The Drama of Divine Providence:
Reflections on the Problem of Evil

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This article studies the problem of evil in Abrahamic religions and philosophical traditions, and tries to restate their solutions in a contemporary language. The author aims at affirming traditional Abrahamic approaches to theodicy that preserve divine omnipotence, benevolence, and omniscience, but without denying the reality of evil.

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Introduction

In addressing the question of the relation between providence and evil in the Abrahamic religious and philosophical traditions, I am not thereby assuming that other great world religious traditions have nothing valuable to teach in this regard; of course they do. But I simply focus on those traditions I happen to know a bit more about and upon their particular approaches to this question—approaches over which I have pondered for at least three decades now. My few modest conclusions add nothing new to the long history of *theodicy*, but attempt rather to state these conclusions in a contemporary language that makes sense to me existentially, and which I hope will make sense to others, as I continue to face the iniquity of evil in my own life and choices, in the structures of sin and evil worked into the very fabric of modern life,[2] and occasionally in what I can only describe as direct demonic attempts on the part of warped "personal" spiritual entities to disrupt genuine unity, destroy what is good, distort what is true, and pervert what is beautiful. My aim is to affirm, more or less, traditional Abrahamic approaches to theodicy that keep intact divine omnipotence, benevolence, and omniscience, but without downplaying the real horror of evil.

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2. These structures of sin are not new per se, but modern technology has enabled them to develop in such a way as to leave virtually no one untouched.

Needless to say, any robust theology of evil must necessarily include and begin with equally robust theologies of God and Creation that emphasize the following fundamental points. First, in the Abrahamic traditions, the word "God" does not simply refer to the highest thing or entity in the cosmos, but to something that is not a "thing" at all "in" the universe. God refers, rather, to that which is so completely other than, and radically transcendent to, the universe, that our language in *affirming* anything about God can only be analogical; the only time our language about God has univocal meaning is when we are denying. Something similar, perhaps, could be said about the *Tao* in Chinese tradition. Second, that which God freely brings out of nothing is therefore not necessary, strictly speaking—this is precisely what the term *creation* means. Third, if God had chosen not to create, God would still be God. All these points underscore how radically transcendent, unknowable, and unnameable God really is. Even when we state that God *is* or that God *exits*, the terms "is" and "exists" are mere analogies wherein unlikeness remains immensely greater than likeness. Thus, the *via negativa* or the *apophatic* ways to God are the appropriate starting points in the Abrahamic religious traditions for any robust theologies of God and God's creative act when attempting to address the enormously problematic phenomenon we call evil.

Of course the central challenge for the Abrahamic religions is to reconcile the belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God with the "existence" of evil. The classical formulation is well known: either you give up omnipotence and hold on to benevolence, or you forgo benevolence and insist only on omnipotence; you simply can't have it both ways. For if God were all-powerful and all-good simultaneously, then evil would not, could not, exist. But since evil "exists" it means that God is either not powerful enough to eliminate it although being all-good wants to, or is powerful enough but does not, because is not all-good.

The classical way out of this age-old dilemma is to simply say that evil is a "privation" of the good, and therefore does not really exist at all—not in any sort of ontological way at least. But this solution causes other philosophical problems, not the least of which is how to possibly explain to the one suffering evil, especially if that person is innocent, that what they are suffering does not really exist. Try explaining that to an innocent man who has been imprisoned for life because he was framed. Or try telling the mother of a little child who has been kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery that the evil she and her child suffer are only *apparent* because evil does not really exist ontologically. This classical approach can be traced back at least to Plotinus, and one finds neo-platonic variations on the theme throughout the Middle Ages in the West. Not surprisingly, however, this explanation becomes progressively less and less satisfying; those committed to it are

continually challenged to find new and improved ways of articulating it and giving it new life. Philosophers of the stature of Leibniz and Schelling, in spite of Immanuel Kant's formidable objections, are among those in modernity who manage to revitalize it in important ways, forging what could be called a new era in *theodicy*. I shall subsequently address in the broadest terms this new era only after exploring another dimension of this problem in the thought of two prominent medieval philosophers and thinkers, one Christian, the other Muslim, as their insights in this regard are most relevant and constitute an important part of the historical puzzle.

