse). Horrendous evils overwhelm theodicies.

A defense, on the other hand, is a logical exercise that shows the compatibility of two propositions:

> A. God is all-knowing, all-benevolent, and all-powerful.
> B. There is genuine evil in the actual world (that God has created).

The primary exemplar of a defense is the Free Will Defense (FWD) formulated by Alvin Plantinga.[6] As far as I know, the logic of this defense has not been defeated, though challenged often.

A general, undefeated form of this defense can run roughly as follows:

1. To show the compatibility of A and B, one needs to discover possibly true (*not* actually true or believed to be actually true) proposition(s) that are compatible with both A and B,[7] such as:

> C. God creates a world containing genuine good and has a good reason for doing so.
> D. It is not within God's power to create a world containing [genuine] good without creating one containing [genuine] evil.

Because A, C, D, entail B, and are all possibly true, then A and B are not contradictory. One can hold both A and B without contradiction.

[6] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). The following discussion paraphrases his argument.

[7] I defended Jacques Dupuis's inclusive pluralism as consistent with orthodox Catholic teaching, against the position taken in the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*. I used an argument analogous in form to the form of defense discussed here. See Terrence W. Tilley, "Christian Orthodoxy and Religious Pluralism," *Modern Theology* 22, no. 1 (2006): 51–63. That article's logic stands undefeated, as far as I can tell, after significant discussion; see Terrence W. Tilley, "'Christian Orthodoxy and Religious Pluralism': A Rejoinder to Gavin D'Costa," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 3 (2007): 447–54, and Terrence W. Tilley, "Concluding Our *Quaestio Disputata* on Theologies of Religious Diversity" (coauthored with Gavin D'Costa), *Modern Theology* 23, no. 3 (2007): 463–68.

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2. The most debated particular form of defense is Plantinga's FWD. John L. Mackie, in his argument against the rationality of believing in God as defined in A, assumed that God could actualize a possible world in which all free beings always choose to do the good and that either A or B must be false because they are not compatible.[8]

3. Plantinga argues that the proposition that "God could make a world in which all free beings choose the good" is incoherent. His argument can be roughly summarized as follows:

> a. God could make a world in which all beings could and would choose the good, but in that world, they would not be (libertarianly) free but determined by God to do the good.
> b. God could make a world in which all beings could be (libertarianly) free, but God could not determine that they always do the good because they were free to choose and to do what was not good, but evil.

4. Thus, Mackie's argument hinges on an assumption that cannot be true and so fails. Mackie's assumption that God could create a world in which all free beings chose the good is incoherent. God could make beings free (but then could not determine their choices of good or evil) or God could make beings good (but then they are not free to choose evil). God cannot make free beings always do the good.

In effect, this FWD is a sufficient defeater of all positions that accept even a minimal form of libertarian free will (an argument that has a compatibilist view of free will would require a different form of argument). If the FWD is correct, then the logical problem of evil is defeated on any and every non-deterministic metaphysical account. The structure and consequences of this argument have often been misconstrued.

An analogous proposition such as E, "Natural evils (e.g., earthquakes, some physical suffering of sentient beings, etc.) are brought about by the activity of free, non-human beings" can cover natural evil as well. This diabolical possibility has received far more attention than it has deserved. The defense needs this proposition to be only logically possible—not true. With A, C, and D, E entails B. So, the defense, as outré as one of its components may be, stands.

Defenses are typically supported by elaborate analysis and persuasive examples and narratives. They may be as elaborate as theodicies. The key that distinguishes defenses is that they are rebuttals of attacks, not theodicies, explanations, or justifications of a set of beliefs. Logically, one who asserts a defense does not have to believe that each proposition used in building the

[8] John L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–12.

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bulwark is true; some need only be logically possible. One who constructs a theodicy uses propositions that the author finds are as true as possible—given that human beliefs about God cannot exhaustively comprehend God.

