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THE ETHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

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The problem of evil is standardly conceived as a logical or epistemic problem for religious belief. Within this approach, the more ethical and existential dimensions of the problem are recognized, if they are recognized at all, only for the sake of distinguishing them from the properly philosophical issues, as practical or pastoral difficulties. A few dissenting voices have insisted that, since the putative logical and epistemic problems of evil are really but pseudo-problems, there is no genuine philosophical problem of evil, just various practical and pastoral difficulties. My aim in this paper is to challenge the assumption shared on all sides: that, if there is a properly philosophical problem of evil, this problem is purely logical or epistemic. I aim to show why the problem of evil has an ineliminably ethical dimension and how a serious challenge to religious belief from the reality of evil can be formulated on distinctly ethical grounds.

My plan is as follows. §1 introduces a challenge to religious belief as the Ethical Argument from evil. §2 argues that the task of assessing this argument is one that philosophers of religion ought to be taking up. Finally, §3 draws on certain of Kierkegaard's religious discourses to consider the ethical problem of evil with specific reference to the case of thankful prayer. I shall not try here to provide anything approaching a full solution to the ethical problem of evil. Rather, my aim is to bring out the problem and to demonstrate why in this connection I think the philosophy of religion needs to take a phenomenological turn.

§1 An ethical challenge to religious belief

Witness an unforgettable passage from Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* :

Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen. Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas-chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer.¹

What does Levi find so offensive about Kuhn's expression of thanks to God? At a first pass, it is Kuhn's refusal to acknowledge the ethical reality of his situation: his refusal properly to recognize not only his fellow sufferers but also the true horror of his own predicament. What Levi finds repellent about Kuhn's prayer appears to be its function as a means of wishful self-deception, a way of blinding himself to the dehumanizing horrors all around.

Levi's charge looks to be ethical in character. But there is no indication that there is some particular moral duty he thinks Kuhn should instead have been performing: for example, doing something to help Beppo. Levi's charge appears instead to rely on a more general idea of ethically appropriate comportment. In a preliminary way, we can formulate this idea as the claim that, in the face of the reality of evil, a person should properly acknowledge this reality in how she responds to it. We shall need to ask what this requirement really comes to. But, as a first approximation, we can say that, from Levi's perspective, Kuhn represents, in the face of evil, a *failure of ethical acknowledgement*.

¹ Levi 1959, 151-152.

So understood, we can ask whether Levi's charge can be generalized. That is: in the face of evil, are expressions of religious devotion inherently failures of ethical acknowledgement? It should be clear that no answer to this general question follows directly from Levi's charge against Kuhn. For, consistently with Levi's description, it may be that, far from being exemplary, Kuhn's prayer was an inauthentic expression of religious devotion – surely understandable given this man's awful predicament, but no true reflection of the essence of the religious. However, examples such as the one Levi describes might be given to support this more general suspicion: that practices of religious devotion unethically gloss over the awful reality of evil. Thus, Adorno:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims: they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.²

At least in contexts of monotheistic religion, it is plausible that authentic religious devotion cannot but express itself in such attitudes as thankfulness, hope and trust in divine providence. If so, then Adorno's claim – that, after Auschwitz, we rightly balk at any such affirmation of 'the positivity of existence' in the light of 'an affirmatively posited transcendence' – amounts to a direct attack on these forms of religious life in general. For his part, Levi's charge against Kuhn likewise clearly reflects a general suspicion about expressions of religious devotion. 'If for no other reason than that Auschwitz existed', he wrote, 'no one in our age should speak of Providence'.³

So, Levi and Adorno press a certain sort of general challenge against at least some forms of religious life. We might roughly articulate this challenge as follows:

² Adorno 2007 [1966], 361.

³ Levi 1959, 188.

(The Ethical Argument from Evil)

- (1) Religious devotion constitutively involves practices that express such attitudes as thankfulness, hope and trust in divine providence.
- (2) In the face of the reality of evil, or of certain horrendous evils, any such expression of religious devotion could only constitute a failure of ethical acknowledgement.

So, religious devotion constitutively involves failures of ethical acknowledgement.

My aim in the remainder of this paper is to consider the challenge to religious belief this argument presents. For the purposes of this discussion, it will be important to bear in mind the following preliminary points.

Firstly, we should notice what the Ethical Argument takes as its target. This is not, directly, God's existence but instead the attitudes and practices constitutive of religious belief and religious life. This marks a contrast with 'the problem of evil' under its more familiar guises. In the tradition of Hume, as inherited for instance by J. L. Mackie or William Rowe, arguments from evil purport to show that God does not exist or, at least, probably not.⁴ The Ethical Argument is different. Even if we make the (contestable) assumption that religious life stands or falls with the proposition that God exists, this argument does not try to refute this proposition directly but attacks instead the practices that express the believer's commitment to it. What is at issue here is what might be called 'the ethics of religious belief', where here the term 'belief' encompasses not just the abstract contents of a person's beliefs – propositions, doctrines, logical entailments of doctrines and the like – but whatever serves to give concrete expression to her beliefs in a person's life.

