

Theodicy, Christology, and Divine Hiding: Neutralizing the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

This article neutralizes the intellectual problem of evil regarding divine culpability. God, it contends, is morally permitted to hide from humans (a statement of) the full divine purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives, because it is morally too profound for them to understand properly now in a way that avoids counterproductive resistance to God and God's full purpose. Given human moral and cognitive limitations relative to God's superiority, we should not expect now to understand God's full purpose properly; nor therefore should humans expect God to reveal that purpose to them. New Testament Christology illustrates this lesson about the absence of a full theodicy for humans now, and thereby contributes to neutralizing the intellectual problem of evil by removing a false expectation regarding God. The article distinguishes two kinds of theodicy, a *full-explanation theodicy* regarding God's full purpose and a *partial-justification theodicy* regarding God's hiding an explanation.

Keywords

Theodicy, Problem of Evil, Christology, Divine Hiding, Suffering, Resurrection

'Do you not care that we are perishing?' (Mark 4:38, NRSV)

Explaining God and Evil

Some theists find relief in saying that God *allows*, rather than *causes*, evil and its resulting suffering. This is cold comfort regarding God's moral character, however, because God would be morally responsible for what God allows as well as what God causes (that is, for allowing it rather than causing it, in cases where God is not the cause). So, God must have a higher moral end in allowing evil and its suffering for

humans. Can defenders of God's moral character be completely in the dark about that end? If they are, should they be agnostic about (part of) God's moral character? Even if they lack a full theodicy, they should have something illuminating to say about God's higher moral end, or at least about God's not revealing that end now to humans. If they have nothing to say, they will invite a recommendation of agnosticism about (an aspect of) God's moral character.

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Many theists look for a higher moral end in God's seeking to build human moral character, that is, in 'soul-making',¹ but we have no settled account in this area. James S. Stewart explains:

We are still left with the question whether God could not have brought his sons and daughters to the same goal by some less tragic road. It is not the fact of suffering that baffles us, for we can see that we need it; it is the frightful excess of the thing which seems so cruel and senseless and superfluous. If God intends [human] sanctification, why could he not have thought out some kindlier way?²

Stewart raises a difficult question for any effort toward a full theodicy. In addition, much human suffering yields despair, including despair about God's reality or goodness, rather than an improved moral character. So, a rationally compelling theodicy would require more than an appeal to a divine purpose to build human moral character. The same holds for such divine purposes as challenging human sin, awakening human conscience, converting humans to God, and promoting human solidarity.

After trying to identify God's purposes in allowing his suffering, Job confessed: 'I have uttered what I did not understand (יָדַעְתִּי), things too wonderful (וְנִסְיָנוֹת) for me, which I did not know' (Job 42:3; NRSV here and in what follows). The apostle Paul echoed the general attitude of Job toward God's apparently severe ways: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable (ἀνεξεραύνητα) are his judgments and how inscrutable (ἀνεξιχνίαστοι) his ways!' (Rom. 11:33). The responses of Job and Paul suggest a question: Why do humans not (fully) understand why God, if real, allows all of the unjust suffering and evil in their lives (even if they understand the purposes behind *some* unjust suffering and evil)? If God chooses not

to reveal the divine purposes in allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives, we humans will have a hard time identifying them. Without divine revelation, we seem not to have access to those purposes; nor, without divine revelation, should we expect to have such access.

Three options arise for the lack of human understanding in question. First, the matter of God's allowing unjust suffering and evil is *constitutively complex* beyond our cognitive resources; its elaborate nature, in virtue of its many parts and their interconnections, outstrips what we comprehend in our cognitive limitations. Second, the matter is *morally profound* beyond our moral depth; it has a moral *gravitas* beyond our own. Job confesses lack of understanding on the ground that the relevant things are 'too wonderful (or marvelous)' for him, and Paul remarks on the 'depth (βάθος)' of the relevant wisdom and knowledge of God. They seem not to be commenting on mere constitutive complexity in creation; instead, they seem to have in mind something closer to moral profundity in God's purposes. Third, God hides from humans at least some divine purposes in allowing unjust suffering and evil, and this concealment blocks full human understanding of the relevant divine purposes. In addition, it should block a human expectation to have such full understanding. This option can include the second option: God could hide a divine purpose because, upon being revealed to unprepared humans, its moral profundity would result in human distortion and resistance. This option also could acknowledge a partial role for constitutive complexity in the relevant lack of human understanding.

