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A Pragmatist Approach to the Mutual Recognition between Ethico-Political and Theological Discourses on Evil and Suffering

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This paper considers what may be taken to be a hitherto somewhat neglected issue in political theology: how should the division, or dichotomy, between two rather different responses to the problem of evil and suffering – that is, the theological and the secular ethico-political approaches – be understood and (possibly) overcome? It is suggested that pragmatism can utilize the theory of recognition in bridging this gap between two apparently very different discourses on evil and suffering. It is further argued that an antitheodicy approach to the problem of evil and suffering ought to be developed across the board, both theologically and politically.

Keywords: evil; suffering; theodicy; antitheodicy; recognition; acknowledgment; pragmatism

Introduction

The problem of evil and suffering – at least in its standard form as a philosophical challenge to theistic belief – has not usually been widely discussed within political theology. It has of course been voluminously examined within theology, as well as political philosophy, but in the latter field it need not be, and typically isn't, linked with the issue of theism at all. The fact that recent explorations of evil tend to be *either* strongly theological *or* non-theologically political and ethical (and hence fully secular) raises interesting issues for pragmatist political theology. From the pragmatist perspective, it is important to avoid unnecessary metaphysical, conceptual, or methodological dualisms (such as the ones between mind and body, knowledge and action, fact and value, or theory and practice, all heavily criticized by most pragmatists); moreover, we should make use of any philosophical and more generally intellectual resources we may have for dealing with fundamental problems of human (individual and socio-political) life.

It is thus vital for pragmatists interested in both religion and politics to take a look at how the problem of evil and suffering is and could be explored. This essay starts from the general pragmatist assumption that the philosophy of religion, like philosophical research generally, can be expected to be *relevant* to human life, both in the public societal and political sphere and in individuals' ethical and existential life challenges. Evil and suffering, of course, are painfully significant human phenomena reminding us of the fundamental contingency and fragility of the human condition and requiring not only empirical research but also careful scholarly analysis, explication, and critical assessment. It can be asked, for example, how we should ethically and politically acknowledge others' (individual and collective) suffering, or recognize another person (or a group) as a victim of deliberate moral evil. By engaging in such inquiries into what can be argued to be necessary conditions for the possibility of moral seriousness itself, i.e., conditions needed for us to be able to so much as occupy a moral perspective, we may deepen our understanding of our contingency, finitude, and vulnerability, as well as enhance our ability to cope, individually and socially, with these features of human life.

We should observe that evil and suffering have traditionally been approached from two quite different perspectives: either from the traditional point of view of *theology and philosophy of religion* usually focusing on the question of *theodicy* ("how could an omnipotent, omniscient, and absolutely benevolent God allow evil and suffering?"), or from the perspective of *secular* ethics, politics, and historiography, supplemented by, e.g., psychological, socio-psychological, and psychopathological accounts of evil-doing ("how can evil actions be explained?", "why do people commit atrocities?").¹ However, it remains unclear whether these academic discourses have much, or indeed anything, in common. It seems that these two discourses on evil and suffering either intentionally or unintentionally *fail to recognize each other* as adequate responses to a universal human problem concerning our appropriate reactions – religious or secular – to the reality of evil and suffering, receiving different interpretations throughout history and in different socio-political and religious (or non-religious) contexts. Indeed, it remains unclear whether

¹ For the primarily theological discourse on evil and suffering, see, e.g., Plantinga 1977; Hick 1978; Adams 1989, 2013; Swinburne 1998; Rowe 2001; van Inwagen 2006; Trakakis 2008; Stump 2010; Dalferth 2011; Meister 2012. For the secular ethico-political discourse, see, e.g., Arendt 1994; Card 2002, 2010; Dews 2008; Wolfe 2012. Some, though relatively few, contributors to these discussions take both discourses seriously: cf., e.g., Jonas 1996; Bernstein 2002; Neiman 2002.

there is any such thing as *the* problem of evil and suffering at all. Thus, the division among the two main approaches raises issues of mutual recognition that need to be taken seriously by theologians, political thinkers, and political theologians.