I refer to the 10th century Andalusian philosopher, theologian, poet, historian, Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥazm (known generally as Ibn Hazm)[1] and to the great 13th century Christian philosopher and theologian, Duns Scotus, whose thought may have been influenced by the work of Ibn Ḥazm. The one central point, so relevant in our context, upon which both of these thinkers agree, though each one develops and uses it differently, concerns God's radical transcendence—even above God's own creation. God is so profoundly above and independent from, creation, that God is not bound by anything whatsoever *in* creation. One contemporary Christian theologian of high repute formulates this in this way: "God's transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind [God's own] actual decisions" (Pope Benedict XVI 2006, §6). The implications for *theodicy* here are immense and in some ways a continuation of the neo-platonic theme of the non-existence of evil, since if our own human sense of what is good and evil, true and false, is not at all analogous to God's—since God is so radically above creation— then what we call evil may in fact be good and vice versa in God's eyes, or the very categories of good and evil, true and false, may not even exist in God's reality—a reality totally unpredictable, unknowable, and un-nameable to and for us.

While granting the relative value and truth of this insight, both the Christian and Islamic traditions over the ages tried to temper it, since if the undue stress on the radical transcendence of God as expressed in Ibn Hazm or Duns Scotus is not qualified by some doctrine of analogy, we could be left with a "God [who] is not even bound by his own word … [wherein] nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us." This could mean, among other things, that "[w]ere it God's will, we would

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1. Ibn Ḥazm was a leader in that school of Islamic thought known as the Zahiri school. He was incredibly prolific and addressed a wide range of logical, philosophical, theological, legal, historical, and comparative religion topic, including a work on the art of love titled The Ring of the Dove.

even have to practice idolatry" (Pope Benedict XVI 2006, §4). With an *analogy of being* doctrine, we can at least be sure that the term *evil* has univocal meaning when we *deny* something about God's nature. When we say, for instance, that "rape is an evil action" and "there is no admixture of evil" in God's being, we can be sure that the term evil has univocal, not mere analogical meaning. Nonetheless, since any balanced doctrine of analogy must always include the thesis that "unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness," it is still therefore the case that, at times, God can explode our otherwise logically and even morally consistent judgments and pious positions, and there are many examples of this in the Abrahamic scriptures: in the book of Hosea, for instance, when He asks the prophet to marry a whore—and then to take her back even after she returns to her life of whoring; and more extreme than this, when He asks Abraham to slaughter his own beloved son. We are apt to miss just how excessively radical and almost contradictory this really is because we all know the happy ending, when God prevented the hand of Abraham from carrying out the act of slaughter, but again it underscores the point that in any healthy doctrine of analogy "unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness"— providing space *not* for contradiction, but for paradox and mystery. It is no accident that the biblical tradition speaks of the *mystery* of evil— by mystery, the biblical tradition does not refer to something we can't know anything about, but simply to something that we cannot know everything about. Or to put it differently, we must aim for a faith which might transcend reason, without contradicting it.

Holding faith and reason together in the proper complementary tension has long been the fundamental goal of the greatest thinkers in the Abrahamic traditions; this is what gave birth to theology and its various branches, including, of course, the branch we call *theodicy*. This task is on-going and never something that once achieved, once understood, can then be captured in a static dogmatic formula, mechanically provided once and for all as a ready-made, one size fits all, water tight solution to a perplexing riddle. This is especially true in those looking for meaning to their own suffering and in the suffering of their loved ones. *Theodicy* and all healthy theology must be open to the ever changing relational dynamic between a living God and His creation, not just in the abstract, but in the messy, existential dilemmas into which we inevitably find ourselves plunged day after day, and which require us to make conscientious choices that have grave effects on our own well-being and on the well-being of others.