If we can explain why humans should not expect to understand the full purpose of God in allowing evil, we can remove the intellectual sting of their not (fully) understanding it. (The psychological sting, we shall see, is a separate matter.) Humans still will need the power to endure evil, but they will not need to suffer from a false expectation to understand now God's full purpose in allowing evil. Relief from that false expectation will disarm a common intellectual source of human resistance to God's

¹ See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd edn (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

² James S. Stewart, *The Strong Name* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1940), 161.

moral character and even God's reality. In that regard, we may consider the project at hand as *neutralizing* the problem of evil as an intellectual threat to human commitment to God.

We can look to New Testament Christology to illuminate our not having a full theodicy, despite the widespread neglect of this important connection. Even if we cannot identify God's higher moral end in allowing all of the unjust suffering and evil in human lives, we can, given a certain Christological lesson, identify God's purpose in *not revealing* that end prior to its fulfillment in human experience. One part of that purpose, we shall see, would be to have humans acquire a felt, sympathetic understanding of the relevant divine end through their experience of its fulfillment. This kind of understanding would differ from a merely verbal, conceptual, or intellectual understanding that fails to engage the affective or volitional center of a person. A related part of the divine purpose in not revealing, we shall see, would be God's desire to save humans from a certain kind of counterproductive resistance to God and God's ends. The resistance, stemming from inadequate sympathetic understanding at least, would include a life-directing objection to God's ends in allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives. We shall see that Jesus considered the resistance in question to be 'adversarial' or 'satanic' toward God in a manner to be identified.

A Christological Lesson

We sell New Testament Christology short when we limit its importance to atonement or redemption. It bears also on the intellectual problem of evil regarding God, particularly on the prospect for a full theodicy as an explanation of the full purpose in God's allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives. Its bearing on a full theodicy, and thus on God's alleged culpability in allowing evil, merits our attention. We shall see that an important lesson from Christology illuminates the absence of a full theodicy owing to human limitations in properly understanding some divine purposes.

Let's consider a pivotal exchange from Matthew's Gospel between Jesus and Peter:

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke [ἐπιτιμᾶν] him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things [οὐ φρονεῖς τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων].' (Matt. 16:21–23 closely following Mark 8:31–33).

Should God have allowed the unjust crucifixion of the innocent Jesus? Peter's explicit answer here: No. Jesus's implicit answer: Yes. We typical humans are Peter, in response to many cases of unjust suffering and evil. If Jesus is right, however, we often mind the wrong things (literally, 'the things of humans') and thus are not in a position to understand properly 'the things of God', particularly the divine purposes in allowing unjust suffering and evil. In case one misses the point, Mark's Gospel repeats that the disciples of Jesus did not 'understand (ἠγγνόουν)' Jesus's prediction of his death and resurrection (see Mark 9:32 cf. Mark 10:33–38).

Luke's Gospel reiterates the teaching of Mark's Gospel that the disciples did not understand (ἠγγνόουν) Jesus's prediction of his suffering. It adds: 'Its meaning was concealed (παρακεκαλυμμένον) from them, so that they could not perceive (αἰσθωνται) it' (Luke 9:45). Using the divine passive voice, Luke suggests that *God* intentionally concealed the meaning from the disciples. In concealing this meaning, God concealed the full divine purpose in allowing the innocent Jesus to suffer. So, the disciples lacked a full theodicy in connection with the unjust suffering of their Messiah. We can, and will, generalize on this case in connection with God's allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives in general and our lacking a full theodicy.