In this paper I will outline in a very general and summarizing way a pragmatism-based program of responding to this need of recognition. What I try to say about the issue here is based on some earlier and on-going work (see XXX), a key aim of which is to offer a thoroughgoing philosophical articulation and defense of *antitheodicism*, viz., a way of thinking about evil and suffering that firmly rejects the pursuit of theodicies allegedly justifying apparently meaningless evil and suffering (to be specified in some more detail below). A project such as this, however, cannot successfully take place by simply dropping the controversies over evil and suffering articulated within theology and the philosophy of religion and by replacing them with a secular ethical and political discourse. Instead, antitheodicism, I believe, has to be carried through within *both* discourses. This general antitheodicism – philosophically more fundamental, I have argued (XXX), than the distinction between theism and atheism, or theological and non-theological views on evil and suffering – turns out to be a (or even the) key to the integration of the theological and the secular ethico-political approaches. We should, I maintain, defend antitheodicism across the board, within both discourses, and thereby critically integrate the two apparently diverging approaches. Therefore, one might also say that we must *emancipate* the problem of evil and suffering – *including* its traditional theological articulations – from theodacist presuppositions that lead to a chronic, both ethically and politically problematic non-acknowledgment of the sufferers' experiential points of view.

A key objective of the kind of approach I am outlining here is thus to critically integrate and thereby overcome the two apparently very different types of discourse through a theoretical and methodological integration of the *theory of recognition* and *pragmatist philosophy of religion*. This latter integration, articulating (we might say) a kind of pragmatist political theology, is at a meta-level itself motivated by pragmatism. This is, simply, the motive of finding the best – the conceptually richest and most useful – theoretical and methodological resources that can help us in our attempts to think about the deepest and most challenging problems of our ethical, political, and religious lives. The type of pragmatism I find particularly relevant to this task is primarily inspired by William James (e.g., 1902, 1907) – among the major classical pragmatists – but it may be further developed in critical dialogue with contemporary pragmatism scholarship and

pragmatist contributions to the understanding of religion (cf. Zackariasson 2015; XXX). The problem of evil and suffering can, I would like to suggest, through such a pragmatist articulation be shown to be a (loosely) definable and (relatively) unified problem manifested through its different interpretations in changing historical and philosophico-theological contexts. It may be argued that the two main discourses currently available are by themselves too narrow to adequately deal with evil and suffering in their full complexity. They are thus limited and too self-contained in their capacities of recognition needed in responding to this problem, and they must recognize each other as relevant perspectives pursuing such adequate recognition.

A notion of *mediated pragmatic recognition* (cf. below) may be developed as a methodological resource in this context, partly on the basis of the pragmatist tradition and partly by making use of the recognition-theoretical framework. In philosophical and political debates on recognition, or *Anerkennung* in German (e.g., Honneth 2005; see also Taylor 1995), a major issue is how various groups of victims and/or marginalized “others” or sufferers can be heard, and how they can “define themselves” or construct their identity, political status, and distinctive perspective in their own ways not dictated by any political, theological, or other external authorities.² Such requests for recognition may focus on the recognizees’ need to be recognized *as* participants of certain kind of human *practices* – and, possibly, as sufferers due to *failing* participation or due to forced participation in, e.g., violent and humiliating practices. This, roughly, is what we may mean by “pragmatic” recognition; the focus on what we do, or are forced to do, in our various social and practical roles. The involvement in different human practices in various actual or potential participatory roles is crucial here.

The entire debate on recognition could in principle be pragmatically re-evaluated by critically investigating the ability of theories of recognition to account for experiences of evil and suffering. That is a huge task not to be undertaken here; I can only indicate some possible lines of inquiry (including some possible research questions remaining open here) that might turn out to be relevant to this challenge. The general idea is that we may, by integrating pragmatist and recognition-theoretical approaches, offer novel perspectives, both politically and theologically, not only on the problem of evil and

² In addition to Honneth’s (2005) seminal work, see, for recent contributions to recognition theory, e.g., Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2009; Saarinen 2016; Koskinen 2017, 2018 (cf. also below).

suffering but also on the concept of recognition itself. Such a meta-level pragmatic integration of pragmatism with recognition theory may also lead to an intensified philosophical appreciation of the *reality* of evil and suffering manifesting not solely academic and intellectual significance but urgent political relevance in a world in which horrendous crimes against humanity (still) take place. This is because the fundamental issue is precisely how to recognize, and practically respond to, the reality of meaningless innocent suffering. By seeking to integrate different theoretical approaches to evil and suffering, we may indirectly strengthen our ethical and political capabilities of recognizing (acknowledging) suffering itself and the experiences of innocent victims of evil.