What are the limits of such defenses? First, the FWD does not defeat the *empirical* problem of evil for theists. As William L. Rowe has preeminently argued, the reality of genuine natural evils in the actual world is another problem.[9] If theists continue to believe in God in the face of genuine natural and moral (including any structural and cultural) evils, evidence for their belief is questionable, at best. The counterargument to Rowe and others is that belief in God does not have the status of a hypothesis that stands in need of evidence, but of a conviction that is accepted unless the evidence against it is overwhelming enough to defeat it for a person of faith who holds it. The believer is not arguing to support a hypothetical belief. As I put it in the original article:

> Rather, the believer is seeking to show that the rebuttal of the believer's claims attempted by the atheologian does not affect, and should not affect, the quality of assent to the believer's claim. Since the atheologian bears the burden of proof in attempting to overthrow an established belief which the believer accepts, a defense fills its purpose if it shows that the attempted rebuttal fails.[10]

The anti-theistic argument is fully successful only if it involves a person's conversion away from faith in God. The locus of the empirical problem is not so much logic as it is the ethics of belief.[11] The empirical problem of evil is

[9] William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41, articulates his basic claim. For a comprehensive discussion of the evidential problem of evil, see Nick Trakakis, *The God beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007). Also see Nick Trakakis, ed., *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) for recent discussions.

[10] Tilley, "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy," 308.

[11] The issues involved with the "ethics of belief" are relevant to construing religious belief as "hypothetical" or "convictional." See Gerald D. McCarthy, ed., *The Ethics of Belief Debate* AAR Academy Series Number 41 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986) for historical essays (especially the excerpts from John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, [New York: The Catholic Publication Society], 73–103) and some contemporary reflections. Also see James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975); James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, revised ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in*

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compounded when one considers social evils. The evidence for horrendous evils is staggering. Rowe's challenge has to do with natural evils. Yet natural evils may be horrendous insofar as they have social and personal components. A hurricane may well be a natural evil, but building a city in "hurricane alley" involves social and personal choices. McCord Adams's work, discussed in the following, reflects the challenges social evils bring to Christian faith and theology and argues for placing them in a redemptive, christological framework, not in a theodicy.

Second, the FWD does not require its holder to believe that all natural evils are caused by devils or space aliens or other nonhuman entities. It does require the holder to recognize the logical possibility that devils caused nonmoral evils, but not to accept the proposition that they actually or even plausibly caused such evils. I do not know if Plantinga or other defenders believe E (I surely do not), but I do not see a way to show this proposition cannot be logically possible.[12] Hence, it suffices to support the FWD.

Third, I would now add that a defense is a "game" played on the opponents' "home turf." This may not have been clear to readers of my earlier article. A defense accepts the atheists' propositions as given only for the sake of argument. The FWD does not commit one to a position that accepts the opponents' view of God simpliciter. The FWD is simply a defense against a specific and common modern atheistic argument against belief in God: it shows that even if one accepts the opponents' view of God, the opponents' attempts to defeat the reasonableness of belief in God in the face of the reality of evils fail.

One can accept the FWD as a defense against the all-too-commonly accepted argument against an assumption that God is an agent who acts directly in the actual world (like a secondary cause) without accepting the understanding of divine action that it assumes. Accepting a defense against such a view can make room for other accounts. A Thomistic account, roughly for an understanding of God as a primary agent who cannot be held responsible for evil, but who creates secondary agents who are responsible for bringing about moral and social evils, neither plays on the opponents' turf nor endorses their view of God. Brian Davies, for example, holds a privative view of evil, that is, that evil is the absence of some good that should be there and is not, not

Belief (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Terrence W. Tilley, *The Wisdom of Religious Commitment* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), and Terrence W. Tilley, *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

[12] Other possibly true propositions can also be employed, like E, to defend the compatibility of A and B regarding natural evil. See Terrence W. Tilley, "Towards a Creativity Defense of Belief in God in the Face of Evil," in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, ed. Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and William R. Stoeger, SJ (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Press, 2007), 195–215.

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the existence of some "thing" that is there. Hence, God cannot be considered the cause of any evil "thing." Created beings may bring about evils, acting for something they desire, but God cannot and does not have desires. God does not create out of desire or need, but out of practically unimaginable love.[13]

Davies explicitly rejects the FWD. He seems to assume that its rhetorical force requires the acceptance of a God who is an agent in the universe (evidently Mackie and Plantinga would accept this understanding of divine power). But such acceptance is only for the sake of argument undertaken on the opponents' home turf. To accept it as a defense does not preclude an argument that does not accept the attackers' and the defenders' assumptions about God and evil. This use of a defense merely clears out the thicket of popular assumptions about divine power that Thomists do not accept. Someone like Davies could accept a defense like the FWD, but then change the subject by reconceiving how we image God.