This realization, I suggest, was the main impetus in Leibniz's *Essays on Theodicy* published in 1710. The full title of the essay, *Essays on Theodicy: On the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, shows the centrality of theodicy in Leibniz's overall metaphysical project. But Leibniz's attempt to rehabilitate the "non-existence" of evil

thesis is rejected by no one less than the great Immanuel Kant. He challenges Leibniz's equation of evil with lack of being and rejects all attempts to justify God's goodness and omnipotence by defining evil as pure privation, claiming rather that evil is some *thing* rooted in human nature. Kant even goes on to say that each and every human being *freely* chooses an evil moral orientation by choosing to give priority to sensual interests over intellectual and moral ones. All human beings, argues Kant, have an evil disposition, but some human beings can rise above this orientation if they cultivate their intellects and learn to think for themselves—this enables them to move from an evil disposition (subjection or submission) to a good disposition (autonomy). Whenever we freely choose to submit to the laws and dictates of others (without understanding) we reinforce our evil disposition, but whenever we freely choose to obey the universal moral law determined *a priori* by our own reason, we begin to develop a good disposition. Political subjection is when an entire state obeys the laws of others imposed from the outside; individual subjection is when individuals choose to obey the laws determined by their sensual and physical desires or wants.[1]

One can see clearly why Kant is not interested in traditional *theodicy*; not only does he reject the notion that evil by definition is a privation (an idea that theodicy must somehow be based on if a traditional theology of God is to be maintained) but he identifies the greatest good with individual autonomy, and the greatest evil as subjection or submission to another.

As the philosophical discussion continues and develops in the West, yet another great German philosopher, Fredrick Schelling, gets into the conversation and makes what I take to be an invaluable contribution to the field by returning to Leibniz, but only after taking Kant's objections seriously. Schelling appreciates Kant's rejection of the "unreality of evil thesis" and admits that too many attempts to give an adequate account of the origin of evil fail because they are designed to fit neatly into the "noble" work of defending both God's benevolence and omnipotence. At the same time, however, he sees that to abandon *theodicy* is to separate metaphysics from morality and to give up on providing any ultimate account of good and evil as it relates to freedom and morality; in this we could say he sides more with Leibniz who makes theodicy central to metaphysics. But a more accurate way to say it is that he attempts to split the difference between Leibniz and Kant, not by reaching a compromise but by soaring higher than either one. His conclusions both save theodicy and introduce unique and (I would say) "mystical" insights into the nature of freedom and evil.

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1. It is crucial to notice here the differences and similarities between Aristotle's approach to ethics and morality, which is virtue centered and Kant's approach which is more law and principle centered.

Ultimately, Schelling sees that to grapple adequately with the question of theodicy, we must necessarily seek to understand human freedom, and the first step in understanding human freedom comes when we begin to wrestle with the question of God's freedom—in particular, to attempt to understand how the notion of God's freedom can be reconciled with God's necessary nature. To do this, he introduces two different ways of being: (*ground*—the principle of contraction) and (*ex-istence*—the principle of expansion); these principles can be found everywhere in nature and capture the ways in which things "are" in the world. The balance in nature emerges when these two "opposing" principles maintain their proper relation. When *ground* (or contraction) remains the "condition for" *existence* (or expansion) then the whole remains balanced and harmonious, but when *ground* becomes that for which the whole is conditioned, evil emerges. Analogously, in God, according to Schelling, ground and existence, contraction and expansion, inwardness and out-wardness, hiding and revelation, always maintain their proper relation in what we could call a mystical divine struggle. This struggle is precisely where God's freedom is located, while His necessity lies in the fact that the result of this struggle is secure: *ground* never becomes absolute, but remains the condition for the self-revelation of the absolute. Although the two ways of being are in tension, they together form the unity of being where the true absolute (God) can be.