Theodicism and antitheodicism

In order to engage in an inquiry of this kind, it should be recognized that the mainstream approach to the problem of evil and suffering especially in contemporary broadly analytic philosophy of religion is, unfortunately, rather strongly *theodictist*. Generally, theodicies, traceable back to major historical figures like Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and G.W. Leibniz, and revived by leading philosophers of religion such as John Hick and Richard Swinburne (see, e.g., Hick 1978; Swinburne 1998), seek a justification, legitimation, and/or excusing of the omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely benevolent God's allowing the world (his creation) to contain evil and suffering that appears to us as meaningless or absurd. Traditionally, theodicies try to explain why such a deity has, or might have, good moral reasons for creating and sustaining a world that contains apparently pointless suffering; these attempts to "explain away" gratuitous evil and suffering, or at least view them as necessary elements of some overall total good, can also take secular forms, if they refer to, say, historical teleology or the alleged tendency of absolutely free and uncontrolled market economy to provide good results for everyone in the long run. In a way or another, theodicies, then, try to account for the reality of evil and suffering as unavoidable in an overall harmonious providential plan; accordingly, they attempt to make suffering "meaningful", after all.

By "theodicism" we may refer to all ways of dealing with the problem of evil and suffering that normatively regard theodicy as a requirement of (reasonable, acceptable) theism, no matter whether one ends up endorsing or rejecting theism. The theodictist can,

indeed, be an atheist, insofar as they conclude that God does not exist (or presumably does not exist, or that there is no sufficient rational justification for theism) precisely because the theodist desideratum cannot be fulfilled by any theodicy argument proposed by the theist. Indeed, most atheists *are* theodists in more or less this sense, appealing to the “argument from evil” as a major consideration against theism. Furthermore, those theistic philosophers (e.g., Plantinga 1977; van Inwagen 2006; Stump 2010) who claim to offer a mere “defense” – instead of a theodicy proper – can be regarded as theodists in the broad sense that they also seek to defend God and account for divine justice by arguing that, for all we know, God *could* have morally acceptable reasons for allowing the world to contain apparently unnecessary and gratuitous evil and innocent suffering, even on the massive scale familiar to us, even though we cannot know those possible reasons to be actual. More technically, such thinkers maintain that there is a possible world in which both God and evil exist, and for all we know that possible world may be actual, so the burden of proof is (they claim) shifted onto the atheist’s shoulders. In short, both theodicies and defenses respond to the atheist argument from evil by defending God’s moral reasons, actual or possible, for creating and maintaining a world in which evil and suffering are real. (In some cases they might end up claiming that evil and suffering are not “as fully real” as the more positive aspects of reality; the historical paradigm of this line of thought is the Platonic way of thinking of evil as a kind of privation, a lack of goodness.)

Crucially for political theology and political philosophy, theodicism is not at all restricted to positions available within the scope of the theism vs. atheism controversy. One may, by extension, hold *secular* versions of theodicism, replacing the alleged harmony of cosmic divine providence with, say, a teleological conception of world-history or simple political necessity, which supposedly justifies (or explains away) any concrete instances of evil and suffering. Clearly, Hegel – a key source for recognition theories – is a major historical background figure of such theodist ways of thinking. We may view, for instance, Marxist transformations of Hegelian ideas as being (at least in some standard versions) committed to secular theodicism. From a (highly simplified) Marxist (or Marxist-Leninist) point of view, considerable individual sacrifices and sufferings are justifiable if they promote the overall collective goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat. On the other hand, such secular theodicies are not confined to socialist or generally leftist thought. At the other end of the political spectrum, not only right-wing nationalists or totalitarian political thinkers but also, in a quite different way, free-market

liberalists or libertarians may espouse similar arguments appealing to the idea that the expected eventual beneficial outcome (which, in many cases, can be expected only in a rather distant future) justifies or at least excuses the sacrifices that must be made on the way toward it. In all these different cases, the ultimate end justifies the means, and the individual experiences of meaningless suffering are simply too limited because they fail to grasp the total (theodist) picture or grand narrative.