Fourth, the FWD, more generally, does not commit one to either a particular explanation or justification of "God's ways." One might accept a form of "open theism"; or one of a variety of views found in "skeptical theism" in which we simply do not know what God's reason might be for permitting evils, even horrendous evils, in the world;[14] or a "process view" in which God is not immutable; or a "Thomistic view" in which God is not a secondary agent who acts in competition with created agents; or a form of accepting the mystery of evil as a theological aporia that evokes dreadful contemplation and the exercise of a "harsh and dreadful love."

What do defenses do? I have claimed that they defeat anti-theodicists' logical attacks. But they also provide a way into helping someone to recognize just where the mystery lies in trying to account for God and evil. John Thiel, for

[13] See Brian Davies, OP, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum Books, 2006). One issue in Plantinga's defense that a Thomist might find perplexing is Plantinga's use of possible world metaphysics, in that it is not clear how God could both survey all possible worlds and actualize one of them while God is also a being in one of them (the actual world) or even in all possible worlds.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters: with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (n.p., Harper One, n.d.), at 39, 99–191, 103, 175, *et passim*, Screwtape evinces an inability to imagine how divine love is not similar to human desires, especially the desire to use loving appearances to wreak domination over others. Divine love is not human love, even if human love is analogous to it. Screwtape cannot imagine anything other than a flawed type of love rooted in desire or motivated by the wish to dominate, use, or absorb others. Some popular preachers' accounts of God's love seemingly deny God's love to sinners or nonbelievers; they replicate some of Screwtape's confusions.

[14] Discussions of these two approaches can be found in many volumes of *Faith and Philosophy: The Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*. The other forms of explanation and justification also appear, but less frequently.

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example, finds that "God's causal relation to evil is a[n] … aporia incapable of theological resolution."[15] The possibly true claims defenses use are not explanations, but merely philosophical rebuttals. A defense makes room for a richer response: not a theodicy, but a recognition of where the mystery is or what divine love consists in. Indeed, Kilby's refusal of an explanation of God's relation to evil and her own explication of a profound understanding of theology's task as gesturing to mystery is not a practical response to evil as Surin might endorse, but a profoundly insightful theological move.[16]

On the other hand, a theodicy is an explanation of why God allows actual evils in the real world God created. In constructing a theodicy, the believer, "tries … to tell us what God's reason is for permitting evil. At bottom, [the believer] says, it's that God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil."[17] The purpose of a theodicy is not to show that the atheologian's attempted rebuttal is unsuccessful. Rather, the believer seeks to show that the warrants for her or his own conclusions are reliable. Here the believer must make the argument. The burden of proof is no longer on the atheologian, but on the believer. Whereas defenses show that the burden of proof is on the atheist (and is unmet), the theodicist bears the burden of proof.[18]

The differences between the two forms of argument are significant. First, the theodicist must account for all of the evils, or at least the forms of evil, in the actual world. The former seems impossible as new evils happen daily. The evolution of social media has brought some new forms of good, but also new forms of evil such as the widespread, nearly unfettered, distribution of disinformation.

Second, to accept a theodicy, a believer must accept the propositions that structure the argument. If any of the propositions are false and irreparable, the argument fails. If any of the propositions are implausible or inadequate, a reader of the argument should be skeptical, at best, of its cogency. Some have tried to suggest that a theodicy is a story more than an argument. But this move, as appealing as it might be, does not make telling an incoherent story good or valid. An incoherent story is no better than a fallacious argument. The believer must accept the whole story or argument of a theodicy to be reasonable. To be felicitous, that acceptance can be properly supported only if the

[15] John Thiel, "On Theological Aporias," *Theological Studies* 84, no. 2 (2023): 354.

[16] Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 152, *et passim*.

[17] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 27.

[18] Tilley, "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy," 308. Also see Nick Trakakis, "The Evidential Problem of Evil," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), section 4, at https://iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/#H4.