Secondly, we should note that, for the Ethical Argument to get off the ground, the scope of its first premise may need to be restricted. It is not clear that Buddhist devotional practices, for example, need involve anything like trust in divine

⁴ Hume 2022 [1779]; Mackie 1955; Rowe 1979.

providence.⁵ Under a restriction to Christianity, by contrast, the premise looks eminently plausible: the claim, that is, that religious devotion constitutively involves such attitudes as thankfulness, hope and trust. Consider, for instance, such Apostolic injunctions as these: 'In everything give thanks' (1 Thess. 5:18); 'Set your minds on things above' (Col. 3:2); 'Be anxious for nothing' (Phil. 4:6); 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!' (Phil. 4:4). As I shall argue below, it will be part of a proper assessment of the Ethical Argument to consider what it might mean truly to heed such injunctions. But it should be uncontentious that it is part of major forms of religious devotion to find ways to express thankfulness to God, for example, or trust in divine providence.

Thirdly, as stated, the scope of the argument may, in another way, be too narrow. For, to cast it in terms of what constitutes (certain forms of) religious devotion may obscure the possibility of a parallel challenge to what Adorno calls 'claims for the positivity of existence' even when these claims do not involve any 'affirmatively posited transcendence'. There is here a certain ambiguity in Adorno's remarks. Is he saying that Auschwitz makes a mockery of any stance that affirms a *transcendent* source of hope? Or is his claim that Auschwitz makes a mockery of *any* hopeful or otherwise affirmative orientation toward the world? Nietzsche appears to be a clear example of a thinker who, in the face of suffering, sought to affirm life, but without the help of any 'affirmatively posited transcendence'. We should therefore not rule out from the outset a parallel form of criticism of non-religious (at any rate, non-transcendent) ideals of life-affirmation, that these gloss over evil in ethically problematic ways, whether this criticism is raised in an historically unindexed way or, with Adorno, always under the qualification, 'after Auschwitz'.

Finally, we should recognize that, at this stage of our discussion, the idea of a 'failure of ethical acknowledgement' remains obscure. Levi's description of Kuhn suffices, I hope, to give us an initial handle on what might count as an example of such failure. But it will also need to be part of our assessment of the Ethical Argument to clarify what can count as a failure of ethical acknowledgement.

⁵ For an account of Buddhism as 'a religion of hope', see, however, Gómez 2000.

What should we make of the Ethical Argument from evil? My first aim in what follows is to make it plausible that, in the context of discussions of 'the problem of evil', assessing this argument is a task that philosophers of religion ought to be taking up. I shall argue for this on the grounds that what too often goes missing in discussions of the problem of evil is its ineliminably ethical dimension.

§2 The ethical challenge and 'the problem of evil'

Consider another figure with whom we may plausibly associate an ethical challenge to religious belief: Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov. Having detailed horribly vivid examples of innocent suffering, Ivan brings his argument to a head:

Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' When the mother embraces the tormentor who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will come and everything will be explained. But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony ... [f]or the love of humanity I don't want it ... I would rather remain with unavenged suffering and unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have piut too high a price on harmony, we cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket. And if I am an honest man I am obligated to return it as soon as possible. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return to him the ticket.⁶

Despite being routinely invoked in the literature, it is arguable that the distinctiveness of Ivan's way of articulating the problem of evil has not been well appreciated. An argument for this is as follows. It is standardly assumed that, were a persuasive theodicy forthcoming, this would be sufficient to resolve the problem of

⁶ Dostoevsky 2011 [1879], 212 (emphasis in original).

evil. And it is likewise assumed that, short of a theodicy, establishing only the possibility of a theodicy, 'for all we know', would be enough to block arguments for the incompatibility of God and evil.⁷ Naturally, doubts continue to be raised about the various theodicies and defences so far thought up. But, against this backdrop, what is striking about Ivan's standpoint is the way he takes himself to be in a position to grant *any theodicy you like*. God may have his reasons. But Ivan will still insist that, in the face of the awful suffering of just one innocent child, it would be unethical for *him*, Ivan, to hope for, or to benefit from, a happy ending or to affirm any reasons God may have for allowing the suffering to happen. To deploy the terminology we introduced above, this would for him evidently amount to a failure of ethical acknowledgement. It is therefore on *ethical* grounds that, in the famous gesture, he respectfully returns the ticket.

