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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD

A review of D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. xxiii + 280 pp. \$20.00 (paper). ISBN: 0-8006-3775-5.

IF YOU THINK THAT EVIL IS OF USE, you betray the evils that people have suffered. And if you think that God is of use, you have never even managed to talk about God. This could be the summary of the philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips's latest book *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God*. The problem is that many Anglo-American analytic philosophers of religion are engaged in a project of theorizing about religion that is fundamentally confused, which is a point that Phillips never tires of reminding us about throughout this book. Drawing resource from his main protagonist Simone Weil, he holds that because of the effort to provide (finite) justifications for God's (infinite) ways, much of contemporary (Anglo-American analytic) philosophy of religion holds theories and theodicies that conflate the infinite with the finite. This is a problem that Phillips has pointed out in the past, and he reminds us here yet again that philosophers of religion should be more careful. Nevertheless, there is enough that is new and interesting in this book that makes reading it definitely worthwhile.

To start, the book itself can be read on various different levels with different audiences in mind. In this review I want to discuss three of them. First of all, the book is a contribution to the discussions in analytic philosophy of religion about the problem of evil and the problem of God. Phillips integrates the arguments from the many essays he has written on these topics during his long career into one, more coherent and complete, treatment of the subject. On the second level, this collection of arguments is presented in a way that shows the major shift in Phillips' philosophical approach towards more general – even metaphysical – reflections on the nature of language and reality. Thirdly, and most interestingly in my opinion, the book can be read as a major and thoroughgoing critique of contemporary society. That is to say, the problems that Phillips detects in the theodicies of the analytic philosophers of religion reflect problematic tendencies

that are dominating our present culture.

Before turning directly to these three levels, let me say a brief word about Phillips' style. As in all of Phillips's work, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God* is full of lively examples and thought-provoking observations. One kind of example seems to be lacking however. Phillips offers many extreme religious examples, like the well-known case of Simone Weil and various examples from the Holocaust. But what about ordinary believers? While these extreme cases clearly offer some religious possibilities, the over-reliance on them might lead to a distortion. Phillips might object that, as a philosopher, he only contemplates possibilities of sense. But – at least for me – these possibilities themselves would have become clearer and more convincing if Phillips had shown how they *could* be present or absent in the ordinary believer's life. Therefore after a critical appraisal of the three levels on which the book can be read, a more "ordinary" example will be discussed to test and evaluate the strength and limitations of Phillips' argument.

The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God consists of two major parts and an interlude. The first part is called "Our Problematic Inheritance" and sums up the many problematic aspects of theodicies, defenses and theories about evil. For instance, how is it possible to reconcile the following three theses: "God is omnipotent," "God is perfectly good" and "Evil exists" This is the basic form of the question that theodicies try to answer. Phillips first sets out to show that the way in which his colleagues treat "God is omnipotent" is confused. They extend the meaning of the notion of God's power rendering it both meaningless and having nothing to do with religion any more. God's perfect goodness secondly suffers a similar fate. For instance, in everyday discourse we are able to distinguish between the pain suffered in a routine visit to the dentist and the suffering of the Holocaust. But why is it that we would rightly be suspicious of those who argued that the Holocaust served a higher good, but yet allow precisely such a position when it comes to our talk of God? And once one proposes such a moral calculus for God, does it really make sense to call this God perfectly good?

Philosophers of religion have devised all sorts of answers to these questions. In the third and longest chapter of the book, "God's Morally Insufficient Reasons," Phillips enumerates, and shortly but convincingly dismantles, ten of them. What Phillips concludes is that no reason can put right those evils of which people say "nothing, of course can compensate for..." In other words, theodicies fail to do justice to such common sense responses.

In the Interlude, Phillips ironically summarizes what theodicies do: "We are

asked to look at the world and to ask, 'Isn't this what you would expect from a being of high moral excellence?' Then, after a few detours to explain the evil, horrendous and otherwise, the breathtakingly confident answer that theodicies provide is, 'Yes'" (121). The problem, however, is that no explanation, theory, or argument is provided for this affirmative answer. According to Phillips, this means that every attempt at such a theory therefore would be confused. Nevertheless, he claims that a confused philosophical construal of religious belief could reflect the lived religion of their authors. (What it would mean to have a confused lived religion, instead of just a confused description of it, remains unclear.) As for what Phillips has to add to this, he conveniently hides behind the modest claim that it is not for him to judge his colleagues' lives. All he can say is that philosophically their theodicies are confused. And further, without this confusion their views of God and the world could only lead to celebration of the terrible or a rebellious response to a God of blind caprice.