Following Mark's Gospel, Luke's Gospel reaffirms that the disciples lacked understanding of Jesus's prediction that he would suffer at human hands: 'They understood (συνήκαν) nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden (κεκρυμμένον) from them, and they did not grasp (ἐγίνωσκον) what was said' (Luke 18:34 cf. Luke 24:25–26). Again, Luke uses the divine passive to indicate that God hid the meaning of Jesus's prediction of suffering from the disciples. Clearly, God did not hide from the disciples the *statement* that Jesus will suffer; Jesus made the statement directly to them. Instead, God concealed both (a) *the meaning* of the statement with regard to God's full purpose for allowing the Messiah's suffering and (b) *the statement of that meaning* and purpose. The divine hiding of (a) and (b) leaves the disciples without a full theodicy for the death of their Messiah. They thus cannot explain why God did not choose a less destructive approach to the culmination of the earthly life of Jesus; nor can we.

Neither God nor Jesus offers anything near a full explanation of why Jesus would undergo, with God's allowance, unjust suffering and evil at human hands. Jesus does portray his own life and death as self-giving for others (Mark 10:45, 14:23–24 cf. Matt. 20:28, 26:27–28), but this broad portrayal falls short of a full explanation. The best account of this divine withholding of a full explanation is that the disciples were not *ready*, or *in a position*, to understand or otherwise handle it properly. Indeed, this is Jesus's suggestion in his aforementioned remark that the disciples mind, or value, human considerations in a manner at odds with properly minding, or valuing, the things of God (Mark 8:33, Matt. 16:23). Their inadequacy in minding the things of God colors their understanding of the relevant statements of Jesus in a way that leads to distortion and even counterproductive resistance.

One might suggest that Jesus himself lacked a full theodicy, in keeping with his cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34), but the matter is complicated. Jesus did not blame God for the evil in

and among humans (see Matt. 13:24–30). If the historical Jesus did not have a full theodicy, we might ask: Why is this? Further questions arise. Would Jesus, as a human, have properly understood God's full purpose? If not, why not? Was this due to a lack of perfect divine love? Did Jesus have to learn such love, as a work in progress, from the things he suffered? The author of the letter to the Hebrews claims that Jesus 'learned obedience through what he suffered', and (thereby) was 'made perfect' (τελειωθείς) (Heb. 5:8–9). Perhaps he has in mind a need to be made perfect in divine love and thereby in understanding. At any rate, it is doubtful that the historical Jesus had a full theodicy, and this would be in keeping with his avowedly limited knowledge (see Mark 13:32).

A relevant lesson of divine concealment emerges from Jesus's use of parables, according to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Mark 4:11–13; Matt. 13:13–15).³ The idea, drawn from Isaiah 6:10, is that God blocks understanding for those who are not in a position to respond properly. In the case of the parables, the uncomprehending audience consists of 'those outside (τοῖς ἔξω)' (Mark 4:11), whereas in the case of Jesus's prediction of suffering, the uncomprehending audience includes the disciples. Perhaps even the disciples can be 'outside' the position needed for properly understanding the prediction of Jesus's suffering, and therefore can be recipients of divine concealment. At least Luke's Gospel indicates as much, taking its lead from Mark 9:31–32.

Peter may get some of the language right in his confession of who Jesus is (Mark 8:29–30; Matt. 16:15–17), but his understanding seems to be largely verbal or conceptual. He evidently does not understand the full meaning involved in God's allowing the Messiah to suffer and die, and this leads to his rebuking Jesus and, in turn, to Jesus calling him 'satan'. We must ask

³ See Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977), and Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

whether we typical humans would have a similar problem if God now stated a full theodicy for unjust suffering and evil in human lives. I suspect that we would, given our cognitive and moral shortcomings in comparison with God's perfect moral character. Even so, we can appreciate, and perhaps even share, Peter's implicit protest that God should find a less destructive option for the culmination of the Messiah's earthly life. God *seems* to be allowing excessive suffering and destruction in this case, among many others.