Viewed in this way, Ivan's discourse on the sufferings of innocents offers more than a quotable pre-theoretical take on the problem of evil, which can then be made precise by philosophers, in terms of an inconsistency internal to religious belief or in terms of evidence against such belief. The point here is not just that Ivan's concerns are ethically inflected. The point is the primacy of this dimension of the problem as he sees it: for him, the ethical problem remains *even on the assumption of the availability of a true theodicy*. *A fortiori*, the problem remains if all we have is a defence of the possibility of a theodicy, which is what so-called 'skeptical theists' insist is all we possibly could have, given that we mortals are in no position to fathom the mind of God.⁸ Ivan's radical objection to religious belief is therefore impervious to standard theistic responses to the problem of evil.

Now it is true that, in some quarters of the philosophy of religion, suspicions have long been raised about the ethics of theodicy. While his more recent advocacy of a *felix culpa* theodicy suggests a change of heart, even so central a figure within the mainstream debates as Alvin Plantinga once disowned theodicies as generally 'shallow, tepid and ultimately frivolous'.⁹ In his valuable study, *The End of the*

⁷ On the contrast between a theodicy and a defence see Plantinga 1974, 28ff.

⁸ For an overview of 'skeptical theism', as a response to the problem of evil, see Dougherty 2011, 561ff.

⁹ Plantinga 1996, 70.

Philosophy of Religion, Nick Trakakis can draw on many more trenchantly expressed worries about the ethics of theodicy.¹⁰ These include the following:

A theodist who, intentionally or inadvertently, formulates doctrines which occlude the radical and ruthless particularity of human evil is, by implication, mediating a social and political practice which averts its gaze from the cruelties that exist in the world.¹¹

With Ivan in mind, such pronouncements might look like bad news for the believer: not only does she face the problem of evil, as a logical or epistemic problem, but her opponent may also have strongly felt ethical grounds to reject in principle any solution she might propose.¹² But this lesson is not always the one that philosophers have drawn from worries about the ethics of theodicy. On the contrary, some who present themselves as sympathetic to religious belief have argued that believers rationally can, and ethically should, reject the whole project of trying to justify the ways of God. According to D. Z. Phillips, for instance, believers are lead down the path of theodicy without good reason and under an illusion: viz. that the 'problem of evil' is a genuine philosophical problem, standing in need of a solution.¹³ In a view like Phillips', there is simply no need for believers to sully themselves with theodicies since the real difficulties are really only practical or pastoral, not properly philosophical. Accordingly, for philosophers, what is needed is not a solution but Wittgensteinian therapy; for the rest, appropriate spiritual counsel.¹⁴

Let me then outline a case for thinking that, as standardly formulated, the problem of evil does not require a direct solution, that is, the provision of a theodicy

¹⁰ Trakakis 2011.

¹¹ Surin 1986, 71. Cf. Tilley 1991.

¹² This way of trying to close off from the outset the very possibility of a theistic response the problem of evil is considered and rejected in van Inwagen 2006, 58ff.

¹³ Phillips 2004.

¹⁴ Compare Genia Schönbaumsfeld's sharp contrast between 'the kind of problem that can be solved intellectually' and the problem of evil as 'an *existential* problem whose solution consists in its dissolution' (Schönbaumsfeld 2018, 105).

or, minimally, a defence of the possibility of a theodicy.¹⁵ *Contra* Phillips, my claim will be that, even if we grant this case, the ethical problem still stands.

As it is standardly formulated, the problem of evil comes in two variants. In the one – the so-called logical problem – the religious believer is charged with formal inconsistency: belief in ‘the God of classical theism’ is alleged to be inconsistent with the belief that evil exists. In the other variant – the so-called evidential problem – evidence of seemingly gratuitous evil in the world is marshalled to render God’s existence unlikely. In response to these two sorts of challenge, is there then available to the believer any other response than to try to provide a theodicy or, at least, a defence of the possibility of a theodicy?¹⁶

In the case of the logical problem, there is a way for the believer simply to side-step the challenge. As its advocates have long recognized, this problem gets off the ground only if, in addition to the tenets of ‘Classical Theism’ – that there exists a being that is supremely good, wise and powerful – and in addition to the proposition that evil exists, we add some auxiliary propositions. Mackie famously proposed two such additions: (i) any good thing eliminates evil so far as it can; and (ii) there are no (non-logical) limits on what an omnipotent being could do. As R. F. Holland once observed, however, it is open to the believer in response to Mackie, instead of trying to refute them, simply to refuse to assent to one or both of these additional propositions.¹⁷ So long as she does not assert them, she, the believer, could not be charged with formal inconsistency. She might, moreover, try to justify her reticence as a principled stance. She might, for example, own scruples about assuming the moral authority to judge whether or not God ought to eliminate evil, in a given case or in general – as though, as Holland put it, God were just another member of the moral community.¹⁸ And she might add that the fact that such scruples are not of course felt by her atheist opponent only goes to reveal the extent

¹⁵ The following paragraphs are not offered as a reconstruction of any arguments in Phillips but instead represent my own defence of the claim that, in its standard formulations, the problem of evil admits of being reasonably side-stepped or diffused.