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story or argument is actually true or a reasonable approximation of the truth. If the hypothesis is seriously flawed, then it cannot support that conviction reasonably.

Third, theodicy as a discourse practice presumes that the theodicist accepts the propositions that constitute the theodicy as true or plausible. The theodicist is arguing for a way of understanding how we can explain why God permits evils, even horrendous ones. This is a consequence of the differing burdens of proof involved in defenses as distinguished from theodicies.

Fourth, I would now add that a theodicy is constructed on the theodicist's "home turf." Theologians who construct theodicies presume that there is a God, whether this presumption is based on an argument such as the cosmological or ontological arguments for God's existence, or has some other basis, or is a "properly basic belief" that is properly groundless. Anti-theistic attackers do not presume God exists. This aspect of the distinction between defenses and theodicies may not have been clear to readers of my earlier article. A theodicist does not accept an anti-theistic view for the sake of argument. The theodicist rejects the argument. The empirical requirement for a theodicy is that the evils must be explained sufficiently for the theodicy to be plausible or persuasive. The argument is not against attempts to defeat the reasonableness of belief in God, but for the reasonableness of belief in God. The burdens of proof differ.

In sum, defenses and theodicies are different sorts of arguments, undertaken in different contexts, with differing rhetorical purposes, and with differing intended main audiences. Both theodicies and defenses can, and often do, suffer from a level of abstraction that often makes them seem implausible but does not make them similar. The failure to recognize the difference plagues many more recent theological approaches to God and evil.

Kilby's Anti-Theodicy Position

I have argued that doing theodicies creates evils, precisely in the sense noted by Karen Kilby: "Theodicies are destructive discourses which efface and perpetuate evils."[19] Unfortunately, Kilby takes my position in *The Evils of Theodicy* as "most aggressive" rejecting "everything to do with theodicy." She does not distinguish theodicies from defenses clearly, as I do, particularly in my supporting a prototype of defense found in Augustine's authoritative instruction as a bishop to the layman Laurentius, *Enchiridion*.[20] She is more

[19] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 76.

[20] See Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 113–40. It is important to note that Augustine, as bishop, is here addressing

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sympathetic to the anti-theodicy position of Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*,[21] which favors "practical theodicy" (a position that can be defended if it is attacked on logical grounds, I might add). She finds me supporting abandoning "the issue as an abstract and general one, in short, and concentrate on what can be done in relation to concrete evils."[22] I do think that theodicies should be abandoned, but not defenses, even abstract ones (given their purpose). I do think that the appropriate response to evils is to do what can be done for victims of hurricanes and earthquakes, and all forms of sin (whether individual acts, cultural patterns, or structural laws, rules, practices or presuppositions). Kilby's position is flawed because she does not recognize that a defense is not a theodicy.[23] To reject theodicies is not to reject defenses.

Theodicies, I have argued in a number of places,[24] also tend to fail to discriminate between personal and social (whether cultural or structural) evils. In effect, they render social evils as practically natural, as if all structural and some cultural arrangements are not to be understood in moral terms. Kilby also seems to think this imputes a moral failure to theodicists. She writes:

> At the heart of the various criticisms is the claim that theodicies tend to put both the author and the reader into the wrong kind of relationship with evil, or, more to the point, with particular evils. They try to reconcile us to evils, that is, in a way which we should not be reconciled. If one takes the long enough view, if one really gets the right perspective, the theodicists seem to say, everything is not so bad.[25]

Later, Kilby is explicit: "What critics like Surin and above all Tilley do is to push the idea that such intellectual failing has a moral dimension… . [Theodicies] are bad for us and a bad thing altogether."[26]

a layman on what are the basics of the faith. It presumes a committed audience, whereas his more polemical works may or may not have an audience that is so committed.

21 Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

22 Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 76.

23 See Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 69n2; 72n10.

24 Summarized in "A Trajectory of Positions," in Trakakis, *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*, 176–90.

25 Karen Kilby, "Evil and the Limits of Theology," *New Blackfriars* 84 (2003): 14–15. The same is repeated in her *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (71), with an addition that indicates the positions are Surin's and mine. Ross McCullough, *Freedom and Sin: Evil in a World Created by God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 11, quotes the earlier version.