By *antitheodism*, in contrast, we may refer to the rejection of any such, or indeed *any*, theodicies – and of the theodist requirement to produce one. Antitheodism does not entail atheism but rather moves beyond the first-order debate over theism and atheism onto an ethical and political level concerned with the moral decency (or, better, the lack thereof) of theodist attempts at justification or excuse – theological as well as secular. Now, one of the main goals of the approach I am recommending here is to defend a resolutely antitheodist approach to evil and suffering – starting from the philosophy of religion but extending this approach to much more general critical discussions concerning the (un)justifiability of innocent suffering (based on any alleged overall good cause) and the ethical and political problems in relying on any harmonious narrative assuming such theodist justification (see XXX).

Thus, the philosophical and more generally cultural and political significance of the theodism vs. antitheodism debate is by no means restricted to theology or the philosophy of religion, though the main critical arguments that may also have political relevance typically unfold from the theodicy problem as it has been formulated within religion and theology. The antitheodist is morally and politically opposed to any grand narrative of theodicy, because such narratives tend to neglect the reality of individual suffering, and especially experiences of the meaninglessness or purposelessness of suffering, sacrificing the individual's perspective to some totalizing overall picture. This is a form of non-recognition or non-acknowledgment *par excellence*. This is also an observation highly relevant, I think, to political theology. The theodicy issue, even though its historical core is theological, is thoroughly political. There is no way in which we could reflect on the problem of evil and suffering in a politically neutral space.

The strength of the antitheodist argument is, however, not restricted to this straightforward moral complaint that theodicies neglect the suffering other's perspective. Let me here simply state (instead of defending at any length) my general hypothesis that antitheodism is *a necessary condition for the possibility of the moral point of view itself* (see XXX). This hypothesis of course needs to be critically evaluated and defended, both

historically and systematically. This presupposes, I believe, a profound synthesis of the two diverging discourses on evil and suffering identified above – the religious/theological and the secular ethical/political – and an equally resolute rejection of theodicism in both areas. Furthermore, this antitheodicism may itself yield a meta-argument against the entire argumentative “game” based on the argument from evil. Such an argument can be formulated to demonstrate that there is something seriously wrong – ethically as well as politically wrong – in that game and that philosophers, theologians, as well as political theorists and other scholars ought to abandon any such theodictist pursuits in order to appropriately acknowledge the real evil and suffering people experience.

Powerful moral criticism of theodicies has fortunately been presented at least since Voltaire’s famous critique of Leibniz in *Candide*, satirically drawing attention to the allegedly providential significance of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake in the “best possible world”, and such criticism has re-emerged in contemporary ethics and philosophy of religion, despite the strongly theodictist orientation of analytic philosophy of religion in particular.³ While such critical discussions of theodicism vs. antitheodicism are both valuable in themselves and also significantly contribute to a re-examination of the nature and aims of the philosophy of religion in relation to other areas of philosophy, especially ethics and political philosophy, it seems to me (see again XXX) that my version of antitheodicism is considerably more radical – both methodologically and substantially – than the available moral critiques of theodicies, because it is intended as *transcendental* (in a sense derived from Immanuel Kant). The standard moral critiques of theodicies are not formulated as transcendental arguments to the effect that theodicism violates the necessary conditions for the possibility of so much as occupying a moral perspective, and one of the novelties of the kind of approach I am proposing lies in this transcendental approach to antitheodicism. The significance of such a transcendental approach not only for moral philosophy but for political philosophy and theology as well needs to be appreciated.⁴

The reference to Kant and transcendental argumentation also highlights the challenge of understanding the *depth* of the concepts of evil and suffering without

³ See, e.g., Tilley 1991; Jonas 1996; Bernstein 2002; Neiman 2002; Wright 2006; Trakakis 2008; Simpson 2009; Gleeson 2012; Knepper 2013; cf. XXX. Neiman’s (2002) work is particularly relevant regarding the significance of the Lisbon earthquake in the development of the problem of evil in modern philosophy.