¹⁶ With critical reference to Phillips 2004, William Hasker has defended a negative answer to this question (Hasker 2007).

¹⁷ Holland 1980.

¹⁸ Holland 1980, 238-9. Cf Davies 2006, 104ff.

to which, in this context of argumentation, such additional propositions as the ones Mackie proposed are tendentious, that is, biased toward atheism.¹⁹

This stance of principled reticence is not likewise available in the case of the evidential arguments. For these arguments do not have the form of the *reductio* and are in no way *ad hominum*. But there may be other ways for believers to defuse the challenge these arguments present rather than to refute their premises or block their inferences. There is indeed a case that the believer can simply concede these arguments but deny that they give her good reasons to give up her faith. Arguably, for example, the believer can reasonably remain sanguine about Bayesian calculations that, considering an evidence-base comprised only of some set of seemingly pointless evils in the world, the probability of 'the God hypothesis' is < 0.5. For, whoever thought that faith is rational on a narrow conception of rationality in terms of risk-averse probability calculations? One does not have to be a radical fideist to see the force of the point made by Rabbi Sacks when he describes faith as 'the defeat of probability by the power of possibility', adding that 'all the great human achievements, in art and science as well as the life of the spirit, came through people who ignored the probable and had faith in the possible.'²⁰ Indeed, on Lara Buchak's careful analysis, faith is sometimes rational precisely because it is sometimes rational not to make one's commitments hostage to revisions on the basis of probability assignments.²¹

Suppose, then, we grant that the logical and evidential formulations of the problem can be diffused in the ways just outlined. Should we conclude that there is no philosophical problem of evil? That would be too quick. For, we still need to ask whether the Ethical Argument – as suggested by the formulations of Levi, Adorno and Dostoevsky's Ivan – identifies a genuine philosophical problem. *Pace* Phillips,

¹⁹ It is a stock complaint about Wittgensteinian appeals to how religious ideas are actually deployed by religious folk that the ultra-subtle (if not crypto-atheistic) views of those who make such appeals are often, in truth, very distant from those of ordinary believers. Though perhaps sometimes warranted, this complaint would be misplaced here. For we are envisaging the believer replying to Mackie in roughly the following way: "Sure, I believe in a God who is really there and who is perfectly good, wise and powerful. But what you say about how such a being must behave – well, I wouldn't want to say that!"

²⁰ Sacks 2021, 100.

²¹ Buchak 2012.

and premature reports of the end of the philosophy of religion, I think there are *prima facie* reasons to answer this question in the affirmative.

Phillips does not consider as such the possibility of a distinctly ethical challenge to religious belief from evil. But what seems to follow from a view like his is that the Ethical Argument could amount, at most, to a practical and pastoral problem, not a genuinely philosophical one. This verdict looks to rest on an unduly narrow idea of a philosophical problem.²² For, the difficulty articulated by the Ethical Argument can be presented as follows. In the face of evil – one may say, in the face of Auschwitz – how can it be possible for there to be religious expressions of thankfulness, say, or hope or trust, that do not unethically gloss over this reality? This *how-possible* question no doubt has a practical dimension. Thus, in a given situation, a believer might find herself at a loss how she could give fitting expression to her religious beliefs. But the question also has a theoretical aspect. In the face of atheistic or agnostic skepticism about this possibility, believers face a challenge of showing that and why such skepticism is unwarranted.

We can think of the theoretical aspect of this challenge as a problem of compossibility. The challenge is to show how a person could at once acknowledge the full reality of evil while expressing religious devotion: for a person at a time, how can these things both be possible, that is, compossible? Consider an analogy with Moore's paradox: 'p but I don't believe that p'.²³ On a plausible story about what makes Moore sentences puzzling, the impression of paradox arises because of the logical compatibility of two propositions that nonetheless appear to be impossibly expressed by a single person in the present tense: that p and that she does not believe that p. By analogy, the Ethical Argument hinges not on a question of logical compatibility but of the compossibility of expressed beliefs or attitudes. Those who press this argument can therefore grant the merely logical compatibility of the propositions, 'evil exists' and 'God is good'; what they deny is the compossibility of practices that genuinely express commitment to these

²² Specifically, this narrow idea is one in which philosophical problems are insulated from ethical and existential concerns. Phillips expressly advances such a conception as philosophy's 'cool place' (Phillips 1999). Cf. Rudd 2005.

²³ e.g. Moore 1942, 543.

propositions. Indeed, from the standpoint of the Ethical Argument, the analogy with Moore's paradox is close: from this perspective, it is quite as though the religious believer were practically trying to express the stance, 'evil exists, but I don't believe it'.