26 Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 72.

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This point is also not quite accurate. It confuses the communicative action of writing a theodicy with the readers' acting in response to reading them. First, those theodicists, who simply do not recognize cultural and structural evils as types of evils distinct from personal sin or a nexus of sins, cannot "try to reconcile us to evils" because they do not see them. You cannot try to reconcile me to a phenomenon you do not see! Perhaps some so-called "natural evils," like Rowe's fawn dying miserably alone in the forest, are just natural evils, but most "natural" evils have social and personal components. Hurricanes are natural. Building cities in their paths is not. Second, if there is a moral failure, it is the readers': those who accept a theodicy blindly and act without consideration of the practical need to work against evils perhaps "sin" by omission.

Theodicists are not immoral or depraved but deprived of (for various reasons) the ability to recognize social evils. If writing theodicies produces evil, it is primarily a cognitive evil. Readers may or may not be blinded to recognizing evils or may not be led to people being "reconciled" to evils or to a caricature of Julian of Norwich's famous line, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." But these are readers' responses to an intellectually problematic discourse. In sum, Kilby's invocation of the immorality of theodicy seems too broad: it seems to conflate theory and praxis. She thus misplaces the locus of any moral evil of theodicy.[27] Theodicies may be a bad thing, but they may not be altogether bad.

Nonetheless, Kilby's own constructive work is truly impressive in that she relocates the theological aporia. She uses an analogy with mathematics: "Mathematics can provide us, in other words, with an example of clarity and mystery varying in direct, rather than inverse proportions."[28] As our understanding of the mathematics of astrophysics deepens, the sense of awe does not diminish, but the mystery understood in and through the aporias that point to that mystery intensifies. The same is true of theological exploration: our sense of mystery deepens.

Reflecting on the work of Denys Turner, Katherine Tanner, and St. Thomas Aquinas, she distances her work from theodicies or defenses that construe divine and human agency as competitive. She concludes: "To say that divine and created agency cannot be contrasted [and thus not competitive] is not to

[27] I note that I am not without "sin" in this area. In the discussion of my first paper devoted to theodicies alone, "The Morality of Theodicies," Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Philosophy of Religion Section, Atlanta, November 1986, Van A. Harvey roundly and correctly castigated me for construing the production of theodicies as a type of moral evil. I learned my lesson! I have never since consciously construed constructing theodicy as sinful.

[28] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 148.

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offer an explanation of how they go together, but *a rule which defeats all possible explanations*."[29] Such a rule is a "stop card" marking the danger of theodicy. She finds that theodicies seek to resolve the insoluble, effectively blocking the path to contemplating the beauty of divine simplicity.

Kilby appreciates the focus and aim (though not necessarily all the content) of Karl Rahner's approach: What Rahner "is aiming to do is not to clear up mysteries that are around in Catholic theology … but to *intensify* the sense of the mysterious."[30] She seems to accept the purposes of philosophical defenses and to reject the purposes of theodicies. She writes:

> How, then, is the role of theology conceived in relation to this mystery? If theology is successful, is the mystery of evil and its relation to God diminished? One can quite neatly divide the discussions of evil into two camps according to their responses to this question, and one can interpret a number of recent attacks on the very project of theodicy as an indication that those which aim to diminish the mystery of evil turn out to be deeply problematic, not just intellectually but also in some sense morally.[31]

Yes, but defenses do not diminish the mystery of evil as they are fundamentally dismissals of relatively superficial understandings of the mystery.

Kilby recognizes the challenges posed by social evils.[32] She also finds that personal and structural evil cannot be distinguished clearly. Hence, she remains cautious about exploring the problem. She focuses on structural evils that entangle our actions with evil. In capitalism, for example, we seem to be unable to avoid such entanglement—unless, of course, we give up any entanglement with the capitalist system. She does not, however, discuss cultural evils such as the pervasive attitudes of racism, sexism, and others that damage people regardless of the systems in which they are entangled. More work remains to be done in this area.