⁴ For recent work on transcendental arguments in moral theory, see Brune et al. 2017; cf. XXX.

necessarily making any religious or theological commitments, while nevertheless keeping the dialogue between religion and secular ethico-political thought on the agenda of political theology. Indirectly, this appreciation of “depth” leads to a recognition of the continuing relevance of originally religious or theological notions in secular ethics and politics. Arguably, we cannot fully recognize even political evil, or politically relevant requests for recognition of unnecessary and pointless suffering, without being aware of the religiously and theologically colored problem of evil at the background of such requests for recognition. The Biblical figure of Job can be found at the background of any political need for recognition amidst unexplainable and unjustifiable sufferings. More attention should hence be drawn to the ways in which even completely secular discourses on evil and suffering still partly depend, albeit usually not explicitly, on the theologico-religious layers of these notions. Evil and suffering offer an illuminating case study of how religious and non-religious approaches to vital human ethical, political, and existential issues may (or may fail to) mutually recognize each other. Hence, the problem of evil and suffering needs to be approached in political theology by synthesizing and critically overcoming isolated approaches that would not habitually recognize each other, or would do so in a very limited way.⁵

Let me elaborate a bit on the view that the kind of antitheodicism needed to counter both theological and secular theodicies is based on an essentially *moral argument*, grounded in the idea that theodicies fail to adequately recognize the *meaninglessness* of suffering and typically treat suffering human beings (or, by extension, non-human sufferers) as mere means to some alleged overall good depicted in some more or less imaginary grand narrative. Kant’s Theodicy Essay (1791) contains an interesting discussion of the *Book of Job* as an “authentic theodicy” – which, however, can be argued to be an antitheodicy (see XXX). Kant’s devastating attack on theodicies involves the character of Job, emphasizing his sincerity (*Aufrichtigkeit*) and truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) in not succumbing to the theodacist tendencies of insincerely and dishonestly explaining and justifying innocent suffering exemplified by his “friends”.

⁵ The results of such inquiry may also have far-reaching relevance to other issues in theology, ethics, and politics, because there are, in addition to evil and suffering, a number of ethical (and/or theological and political) concepts, such as guilt, shame, or dignity, that can be similarly approached from an enriched perspective integrating theological and secular discourses, thus seeking to rearticulate what it means for us to engage in ethical or political reflection in general.

This Kantian starting point can be used to develop the idea that theodicies are morally inadequate, or even immoral, responses to evil and suffering precisely due to their serious failure of recognition (or failure of acknowledgment). What we may call “Kantian” antitheodicies (even when they do not directly invoke any Kantian considerations) can thus be seen as defending antitheodicism as a condition for the possibility of the moral perspective (or moral seriousness) itself. In this sense, it can even be argued that *only* an antitheodist can occupy a morally serious perspective on evil and suffering – whether that perspective is secularly ethical and political, or theological and religious.

This strong claim must clearly be put forward as a transcendental thesis, not as a factual or empirical claim about anyone’s (theodacists’ or antitheodacists’) concrete ability or inability to engage in moral or political reflection and deliberation. It concerns the necessary conditions for the possibility of the moral perspective itself (and thus also the availability of a genuinely moral perspective in theological and political discourses). As such, its political significance should be clear, because arguably political theory constantly needs to be concerned not only with the legitimacy of our responses to suffering but also with the question regarding the availability of genuinely moral perspectives within various political outlooks.

Pragmatism and recognition

Anyone taking even a quick glance at the relevant literature notices that there is no lack of cases illustrating the *failures* of mutual recognition in the contemporary discourse on evil and suffering. Christian philosophers like Peter van Inwagen (2006) typically argue against political and cultural thinkers like Susan Neiman (2002) who view the problem of evil as a historically transforming problem receiving both theological and secular articulations. For van Inwagen, the problem of evil is merely a question about the compatibility of the reality of evil with God’s existence, while Neiman regards it as a much more general problem concerning the comprehensibility of the world – a problem that can have religious/theological or secular manifestations, depending on the cultural and political context within which it is considered.⁶ Secular political theorists, in contrast

⁶ Neiman’s (2002) analysis of the problem of evil in modern philosophy is crucial for any political theology, because it duly acknowledges the existential as well as political

to theistic theodacists, often maintain that theological views on evil simply lead us astray and should be abandoned in the modern world. Both standpoints are problematic and can be seen as lacking in any adequate recognition of the other party. The concept of mediated pragmatic recognition that I argue needs to be developed in this context is helpful in both clarifying these debates and searching constructive resolutions. Evil and suffering should be theorized not just by attacking theodicies but by constructing a new ethico-political (yet theologically relevant) antitheodicism, and it is right here that recognition theory and pragmatism are both needed.