These points suggest an interpretation of standard logical and evidential formulations of the problem of evil as two ways of abstracting from the root problem. On this suggestion, the logical problem attests to, but abstracts from, a fundamental worry about the coherence of religious belief with the full recognition of evil's reality. The risk of distortion here consists in treating the problem as one of merely logical compatibility, where this abstracts from the ways in which beliefs manifest themselves *in concreto*. The evidential problem, by contrast, attests to, but abstracts from, the ethically inflected demand that we properly acknowledge the reality in our world of manifold terrible and seemingly pointless evils. The risk of distortion here consists in treating this demand as though it were merely epistemic, solely a matter of warrant or justification for positing God's existence. But this is all the more reason to suppose that, even if the believer is able to diffuse standard formulations of the problem of evil, she is not yet off the hook: for the worry about incoherence in her lived commitments, and the demand to do justice to reality, may yet remain.

In sum, neglect for the ethical dimensions of the problem of evil is deleterious, for three reasons. Firstly, when the problem is presented as an attack on religious belief, it is unsafe to assume that a theodicy – or, minimally, a defence of the possibility of a theodicy – would suffice to meet the attack. For, as the case of Dostoevsky's Ivan shows, these types of response to the problem fail to engage with its ineliminably ethical dimension. (To borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, method and problem here pass one another by.²⁴) Secondly, religious believers may have their own ethical reasons for declining demands to produce a theodicy. From the perspective of these reasons, such demands are tendentious. But thirdly, moreover, even if the believer can reasonably sidestep logical and evidential formulations of

²⁴ Wittgenstein 1958, 232.

the problem, eschewing the very idea of theodicy as unethical and unnecessary, the challenge articulated by the Ethical Argument still stands.

In the light of these considerations, we might venture the following hypothesis. Underlying the standard problem-of-evil debates is a more or less hidden stand-off: between ethical objections to religious belief and, on the other hand, the scruples a believer may feel about subjecting God to moral judgement. In my view, these debates are unlikely truly to advance unless and until these ethical dimensions are brought out into the open. But how then are we to proceed once the underlying issues are out?

§3 Toward a phenomenological approach: the case of thankful prayer

Let us return then to the Ethical Argument to consider more directly the challenge it presents. How can we assess the charge against religious life that it unethically glosses over the reality of evil? A method that suggests itself here is to try to produce descriptions of religious life to which this charge fails to stick. The assessment will then be whether these descriptions are fit for purpose – or whether, on the contrary, they either fail to describe genuine human possibilities or remain vulnerable to the kinds of worries pressed by Levi, Adorno and Dostoevsky's Ivan. Part of what will need to be assessed here is what it really means to avoid glossing over the reality of evil in unethical ways.

Another way to put this methodological proposal is that, with the ethical problem of evil more sharply in focus, it becomes clear that this is an area in which the philosophy of religion needs to take a phenomenological turn. Merold Westphal helpfully introduces the general idea of the phenomenology of religion with reference to the question, 'What does it mean to be religious?'.²⁵ This question and approach shifts attention away from debates for and against the proposition that God exists and toward the practices and attitudes that constitute various kinds of religious devotion. Among its topics are religious practices of hope, patience, sacrifice, worship, lamentation and so forth. In the remainder of this paper, I shall

²⁵ Westphal 1984, 1.

offer a contribution in just one of these areas: the case of thankful prayer. With Levi's censure of Kuhn in mind, we can focus the issues that concern us here on the question: under conditions of horrendous evil, could there be thankful prayer without failure of ethical acknowledgement? What would such prayer have to be like?

To broach these questions, we need a better idea of what we are assessing when we ask whether something involves a failure of ethical acknowledgement. Taking a cue from Levi's description of Kuhn, and adopting a virtue-theoretical framework, I propose the following working account. Something will exhibit a failure of ethical acknowledgement, in the face of evil, to the extent that it exhibits one or both of two vices. The first vice is *wishful self-deception*. As Levi sees it, Kuhn's prayer involves wishfully pretending that the situation has redeeming features: specifically, that he has not been chosen that day for the gas-chamber. From Levi's perspective, this is of course no redeeming feature of the situation: the good for which Kuhn gives thanks is an illusion. 'Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn?' – plausibly, Levi thinks he does realize this, but his posture of thankful prayer betrays his desire to repress what he knows. The second vice is what we might call *spiritualized self-absorption*. Again, in Levi's view, Kuhn's prayer indulges the self-serving fantasy that he is somehow better placed than his fellow sufferers since, in this fantasy, God is sparing him from the horror facing them. But I take it that Levi's objection here is not just to the content of Kuhn's prayer but to his whole demeanor while praying. Swaying and muttering, Kuhn literally closes his eyes to the horrors all around, withdrawing into himself and a fantasy of aloofness.