Nature, too, and everything in it, including (and especially) human beings, analogously enjoy these same two ways of being, but the outcome of the struggle is far from secure: evil often emerges because the contracting principle seeks to dominate the principle of expansion. In spite of Schopenhauer's scathing critique of Schelling, claiming, as he does, that Schelling is simply aping Kant while pretending to be original, I suggest that, on the contrary, Schelling goes much deeper than, and even reveals the inherent weaknesses in, Kant. Schelling identifies evil with a distortion of the *relation* between *ground* and *existence* whereby *ground* (or inwardness) becomes the perversely self-conscious, *rational* will of the *individual* no longer in real relation to anything but itself. In this, it is possible to read Schelling as criticizing a particular form of Kantian rationalism. Regrettably, Schelling does not, as far as I can tell, say why it is that the proper relation is maintained in God and not in nature or in human beings created by God. He does imply that this is simply because Creation is not necessary, but he does not explicitly develop this. In this, although his account of freedom and evil is weightier than virtually any other philosophical account in the nineteenth century, it is by no means the final word.[1]

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1. Schelling's work has always reminded me of certain trends in the mystical traditions of the Abrahamic religions. In particular, the Lurianic School of Kabbala with its

Of course, there can never be a "final" word when it comes to such a mystery. But by way of conclusion I do now offer my own provisional and modest "final" word in the light of all that has been said. First, regardless of the ontological weight we give to evil in terms of its existence, God's omnipotence is not undermined in the face of evil while simultaneously insisting on His benevolence, because God did not have to create in the first place. If God does not create, then even the possibility of evil does not exist. Furthermore, God's act of creating out of nothing is precisely that which demonstrates His omnipotence. And when it comes to God's benevolence, it is not that God does not want to get rid of evil; what God does not want to do, rather, is to get rid of beings that are free like Him. The key term here is "like." We are back to the point about analogy. Our freedom is *like* God's freedom; it is not the same. Of course, God knows that we will abuse our freedom and He knows our acts before we commit them, but this does not mean that they are not free acts. As Boethius taught long ago, God foresees all our actions: the actions that are determined He foresees as determined; and the actions that are free, He foresees as free and therefore does not predetermine them. This tension in seeing our acts before we perform them, but not determining them, is precisely where the drama of God's divine providence as an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful being comes into play. In a way, then, God depends on His creation, not in an absolute sense, because He did not have to create, but nonetheless in a real sense, because He does decide to create free beings. It's as if God has taken a risk, knowing all along that no matter what happens to His creation, He can bring it back on course. God's providence means that He is even ready to be rejected, and knows how to use this very rejection to bring His creation back to Him at a deeper and more intimate level. This, in part, is the lesson He teaches Joseph and his brothers, Job, and the prophets, especially the prophet Hosea whom He asks to marry a prostitute; in this latter, especially, the drama of divine providence emerges most deeply. God keeps telling Hosea, take her back, take her back, until Hosea breaks down in anguish. And then God teaches Hosea the all-important truth about His love for His

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emphasis on the teaching of tsimtsum (divine withdrawal), wherein God (in order to create out of nothing) becomes absent to himself in a kind of contraction so that "the void" or "nothingness" can come into existence, sounds a lot like Schelling's ground/existence distinction, since this void (in the Lurianic School) then becomes the "place" where freedom originates. In Christian mysticism, too, one finds echoes of this in both the ancient and modern periods. One contemporary Spanish Christian mystic, Fernando Rielo, writes in terms strikingly close to what we find in the Lurianic School and his conclusions are somewhat commensurate with what Schelling proposes, though I cannot go into them here. All of this also reminds me of that incredibly pregnant statement by the great Russian thinker, Nicolas Berdyaev, when he stated in his The Destiny of Man, "Freedom is not determined by God; it is part of the nothing out of which God created the world" (Berdyaev 1937, 33).

people, for His creation, not His general love for all of humanity, but His particular love for each and every creature, when He says "Israel is my unfaithful whore; but I love her and I will take her back and redeem her from all her iniquities." This is high drama indeed. God's providence, in keeping with His omnipotence, benevolence, and omniscience, is not some sort of stoical, disconnected interaction, but one wherein God gets involved in the muddled and messy details. The ultimate answer to the mystery of iniquity would be for the very Creator to enter into the misery, not as the Creator God, but as a vulnerable, miserable, suffering creature of creation, in order to perfectly and completely identify with it and then, because God, save it. But such an answer might be too good to be true? Or perhaps not?

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