Perhaps, like Peter, we can gain *some* needed (incomplete) understanding *after* the fulfillment of God's enacted plan in human experience, but, in any case, it often comes late if at all. We find an example of this in John's Gospel: 'The other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they [the disciples] did not understand (ἤδεισαν) the scripture, that he must rise from the dead' (John 20:9 cf. Luke 24:25–27). Their understanding was delayed, until the time of the experienced fulfillment of God's plan in their lives. God thus can withhold a full explanation of divine purposes before their fulfillment in human experience. We need to clarify why this is so.

Many people regard the crucifixion of Jesus as an unsurpassed injustice to an individual human, on the assumption that Jesus was innocent of wrongdoing. Stewart remarks that the 'Cross [of Jesus] itself was the problem of evil at its worst, the most unpardonable, desperate deed that ever defaced the page of history'.⁴ Jesus, however, does not offer Peter an answer to the question of why he would undergo a crucifixion allowed by God instead of a less vicious form of death. He reveals that he and his disciples will suffer, but not why he and they will suffer in the way indicated or why he and they will suffer as much as they will. In particular, Peter and the disciples receive no explanation of why the suffering allowed by God is morally fitting rather than excessive. We find a

similar situation in the calling of Saul of Tarsus: 'The Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."' (Acts 9:15–16). Here, too, the apostle Paul does not receive an explanation of why his suffering allowed by God is fitting rather than excessive.

Paul was aware of the challenge to faith in God from unjust suffering and evil allowed by God (see 2 Cor. 1:8), but he neither proposes a full theodicy nor laments not having one. In addition, he shows no sign of expecting God to offer a full theodicy to humans now. Instead, he offers the following response:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35–37).

Paul highlights one's being able to endure, courtesy of God's power, the unjust suffering and evil in question, even in the absence of a full theodicy. He acknowledges that God 'did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us', but he does not fault or doubt God's goodness for excessive tolerance in giving Jesus up to violent crucifixion by the Roman soldiers. Instead, he thinks of *some* cases of suffering as an opportunity to trust God: 'We felt that we had received the sentence of death so that (ἵνα) we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' (2 Cor. 1:9).

Paul, as noted, finds a 'depth' in God's redemptive plan that leaves God's full purpose 'unsearchable' and 'inscrutable' by humans now (Rom. 11:33). He does expect to have improved knowledge in the fullness of time (1 Cor. 13:12), but that does not yield anything near a full theodicy now. Even so, given his knowledge of God's moral character in Christ, Paul affirms: 'We know that all things work together for good

⁴ James S. Stewart, *Walking with God*, ed. Gordon Grant (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1996), 213.

for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom. 8:28). This affirmation, however, does not entail knowledge now of God's full purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives. So, it does not yield or support a full theodicy now; nor does it figure in an objection to our not having a full theodicy now.

Paul's attitude toward a full theodicy fits with that of Jesus, who refrains from explaining God's full purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil. Luke's Gospel offers an illustration:

There were some present who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.' (Luke 13:1–5).

In rejecting a bad theodicy, Jesus gives no hint of why God allowed the unjust suffering and evil in question; nor does he suggest that God should reveal the relevant divine purpose now to humans. Instead, he redirects the topic to how humans relate to God. He suggests that the inquirers about evil should focus on turning toward obedience to God. He thus responds as if God will not now give humans a full explanation of why God allows unjust suffering and evil in human lives.

We find another illustration in John's Gospel, in connection with the raising of Lazarus by Jesus: 'The sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.'" (John 11:3–4). It may be tempting to generalize on the comment by Jesus, and thus to propose that all suffering and evil are 'for God's glory'. Such generalizing, however, would be a

mistake. Jesus is commenting on the particular case of Lazarus in relation to his own opportunity to raise Lazarus. He thus offers a purpose regarding himself: 'so that the Son of God may be glorified through it'. This case, then, is not reflective of suffering and evil in general. As a result, we do not find here any suggestion of a full theodicy. Jesus consistently refrained from any indication of a full theodicy for humans now. Instead, he suggests, as indicated, that typical humans are not in a position now to understand God's full purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil. We turn to the importance of this lesson regarding two kinds of theodicy and neutralizing the intellectual problem of evil.