Our question, then, is whether, in the face of evil, expressions of religious gratitude can avoid these twin pitfalls. For help with this question, I propose to turn to Kierkegaard's devotional writings: in the first instance, to the first of his trilogy of discourses on a favourite Biblical text, 'Every good and perfect gift comes from above' (James 1:17).²⁶ This discourse features a novel application of the Euthyphro Dilemma to the question of how a person can come to regard anything as a good gift

²⁶ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 31-48.

from God. If X is a good gift from God then either X is willed by God because it is a good gift or X is a good gift just because God wills it as such. Either way, Kierkegaard argues, we may find ourselves at a loss how to assess whether, for any x, X is a good gift from God. Typifying a voice of perplexity and doubt, in response to words of the Apostle, he summarizes the dilemma as follows:

“What does this mean? What else but that everything that comes from God is a good and perfect gift, and that everything that is a good and perfect gift is from God.” This explanation certainly is simple and natural, and yet doubt has craftily concealed itself in it. Consequently, it goes on: “Therefore, if a person is able to find peace in these words in his lifetime, he must be able to decide either what it is that comes from God or what may legitimately and truly be termed a good and perfect gift. But how is this possible? Is every human life, then, a continuous chain of miracles? Or is it possible for a human being’s understanding to make its way through the incalculable series of secondary causes and effects, to penetrate everything in between, and in that way find God? Or is it possible for a human being to decide with certainty what is a good and perfect gift for him? Does it not run aground on this again and again?”²⁷

Now, one suggestion might be that the believer can solve the problem by judging *everything* to be, in the final analysis, good: whether by adopting some theodicy according to which every apparent evil is a necessary part of some greater good, given some independent criterion of the good, or by supposing that everything is willed by God. By this solution, the believer can then give thanks for literally everything that befalls her, under the supposition that everything is in some way good or an expression of God’s will. Epictetus illustrates the latter possibility: if we attain the right perspective on the whole, and not just our place within it, so he claimed, ‘it is easy for a man to find occasion to praise providence’.²⁸

²⁷ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 41.

²⁸ Cited in Allen 1990, 189.

But Kierkegaard does not take this Stoic route. Envisaging a different interpretation of his Biblical text to the one he associates with doubt, he asks:

And when your wish was denied, did you thank God? And when people wronged you and insulted you, did you thank God? We are not saying that the wrong thereby ceased to be wrong – what would be the use of such pernicious and foolish talk! It is up to you to decide whether it was wrong; but have you taken the wrong and insult to God and by your thanksgiving received it from his hand as a good and perfect gift?²⁹

Contrary to the idea that we should somehow try to affirm everything as good, Kierkegaard thinks it would be pernicious and foolish to say that, in order to remain thankful, a person should try to convince herself that a wrong was not really a wrong, for example, or to try to pretend to be pleased when the desires of her heart are left unsatisfied.

So, what *is* Kierkegaard's solution? Crucially, he rejects the assumption on which the dilemma relies: the assumption, that is, that thankfulness is conditional on prior judgements about what is good or willed by God. His answer relies instead on an idea of the transformative power of gratitude itself. He argues that the very expression of thanks, even in the face of that which one regards as evil in itself, can help the believer to hold on to a perspective in which her good is not hostage to fortune. Again, the claim here is not that thankfulness transforms the evil into a good but rather that it transforms the believer's perspective, by helping her to receive what befalls her in a new way.

This idea of the transformative power of gratitude presupposes that our default perspective is to identify the human good with our finite, worldly goods. To the extent that we find our desires satisfied, our sufferings minimal, our achievements amply recognized in the world, then, from this default perspective, our lives are going well. Unconditional gratitude undercuts this whole outlook and

²⁹ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 43.

orientation. By refusing to base itself on judgements about what counts as good, such gratitude discloses the human good under an 'eternal' aspect, that is, as such as to transcend the whole scene of worldly fortune and misfortune. For the believer, this transformation of values may in turn help to make possible a radical kind of joy and peace – the kind that 'passes all understanding' (Phil 4:17).

In the way he presents it, Kierkegaard is careful to block any tendency we may have to conflate this idea of the transformative power of unconditional gratitude with the notion that evils are in general justified because they provide good opportunities for learning and character-development. He writes:

Is it not true, my listener, that you interpreted those apostolic words in this way and that you were not baffled about what was a good and perfect gift or about what came from God, because every gift, you said, is good if it is received with thankfulness from the hand of God, and from God comes every good and perfect gift ... You interpreted the apostolic words in the expanding of your heart. You did not insist on learning much from life; you wished to learn but one thing: always to thank God, and thereby to learn to understand one thing: that all things serve for good to those who love God.³⁰

Contra 'vale of soul-making' styles of theodicy, keeping thankful is not about learning from the hard school of life or seizing opportunities for moral heroism.³¹ It is instead an 'expanding of the heart' in which a person refuses to let her good be defined by how things turn out for her in the world.