The basic idea of mediated recognition – to put it in a simplified way – is that persons or groups that do not or cannot directly recognize each other (*as* something, or in some specific role) can nevertheless recognize, e.g., some generally binding normative standards or principles that govern their mutual relations (see especially Saarinen 2016; Koskinen 2017, 2018).⁷ Their mutual recognition thus emerges as an indirect, mediated relation based on initially non-mutual acts of recognition. For instance, certain fundamental norms of rationality could be regarded as valid by parties to a debate that does not lead to any agreement or even any direct mutual recognition. Mediated pragmatic recognition, furthermore, can be characterized as mediated recognition focusing on the recognition of the “other” in some specific practice-related role, i.e., as a participant in a given human practice. It is clear that recognition acts of this kind – and in principle *any* recognition acts whatsoever – are always inevitably and inherently political due to the various, often complex power relations that may obtain between the parties to the recognition act.

Now, it needs to be examined whether, and how, the intuitive idea of mediated recognition can be applied to the challenge of mutual recognition among rival approaches to evil and suffering. Employing this and related concepts may offer a new way of dealing with these phenomena by synthesizing the *intellectual* task of analyzing and evaluating rational arguments (*pro* and *contra* theodicies) with the *ethical* task of acknowledging other human beings in their various individual and social practice-based roles and capacities, especially as victims and sufferers – of course without forgetting the complex

significance of the issue while never reducing it to merely secular discourses. Her tendency to maintain that the problem of evil is *the* fundamental problem of modern philosophy seems somewhat exaggerated, though.

⁷ I am crucially indebted to Heikki J. Koskinen’s careful systematic work on this notion, in particular.

political issues (e.g., “victimization”) involved in recognizing (or self-recognizing) someone or some group as a victim.

In developing the relevant notion of recognition and the overall argumentation against theodicism, one may, as already indicated, significantly draw from the pragmatist tradition (in the philosophy of religion and more generally in ethics and political philosophy). As is well known, pragmatism, originated by Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey in late nineteenth century, offers a critical and constructive middle path to various philosophical disputes and dichotomies (e.g., realism vs. idealism, fact vs. value, nature vs. culture, science vs. religion). While the standard discussions of recognition mostly start from Hegelian ideas, it is in my view pragmatism that could, perhaps contrary to appearances, be considered a philosophy of recognition *par excellence*.⁸

Pragmatism is highly relevant here also due to its philosophical focus on “deep” democratic politics. One of the preconditions of maintaining and further developing democracy – in a rich pragmatist sense as a “way of life”, as articulated, for instance, in Dewey’s (1927) views on democratic participation – is a continuous sincere attempt to respond to individual human beings’ legitimate need to be genuinely listened to in societies they live in and contribute to. This need is manifested in various requests for recognition, as well as responses to such requests, among individuals and social groups. Thus, from a pragmatist perspective it is natural to suggest that a socially highly important request for recognition concerns the recognition of instances of suffering (individual and social). We may see pragmatists (especially James) as arguing that attempts to respond to such requests by delivering a theodicy are almost invariably ethically and politically problematic, because they fail to adequately recognize the individual sufferer and her/his concrete experience. The pragmatist antitheodist may argue that the theodist failure to recognize individual and social suffering in its utter meaninglessness and absurdity may be seriously harmful for the preconditions of democracy as a way of life.

⁸ Charles Taylor (1995), Axel Honneth (2005), and other recognition theorists do occasionally cite pragmatist classics, especially George Herbert Mead but also Dewey and others; however, the two are different traditions that currently generally do not recognize each other (and their mutual relevance) as explicitly as they might – and I am here (again very briefly and programmatically) proposing to rectify this situation. One of the relatively few explicit studies on the relations between pragmatism and recognition theory is Decker 2012.

Within pragmatism, the Deweyan conception of democracy as a way of life needs to be supplemented by a Jamesian concern for the irreducibility of the individual: we have to be sensitive to what James (1891) called the “cries of the wounded” and avoid the kinds of Hegelian and Leibnizian theodicies he firmly rejected in *Pragmatism* (1907, chapter 1). By exploring these issues from a recognition-theoretical point of view, we can make more precise the pragmatist idea that democracy in the deep sense of truly engaged participation in democratic practices requires the recognition of others as (actual or potential) participants.