Two Kinds of Theodicy

Even in the absence of a full theodicy, we can neutralize the intellectual problem of evil by removing false expectations for God's revealing, and for our having, a full explanation of why God allows unjust suffering and evil. According to the Christological lesson of the previous section, God has a reason *not* to reveal to typical humans now the full divine purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil in human lives. Part of the reason is that typical humans would lack now the understanding needed to handle (a statement of) the purpose aright. They would fail, as in the case of the apostle Peter, to understand properly and therefore would tend toward counterproductive resistance to God and God's purpose. The resistance, broader in scope than the kind seen in Peter (and inviting the tag 'satan' from Jesus), would be counterproductive in that it would increase alienation of people from God. We have no reason to hold that we would handle the relevant situation better than Peter did.

At the heart of our problem is a lack of felt, sympathetic understanding of the divine purpose, beyond any merely verbal or conceptual understanding. The problem thus exceeds a matter of our intellectual limitations. H.R. Mackintosh explains, in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus:

The great reason why we fail to understand Calvary is not merely that we are not profound enough, it is that we are not good enough. It is because we are such strangers to sacrifice that God's sacrifice leaves us bewildered. It is because we love so little that His love is mysterious. We have never forgiven anybody at such a cost as His. We have never taken the initiative in putting a quarrel right with His kind of unreserved willingness to suffer. It is our unlikeness to God that hangs as an obscuring screen impeding our view, and we see the Atonement so often through the frosted glass of our own lovelessness.⁵

Our being strangers to lived self-sacrifice out of unselfish love, according to Mackintosh, results in our not properly, and sympathetically, understanding God's purpose in allowing the crucifixion of Jesus. We lack proper felt understanding of God's purpose of sacrificial love because we are deficient in such love. So, we do not face a problem simply of the constitutive complexity of God's purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil. Given our own moral shortcomings regarding the kind of self-sacrificial love characteristic of God, we face a problem of our deficient moral profundity in relation to God's perfect moral character. (Paul identifies a related problem in 1 Corinthians 1:14.) The way out, according to Paul, is not a self-help program toward goodness, but instead is a matter of receiving divine grace offered at God's opportune time, typically in suffering.⁶

Our neutralizing the problem of evil calls for our generalizing on the Christological lesson about our inadequate understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus. We have the same kind of deficiency regarding the divine purpose more generally, in allowing many other cases of

unjust suffering and evil. In this perspective, we would have, by way of response to the divine purpose, a kind of resistance akin to Peter's regarding the predicted suffering of Jesus but broader in scope, and that would increase our alienation from God. The culprit is an improper understanding that yields a false expectation of what God should do, as opposed to what God has done, in allowing the suffering and evil or at least in failing to explain for us its full divine purpose. If we reasonably can set aside the misunderstanding and the resulting false expectation, we can neutralize the problem of evil by disabling its intellectual threat. We then may be positioned to grant God's goodness in allowing the unjust suffering and evil in human lives.

We have a Christological basis for neutralizing the problem of evil, a basis in what God did in Jesus. The life of Jesus identifies and manifests God's moral character as self-giving for the good of others, even for enemies of God. His life exemplifies God's giving humans what (or, better, *someone*) they need for correctly portraying and relating to God as worthy of worship and hence as morally perfect. On this basis, we can sympathize with Paul's illuminating question: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Rom. 8:32). The key point is that Christology properly understood manifests God's moral character as seeking to work things out for the good of all humans who are willing to receive what is good from God on divine moral terms (see Rom. 8:28). Such Christology thus offers a basis for avoiding agnosticism about God's moral character in the face of unjust human suffering and evil.