One way forward would be to show that there are approaches to social evils that can and should be deconstructed. Construing social evils, for example, as simply an agglomeration of personal sins without considering the cultural and social contexts that incline people to sin or entangle them in sin seems a missed opportunity, at least so far. It seems to me that an ideology of individualism lies behind many of the refusals to name social evils. Such reduction of social evils to personal sins or natural evil neglects the power of culture and

[29] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 151; emphasis added.
[30] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 152; emphasis in the original.
[31] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 153.
[32] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 94–98.

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system. It also seems that corporate actions (for example, the civil rights movements and the US farm workers movement, which are not merely negative protests, but movements for ameliorating or extirpating extant social evils in favor of a "better way") may be possibly important in imagining and understanding which cultural components and social structures we ought prefer. The issue is not a general one, but particular challenges about particular, concrete cultural phenomena and social structures: Is the world better or worse if we support free trade, for example? Is it an unsupportable social structure because it is thoroughly evil or is it a structure productive of some evils, or is it an optimal structure, given the circumstances? The real issues are practical and retail, not intellectual and wholesale.

Nonetheless, I find her constructive work illuminating even as I am not convinced about the moral issue. But while my descriptive analysis distinguishing theodicies and defenses may not line up perfectly with her distinction between writings of God and evils that minimize versus those that aim to intensify (and rightly place) the sense of mystery that our desire to understand generates, I hope our approaches yield different, but accurate and compatible insights.[33]

McCord Adams and McCullough: Explanation or Justification?

Theodicy is a modern discourse project. The first essay in this project was written by the future Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, William King, in 1702, *De Origine Mali*. An English translation by Edmund Law was published in 1731 as *An Essay on the Origin of Evil*. The neologism "theodicy" followed as the title of Leibniz's response to the issues, including lengthy discussion of King's work, in his *Théodicée* in 1710. It is an anachronism to call premodern reflection on God and evil a theodicy or a defense, unless one is clear about why one is using an admittedly anachronistic notion.

A key characteristic of King's work—and most modern theodicies and defenses—was its ignoring of actual evils, such as the killings at the Battle of Boyne in 1690, which settled the Williamite War in the favor of the Anglicans. King was then Bishop of Derry in the north of Ireland. This characteristic of not mentioning significant real evils is a central characteristic of the modern project of theodicy, in contrast to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and other works on God and evil previous to the modern project. Projects like those of

[33] I have not commented on Kilby's provocative and insightful placing the mystery of the Trinity in theology by nuanced appeals to what we do in prayer as it does not seem relevant to the topic of this article, but I found those chapters profoundly worth serious reading and reflection.

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Kilby, Ross McCullough, and McCord Adams try to retrieve the insights of premodern views about God and to avoid the problems of modern accounts of God's relationship to evil.

To call a theodicy an attempt "to justify God's ways to man"[34] is misleading. Despite her insights, Marilyn McCord Adams claims that her project in *Christ and Horrors* is not really a theodicy because it is an explanation, not a justification. Her reasoning presumes a *de re* (talk about things) approach in theodicies (and defenses).[35] But even if a theodicy is an explanation, it is not an explanation of God's ways. It functions not to justify God, but to show our set of theological beliefs reasonable. Defenses are a *de dicto* (talk about facts and reasons, for example) approach that defends the compatibility of A and B. "I have argued that horrors are so bad that no candidate reason-why … is remotely *sufficient* to exhibit the compatibility of horrors with Divine goodness-to created horror-participants, and that any attempt to construe one or more of them as sufficient underestimates how bad horrors are and caricatures God into something monstrous."[36] I entirely agree: modern theodicists caricature our belief in God.

But the author of such a caricature, as well of any theodicy or defense, is a human, writing *de dicto*, about what humans say about God, whose ways are not our ways. Explanations are justifications, not of God, but of our believing in the infinite goodness of God in the face of evils, even horrendous evils, a point she concedes when she claims that she is describing a "cosmos held together by Christ and to exhibit the coherence of Christology."[37] McCord Adams's hypothesis is a justification of holding not merely theistic belief, but Christian belief. It is an explanation that attempts to justify our beliefs as reasonable. And it is finally in the genre of Christology, so McCord Adams has, in effect, changed the subject: she seeks to show how we can believe in true salvation in Christ in the face of the horrendous evils we know of. The subject of her work is christological, not theodical.