Put otherwise, most of Phillips' work seems to contain criticisms from the sideline: he points out confusions in the writings of other philosophers of religion. To a certain extent, this approach can be expected and even quite helpful. However, as one gets to the end of this book, one is left still wanting for Phillips to present his own constructive argument about how the problem of God and evil should be more responsibly treated. We are told that we should not think of God's covenant as though it were a contract. We are told that God cannot be called 'a consciousness' in the way Hick wants to have it, since that notion is a philosophical chimera, and making one's life a sacrifice to God is not like sacrificing oneself for some purpose. Whatever gestures towards a constructive argument there are, they are mostly descriptions of Weil's attitude towards suffering, which he links with what he describes as an age-old attitude within the Christian tradition that highlights the Christian struggle against pride. In short, we should recognize that nothing is ours by right and everything is a gift of grace. One has no right to expect anything good, or even anything at all. To be a Christian is to be rid of all expectations altogether. Based on this understanding, one only experiences suffering because one is still tied to expectations.

Rhees has critiqued this conception arguing that while it may have a certain existential and spiritual appeal, it contains a deep evil as well: "a desire to be nothing before God, can lead to a flight from responsibility and an ignoring of the dependence others may have on you" (243). Phillips mentions this critique, but chooses to stress the positive aspects of this conception instead. The 'religious renunciation,' as Phillips calls it, "does not mean, of course, that the believer does not care about what happens, but that he has something in which he stands even in the dark days" (186). When placed on the proper level, a

believer's relationship with God does not depend upon any historical circumstance. The love of God may endure, even in the Holocaust camp. But it must always be remembered that this love is a gift of grace – a gift for which one is never entitled and can never be expected.

While this book continues the work to which Phillips has long been devoted as a philosopher of religion, it also expresses a shift, or at least an expansion, of his thinking. In recent years, Phillips has made the argument that the task of philosophy consists of more than clearing up confusions and showing differences. In fact, under the influence of reading Rhees's *Nachlass*, these activities are regarded as only relevant to the philosopher in as far as they throw light on the philosopher's real concern – namely, the big questions in philosophy such as, "What does it mean to say something?" It is with this newfound commitment to these real concerns and these basic philosophical questions in mind that Phillips turns his life-long criticisms of theodicies to an occasion for a fundamental analysis of language, logic and reality.

On this deeper, more properly philosophical, level the first part of the book investigates the nature of logic. This is clear from the titles of the first two chapters: "Logic and Omnipotence" and "Logic and God's Will." Phillips on the one hand challenges the accepted idea among philosophers of religion that there is a distinction between the logical and the existential problem of evil. On the other hand Phillips holds that his objections to the theodicies are logical in nature rather than moral. These apparently contradicting claims are reconciled by a different interpretation of what logic is: "The 'logical' is rooted in 'the existential'" (xi). According to Phillips' analysis, logical rules do not determine what makes sense in religious language, but the rules that are already present within religious language determine what the correct logical description of this logic is. One cannot sidestep logical problems referring to one's own existential stance, but neither can we discuss logic apart from existential discourse. Abstract conceptions without any actual application of omnipotence or goodness should not be imposed on religion. Of all kind of strange assumptions about God discussed by philosophers of religion, Phillips says, "The point is not that we *couldn't* speak in this way because logic forbids it. The point is that we *do* not speak in this way because, *given* the grammar of our concept of God, it makes no sense to do so" (18ff.). Logic is a tool for describing what already happens in discourse.