We should not expect now a full explanation of why God allowed Jesus to suffer unjustly in Roman crucifixion or why God allows unjust suffering in general. Instead, our Pauline suggestion is that the life of Jesus manifests God's character as bringing good out of allowed evil in ways that give lasting benefits, *at God's appointed time*, to all willing to receive such benefits on God's moral terms. These benefits,

⁵ H.R. Mackintosh, 'An Indisputable Argument', in Mackintosh, *Sermons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1938), 176–77. On the same theme, see T.R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (London: Association Press, 1917), 182.

⁶ On Paul's approach to grace, see John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

in Paul's account, exceed what are ordinarily called 'reparations' and, as well, what are typical human expectations (see Rom. 8:18; 1 Cor. 2:9, drawing from Isa. 64:4). The God of New Testament Christology can give lasting benefits via the resurrection of humans, after the model of the risen Jesus (Rom. 8:11), and thereby extend the time for such benefits. So, there would be no limit to earthly human life for the divine provision of benefits in the wake of unjust suffering and evil. People who reject life with God, however, will thereby reject for themselves the resurrection and its benefits that depend on cooperative life with God. They thus will block God's effort to bring lasting good out of the unjust suffering and evil in their lives. As long as God honors their freedom to reject cooperative life with God, they can frustrate the divine effort to bring lasting good life to all people.

According to the Gethsemane story in the Gospels, Jesus ultimately agreed to self-sacrifice for others on behalf of God, despite initial hesitation (Mark 14:36; Matt. 26:39). His disciples, according to Jesus and Paul, will follow suit in sacrificial suffering, despite any initial resistance they may have (Mark 10:39, 13:9–13; Phil. 1:29; Col. 1:24). This suffering does not await advance approval from the disciples, and the same is true of the resurrection benefits. God often seeks to bring people to cooperation with God *in* their suffering and in advance of the full resurrection benefits. This would be a moral prerogative of God so long as God offers the benefits of resurrection life for those who suffer. It would be presumptuous of humans, given their cognitive and moral limitations, to suppose that they should control the precise timing of God's redemptive provisions.

The neutralizing offer does not rest just on a promise of the benefits of resurrection life. Instead, it has an anchor in distinctive experiential evidence in the present. Paul thinks of the anchor as including experience of one's undergoing new creation by God now (2 Cor. 5:17–18), whereby one experiences God's life-giving moral character in the beginning of resurrection

life now (Rom. 6:4, 11 cf. Rom. 5:3–5; Col. 3:1).⁷ One must be suitably cooperative toward God to receive the evidence in question properly, but this does not count against the reality of the evidence. Instead, it acknowledges that the evidence is not forced upon those who refuse it. We should expect this of a God who seeks to retain the genuine agency of those who decide for or against God (cf. Rom. 10:21, 11:20). As a result, we should not expect to control the evidence in a way that convinces all people. So, our neutralizing effort does not pretend to silence all skeptics with overwhelming evidence of God's character or purpose. It properly leaves room for divine hiding for divine redemptive purposes, some of which are beyond us, given our cognitive and moral limitations.

The neutralizing of the intellectual problem of evil does not offer, or intend to offer, a full theodicy of God's allowing unjust suffering and evil. That is, it does not offer or depend on what we may call a *full-explanation theodicy* regarding God's full purpose in allowing unjust suffering and evil. Even so, the proposed neutralizing offers a different approach to theodicy as a *partial-justification theodicy* regarding God's hiding, and not explaining, the full purpose in allowing suffering and evil. In keeping with the aforementioned lessons from Jesus and Paul, we now have at best the latter kind of theodicy, and not the former kind. The partial justification suggested does not support a claim to explain divine hiding in general or to refute all skeptics,⁸ but it does remove some false expectations that figure in a common anti-theistic use of the intellectual problem of evil. It thereby

⁷ On the relevant kind of experience, see P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1909), 195–208; A. E. Garvie, *The Christian Certainty* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 365–97; L. W. Hurtado, 'Revelatory Experiences and Religious Innovation in Earliest Christianity', *Expository Times* 125 (2014), 469–82, and Paul K. Moser, *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 284–330.