McCullough follows McCord Adams down the path of separating justification from explanation. His theodicy is an explanation of how God does not create evil, "so there is no way of linking evil to that Intelligibility that underlies creation and makes possible our explanations."[38] Again, this explanation is a

[34] I allude here to A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* LXII:
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.

[35] Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 43.

[36] Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 43, citing her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 53–55; emphasis in the original

[37] Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 44.

[38] McCullough, *Freedom and Sin*, 13.

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de dicto justification of our beliefs about God and evil. McCullough writes in a *de re* mode, but his propositions and arguments function *de dicto*. They support a set of beliefs some people hold about God: he is "not asking what it is that mitigates the evils of history, what justifies them by overcoming them or integrating them into some greater good."[39] He seeks to show how we account for the origin of evil. His strategy is like that of Archbishop King's: to explain what "we" believe about the origin of evil.

McCullough seeks to develop a theodicy that holds together God's opposition to evil and God's noncompetition with creatures.[40] His key move is to attribute evil not to result from misuse of free will, but of human deficiency in acts that God wills effectively that we do. God wants the best of us. We resist the best for us and in so doing fall short of what God wants. God is not responsible for that falling short, but we are responsible for missing the mark, especially in our creaturely creativity.[41] McCullough also ignores social evils, thus replicating in his theodicy one of the main evils of the modern discourse about God and evil.

Conclusion

Although the works considered in the previous two sections have interesting, provocative, plausible, and promising insights, their projects are weakened by their neglect of the distinctions between theodicies and defenses. This leads McCord Adams and McCullough to write complicated theodical attempts to explain and justify our beliefs as reasonable. We believe in God. We recognize evils. We need to show that these beliefs are compatible. It is not an easy task, as the numerous debates over Plantinga's FWD show. But to explain evils metaphysically is to open the possibility of explaining evils away as not counting against our belief in God. However, evils do challenge that belief. The question is whether recognizing them as challenges is a good reason to abandon one's convictions about God and God's world.[42] That is a different question.

[39] McCullough, *Freedom and Sin*, 11.

[40] McCullough, *Freedom and Sin*, 5.

[41] See my review of McCullough's book in *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 196–98. I have argued that a "creativity defense" can be developed (see note 12 previously), but this would not explain the origin of evil in a metaphysical argument, but only show that propositions A and B, discussed previously, are compatible.

[42] In Terrence W. Tilley, *The Karamazov Case: Dostoevsky's Argument for His Vision* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2023), I argue that Dostoevsky's text both lays out a vision of how to repair this fractured icon of a world and mounts a subtle and rich argument in support of doing so.

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It is imperative that theologians and philosophers note the differences in logic, argument structure, and rhetorical purposes of theodicies and defenses. The insights of contemporary theologians and philosophers such as McCord Adams, Kilby, and McCullough could be more clearly—and more plausibly—argued were they clearer about how recognizing the ways in which defenses could serve their purposes and theodical discourse cannot. Such a distinction would, in my judgment, render their works more effective in recognizing that Christology must account for horrors, that the point of the discourses about God and evil is good when it intensifies, not diminishes, the mystery, and that creativity could open the way to a defense compatible with Thomistic accounts of divine action that could untangle the mysteries of social evils.

Our students are sometimes interested in the modern debates about God and evil that still erupt in popular simplifications of the issues, whether rooted in Humean perplexities, Mackie's atheistic challenges, or the "new atheists'" popular broadsides. They are steeped in a cultural understanding of a God who acts like a secondary agent.[43] Contemporary philosophical theologians cannot ignore these moves, but must work to undermine them as a prolegomenon to opening the students' minds both to imagining that the mystery lies deeper and elsewhere than modern philosophers seem to think and to practical responses to the evils we face. Recognizing the differences of theodicies and defenses can, I believe, contribute clarity and plausibility to such prolegomena.[44]

[43] For a particularly problematical version of this sort of view of God ("the Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist"), see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 162–65, or my discussion of their work in *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't*, 65–67.

[44] The author thanks the referees who saved this article from blunders and infelicities. Those that remain are solely the author's.

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