The second part of Phillips's book is also about logic, although it is a little less obvious. It is about the logic of having "a conception of human life." On the surface level Phillips seems to be describing Weil's faith, but on a closer look, what really interests Phillips is whether it is possible to have "*a conception of*

human life, such that *anything* that may happen within it is understood in a certain way" (162). Phillips as a philosopher is not interested in the faith that Weil historically possessed, but in the possibility of holding such an a-historical, eternal way of looking at the world. After a description of Weil's radical self-emptying, Phillips says: "the greatest difficulty has yet to be faced. There still seems to be a predictive element in the religious belief I have described" (186). As long as there is a predictive element in one's conception of human life it still can be falsified by the facts and it would not be a response to life stripped of all expectation, a posture that would hold *whatever happens*. In his introduction Phillips mentions that in concrete life all-embracing responses come to be challenged, questioned, doubted or eroded – people change their response or they give up seeking such large answers. Nevertheless, in part II Phillips attempts to prove that these responses invoking eternity are never given up by necessity – no evil of itself could force someone to give it up since infinity operates on another level than the finite facts of the world.

On a philosophical level Phillips contemplated the possibility of a conception of human life under the aspect of eternity. In his concluding remarks, he observes that "the sense of the eternal has been eroded in our culture" and says: "this is not simply a matter of intellectual regret" (273ff.). On the third level therefore *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God* could be read as a critique of our contemporary culture. The criticisms of theodicies in the first part are meant to reach beyond the discussed analytic philosophers of religion. Phillips says: "The ... objections I have considered should help us to resist secular and religious attempts at rationalizing human life" (83). Phillips criticizes the way in which philosophers of religion try to measure the quality of God's management, but he also exposes the general vulgarization and corruption of human relationships to which the application of a cost-benefit analysis to everything in life leads. Time and again he provides us with examples that should show that applying such calculations to everything vulgarizes human life. "A husband who plays with his children out of a sense of duty, or because he believes it is good for them, is ... different from one who is *absorbed* in play with his children" (32). Sometimes thinking before acting is better. The Good Samaritan, however, did not think about what he should do, but acted without a second thought: "When we say that he *could not* pass by, that is a comment on his character. Given who he is, leaving the victim unaided is simply ruled out for him" (31). A sociologist may describe a conversation as a game of countering moves made the other speaker. But for the people themselves: "when a conversation has been a matter of simply countering moves, that is a sign of failure. ('You can't have a natural or decent conversation with him.') ... One cannot speak of mastering conversation in this way, any more than one could speak of mastering life" (104). In contemporary society, however, courses are offered for everything. Phillips criticizes such

tendencies in our culture. Read on this level the second part of the book presents us Weil as someone who has been absorbed in her life like the husband in playing with his children, and who responded to the evils that happened to her in a way she considered she could not have done otherwise.

Weil, however, was both a very reflective person and radical in her striving for perfection. In what way could Phillips' reflections apply to more ordinary people? In the documentary *Searching for the Wrong-eyed Jesus* (Andrew Douglas, 2005) about the American South, we hear a mother saying: "I had a son that was fifteen... when he passed away. And ... that stops you from believing for a while. But I believe he went to a better place, because he was heading in the wrong direction too. And it took me a long time to figure out that he *is* in a better place. I went to his grave the other day... for the first time in twelve years. It took me a long time to go there. I'm glad I did." It is easy to see how such reactions could stimulate the search for theodicies. Phillips says that he wants to show his colleagues the path from confusion to clarity, but he only shows that their paths end in confusion. He does not pay much attention to what tempted these philosophers to choose these paths in the first place. If Phillips could account for this mother's response to the death of her son in another way than those philosophers of religions would, that would help. This would also more forcefully refute the claim that his account of religion is elitist, or overly intellectualized. Possibly Phillips would regard this woman's religion as an example of the confused lives to which theodicies may lead. But does her testimony necessarily imply a confused lived religion? She succeeds perfectly in expressing that finally she has learned how to live with her son's death. She got rid of the pride of calling God to account that may be present in anger, and she struggled to find her response to the evil that has befallen her. Probably she will not be cheering when someone else "who is heading in the wrong direction" dies. In fact, if one does think that she has to explain why she does not, one is most likely completely to misunderstand her.

The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God is convincing in showing that theodicies are philosophically confused. However, the impact of Phillips's latest book would have improved if he had accounted for cases of ordinary, lived religious experience, which is oftentimes, perhaps ironically, less confused than the philosopher whose task it is to render sense from responses to evil and suffering.

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