⁸ On divine hiding in general and the relevant skepticism, see Moser, *The God Relationship*, 161–90, 313–30.

neutralizes the intellectual problem in connection with that use, at least for those receptive to the available evidence.

If God intends to hide the full purpose in allowing suffering and evil, one might wonder why Jesus would have put Peter in a difficult position that prompted a rebuke for ‘satanic’ resistance. If God’s concealment of full purpose aims to avoid such resistance, why prompt it in the case of Peter? A plausible answer is that Peter is serving, by divine intent, as an instructive example for a larger audience. At least the authors of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, arguably with the influence of Jesus, are using Peter as an example of how *not* to approach the matter of Messianic suffering. Peter was an important example in this regard, given the ongoing suffering and persecution of the earliest Christians, including the first recipients of Mark’s Gospel facing persecution in Rome. So, this example has important practical value for its original audience. Even so, God would be able to hide the full purpose for allowing suffering and evil, and would need to do so despite the disciples’ lack of understanding. The reason for the latter need is that revealing the full purpose would only exacerbate the disciples’ difficulty, given their not being in a position to understand properly. Such revealing would add to the extent of inadequate understanding suffered by the disciples, without a corresponding redemptive gain. It thus would be a worse situation than their not being given now the full purpose in question. This lesson applies even to those who are not disciples, and thus the neutralizing can apply to people not acknowledging God, despite their unawareness of it.

In neutralizing the intellectual problem of evil, we do not remove all *psychological* problems regarding evil in relation to God. We are in no position to neutralize all such psychological problems, such as emotional problems, haunting people as a result of evil. Some people suffer emotional pain from evil, and neutralizing the intellectual problem of evil leaves their emotional pain intact. They may want, and even expect, more comfort from God in their pain,

and we are in no position to fault them, just as we may be in no position to comfort them in the way they need. So, a partial-justification theology regarding God’s hiding is no panacea for the trials and tribulations of this world. It removes a nagging intellectual problem for many people, but it allows other problems to endure. Perhaps this is part of the mixed predicament of having a ‘treasure in earthen vessels’, as Paul might suggest. In any case, it is doubtful that more divine *explaining* or *purpose-revealing* would supply the psychological comfort sought. Something of a different kind, such as divine comfort, seems needed, and any divine comfort will have to be at divine, rather than human, discretion.

Our neutralizing effort, finally, does not acquiesce to any evil in either accepting it or refusing to oppose it. Instead, it yields to human limitations in understanding God’s full purpose in allowing evil. These two options differ, and we have no reason to suppose that the latter yielding entails the former acquiescence.

Conclusion

The neutralizing on offer can benefit from a perspective akin to that suggested by Stewart:

What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation but a reinforcing presence: Christ to stand beside you, through the darkness, Christ’s companionship to make the dark experience sacramental—‘Yea, though I walk in death’s dark vale, Yet will I fear none ill: For Thou art with me....’ (Psalm 23).⁹

I say ‘akin’ to this perspective, because our lacking a full explanation does not entail our lacking *all* explanation. This perspective, however, does not emerge just from intellectual reflection, however rigorous. Instead, it engages who one resolves to be *as a personal, moral agent before God*. So, what may have seemed to be mainly an intellectual puzzle, regarding God

⁹ Stewart, *Walking with God*, 124.

and evil, leads to existential questions about who one will resolve to be in relation to God.

Answers may not come easy in the area at hand, but having neutralized the intellectual problem of evil, we now can face the deeper questions with intellectual sincerity. We now

have the intellectual space to allow the existential questions about our relating to God to emerge and endure for our good. This is one vital benefit of neutralizing the intellectual problem of evil, courtesy of New Testament Christology. In this perspective, theodicy recapitulates Christology.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thanks for helpful comments to Aaron Bartolome, Tom Carson, Harry Gensler, Chad Meister, Linda Moser, Benjamin Nasmith, Jonathan Parsons, and Bernard Walker.