For Kierkegaard, then, the fundamental mistake is to think we must first sort the good from the evil in our lives before giving thanks. If we give thanks only for the finite things we confidently deem good, he thinks, this will express a merely conditional, 'worldly' sort of gratitude, apt perhaps for some human-to-human transactions, but out of place in a person's relationship to God. In the most

³⁰ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 42.

³¹ For an expressly non-Christian 'vale of soul-making' theodicy, see Keats 2002 [1819], 290ff. John Hick's well-known version takes its inspiration from Irenaeus (Hick 1981).

uncompromising version of this claim, if our gratitude is conditional on what we deem good, its object cannot truly be *God*. Simone Weil puts the point a little more cautiously: 'Love of God is pure', she writes, 'when joy and suffering inspire an equal degree of gratitude.'³²

In Kierkegaard's description of the ideally thankful person, is this person guilty of wishful self-deception? Naturally, it follows from atheism that any putative relationship to God is deluded. But if one's aim is to press the Ethical Argument as an attack on religious belief, any such appeal to atheism would of course be question-begging. (Notably, Dostoevsky's Ivan and Levi couch their objections in ways that do not presuppose atheism but work instead in a mode of internal critique.³³) The germane question is whether, in Kierkegaard's description, the thankful person wishfully regards the situation as better than it is. It seems clear he would answer this question in the negative. As we have emphasized, he thinks the ideally thankful person can and should continue to recognize evil as evil while, through her unconditional gratitude, seeking not to allow it to fill her horizon. Unlike Kuhn in Levi's description, she does not pretend that her situation has redeeming features. Rather, she seeks a transformed perspective in which her circumstances cannot rob her of felicity, unremittingly bad as she may deem them to be in themselves.

Still, it might be objected there remains a kind of wishfulness in Kierkegaardian thankfulness: the wish, as we might describe it, not to think too long or too hard about whether one's experiences truly admit of being interpreted as expressions of God's love. Some of Kierkegaard's formulations may suggest the thankful person ideally suspends or 'brackets' the question of whether the object of her thanks is good or evil, refusing to attend to this question, turning to it a blind eye, trying to be grateful regardless. And we could envisage Levi complaining that, for a person in Kuhn's plight, this could only mean refusing truly to face up to the dehumanizing horror of the situation.

³² Weil 2002 [1947], 63.

³³ This may also be true of Adorno, whose negativism is sometimes associated with apophatic theology rather than atheism (Brittain 2010).

Kierkegaard's discourses elsewhere contain resources which help to address this concern. These include his reflections on Jesus' Gethsemane prayer, '[I]f it is possible, Father, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will be done but yours.' For Kierkegaard, far from sidelining the questions whether the cup is bitter and whether it is the Father's will, Jesus here models 'the praying question and the questioning prayer'.³⁴ Likewise, we may suppose that, in his view of the ideally thankful person, prayers of unconditional gratitude in the face of evil are also praying questions and questioning prayers. Rather than turning a blind eye, such prayer seeks honestly to acknowledge the reality of evil and one's lived experience of it.

We may also add here that it would surely be harsh to blame any ordinary human for flinching in the face of anything approaching Kuhn's situation. Notably, while Levi seems to compare him favorably to Kuhn, Beppo's blank stare also appears to be a kind of defence against the horror. Worries about wishful thinking should not be pressed too hard.

But the worry may return in a different way. Granted that, in the face of evil, Kierkegaard's ideally thankful person would not pretend the situation is better than it is, would she not nonetheless pretend her *response* to the situation is better than it is? Would she not, as we say, be making a virtue out of a necessity? Kierkegaard anticipates this objection also. Of one who responds to unavoidable suffering in patient acceptance, he writes: 'Undeniably, he is making a virtue out of necessity, that is just the secret, that is certainly a most accurate expression of what he does ... he brings a determination of freedom out of that which is determined as necessity ... [a]nd it is just there that the healing power of the decision for the Eternal resides: that the sufferer may voluntarily accept the compulsory suffering.'³⁵ For Kierkegaard, however, this response is wishful and self-deceptive only on the assumption that the human good really is hostage to fortune. But religious life consists precisely in rejecting this outlook in favour of 'the decision for the Eternal', that is, by adopting an eternal perspective on life's slings and arrows.

³⁴ Kierkegaard 1993 [1847], 255

³⁵ Kierkegaard 1948 [1847], 175. Cf. Kierkegaard 1993 [1847] 119-120.

What of the concern about spiritualized self-absorption? On the face of it, there is much in Kierkegaard to fuel the worry. Is he not the champion of ‘hidden inwardness’? And does not his vision of religious life idolize the solitary individual, ripped out from the crowd, alone before God? And have we not just seen him advocate for the inner citadel, in which individuals shield themselves from what is really going on around them? For many of his readers – Adorno and Buber among them – Kierkegaard is indeed to be censured for the way he valorizes retreat from the public world.³⁶ Must we then suppose that his only reply to this sort of complaint is to insist that, from the standpoint of ethics and public reason, religious life is bound to look dubious since it relies on a teleological suspension of the ethical?

If we look beyond the caricatures, and turn back to Kierkegaard’s discourses, a different picture emerges. The third in his 1843 trilogy of discourses on James 1 focuses on the way that, from the teaching that every good gift comes from above, James directly draws conclusions about *human* relationships. Kierkegaard writes:

The same apostle ... warns in the very next passage against the worldly endeavors that sought to penetrate also the congregation in order to establish difference and distinction in the service of vanity, to emancipate it from the bond of perfection that knits its members together in equality before God ... [I]n the world, external life takes arrogant pride in differences – or cravenly and worriedly sighs under them. But in the hallowed place, the voice of the ruler is heard no more than in the grave; there is no difference between man and woman ... There even the teacher is the servant, and the greatest is the lowliest, and the most powerful person in the world is the one who needs intercessory prayer more than anyone else; there every externality is discarded as imperfect, and equality is true for all, redeeming and equally redeeming.³⁷

³⁶ See e.g. Buber 2002 [1936]. Compare the use of the term ‘Innere Emigration’, as coined by Frank Thiess, to describe the withdrawal from public life of some among the intellectuals who remained in Germany between 1933 and 1945 (see Klieneberger 1965).

³⁷ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 141.

Kierkegaard goes on to argue that the perspective in which every good gift comes from above is inseparable from a spirit of willingness to give to others: sacrificially, uncalculatingly, and without respect to 'worldly' status and success. His guiding thought is that taking refuge in God's love, come what may, cannot be dissociated from loving other human beings just as such.³⁸ Seen as those who equally depend on God for every good gift, we all share in the equality 'that does not allow any human being to be another's debtor', as Kierkegaard puts it – 'except, as Paul says, in the one debt, the debt of loving one another'.³⁹

In Kierkegaard's account, then, true thankfulness is always also an expression of our human equality before God. Under conditions of dehumanization, unconditional thankful prayer is a way to hold onto the value of one's own humanity but also, and by the same token, to the humanity in others. In the parable, the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like the others. Kierkegaard would no doubt find such prayer repugnant, no less than Levi. But from Kierkegaard's perspective, to reject the religious on these grounds would be to mistake the semblance for the reality, where true thankfulness always punctures our fantasies of self-aggrandizement and holds us open to our common humanity.

Should friends of the Ethical Argument be moved by these Kierkegaardian reflections? Perhaps in the end the deepest reason why Levi reacts so vehemently against Kuhn's prayer is his perception that this putatively religious exercise all too painfully exhibits how far Kuhn has internalized his dehumanizing treatment at the hands of the Nazi oppressors. Kierkegaard would surely be sensitive to this kind of concern. As we have noted, his account of unconditional thankfulness is closely bound up with the aim to keep ourselves open to our human dignity and common humanity. This account no doubt raises many further questions, however: not least, whether unconditional thankfulness is a genuine human possibility. Given that such thankfulness is not based on judgements about what is good or what expresses God's will, *for what*, exactly, does his ideally thankful person give thanks? And how

³⁸ For an account of how care for others in their common humanity enters into Kierkegaard's ethics, see Stern and Watts 2024.

³⁹ Kierkegaard 1990 [1843], 158; Rom 13:8.

in the end can such thankfulness differ from an attitude of world-weary resignation? A related issue is a problem of motivation: what kind of reason could a person possibly have in the first place to adopt an attitude of unconditional gratitude? Could there be any reason other than the desire to manage disappointment?

A phenomenological defence of religious life against the Ethical Argument from evil would need answers to such questions. But my own claim here is modest: that Kierkegaard's portrayal of religious gratitude furnishes an object of assessment of the right sort: that is, suitable to help us assess the ethical problem of evil.

Afterword

My aim in this paper has been to bring into focus the Ethical Argument from evil, to bring out its probative force, and to begin to bring to bear a phenomenological approach to the issues it raises. But I would like to add a disclaimer. I write here as a professional philosopher. I do not write as an authoritative witness to the possibility of authentic faith under anything like the conditions recalled in Levi's *If This is a Man*. There are indeed holocaust survivors who have testified to this possibility.⁴⁰ And if, to echo Ricoeur, the phenomenology of religion is in general governed by the aim to let the believing soul speak, it seems to me that any phenomenological approach to the problem of evil will at some point need to give way to those who have truly earned the right to speak.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ For some moving testimonies, see Phillips 2004, 209ff.

⁴¹ Ricoeur 1967, 19. This paper has benefited from conversations with David Batho, Matteo Falomi, Fabian Freyenhagen, Béatrice Han-Pile, Mark Johnston, Timo Jütten, Wayne Martin, and Mark Wrathall. Thanks also to participants in various meetings at Aix-en-Provence, Essex, Oxford, and Sheffield.

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