We can perceive the striking similarity of the pragmatist and the recognition-theoretical approaches if we recall how James (1907, chapter 2) compares his *pragmatic method* to a corridor in a hotel. Very different intellectual work can be done in individual rooms all of which can be reached by walking along the same corridor (i.e., by using the same pragmatic method): in one of them, we may find a religious believer engaging in prayer, while in another one we may find a scientist conducting empirical experiments or a critic of religion writing an atheist thesis. Pragmatism thus recognizes, and James urges us to recognize, the irreducible and often incommensurable value of *different human practices* having their distinctive purposes and goals. Pragmatism can also facilitate processes of mutual recognition between persons and groups maintaining divergent views on, e.g., science and religion – or, *mutatis mutandis*, evil and suffering. Thus, it may contribute to the integration of theological and secular approaches to evil as well as to the mutual recognition between rival theories of recognition themselves, such as the Hegelian line articulated by Axel Honneth *et al.* and the more Wittgenstein-inspired discussions of acknowledgment associated with thinkers like Stanley Cavell, D.Z. Phillips, and Raimond Gaita.⁹ Moreover, pragmatism highlights the most vital task we face here, viz., the practical one of getting rid of or fighting against evil, or at least diminishing suffering, while also critically questioning and overcoming any sharp distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* approaches to the problem of evil and suffering (a dichotomy that is itself typical of theodicism). This is one obvious reason why pragmatism is more promising than many of its rivals in this particular discourse; we may, indeed, at the meta-

⁹ On the concept of acknowledgment in this context, see especially Cavell 1979.

level reflexively argue for the pragmatic significance of pragmatism in making sense of, and responding to, the antitheodist challenge of acknowledging innocent suffering.¹⁰

My basic pragmatist ideas here are implicitly based on a Kantian understanding of the relations between theoretical and practical philosophy (which Kant, admittedly, distinguished much more sharply from each other than the pragmatists do). Kant's (1791) moral criticism of theodicies can itself be seen as a moral criticism of the failure to appropriately distinguish between theoretical and practical reason and their distinctive concerns, particularly as a criticism of attempts to appeal to the former (in the form of metaphysical, speculative theodicies *à la* Leibniz) independently of the latter (i.e., genuine moral concern with suffering). Kant might (somewhat anachronistically) be regarded as a "pragmatist" in the sense that he maintained that the ultimate task of human reason is practical: reason in general – in its theoretical and practical uses – is in the end guided by practical reason and its ethical concerns, because the division of labor between the theoretical and the practical uses of reason is itself inevitably ethically grounded and motivated. There is no non-ethical place for us to stand in order to establish such a division of labor. Kant, then, shifts the attention from metaphysics to morality – and, as we learn from his doctrine of the "postulates of practical reason" (see Kant 1788), it is only on the basis of morality (i.e., the moral law codified in the categorical imperative) that we can hope for the (metaphysical) reality of God and the immortality of the soul.

The Kantian background of what I take to be a proper pragmatist approach is also manifested in the fact, already emphasized above, that recognition-theoretical arguments and ideas may themselves be pragmatically evaluated in terms of their potential practical moral relevance in dealing with the problem of evil and suffering. Indeed, pragmatism can assess the practical value of metaphysical and other theoretical concepts and arguments on the grounds of their ethical relevance (see XXX). This is how we may see James's (1907, chapters 2-4) development of the pragmatic method: it is the conceivable ethical significance of metaphysical issues – such as theism vs. atheism, freedom vs. determinism, or monism vs. pluralism – that we should focus on when examining metaphysics pragmatically. The true pragmatic meaning of metaphysical ideas and positions lies in such practical results. The same goes, we may suggest, for pragmatist

¹⁰ This paper, however, contains no general defense of pragmatism in the philosophy of religion or elsewhere. (This entire journal issue is devoted to pragmatist political theology.) For recent accounts of the significance of pragmatism in the philosophy of religion, see, e.g., Zackariasson 2015; XXX.

politics and theology. Furthermore, experiences of evil and suffering constitute a crucial pragmatic “experiment” regarding the relevance and applicability of theories of recognition: those theories are successful to the extent they are able to ethically account for victims’ and sufferers’ need to be acknowledged “from their own perspective”, while also keeping aware of the inescapable need to be able to take a critical attitude to that perspective.

Moreover, while pragmatism – obviously diverging from Kantian universalism about reason even when taking Kant very seriously – emphasizes the perspectival and practice-embedded nature of all human thought and inquiry, it crucially differs from *relativism*. This is as important politically as it is ethically and epistemically. According to pragmatism, we might say, our various human practices (as participants of which we need to be recognized and recognize others) operate as *contexts* making possible different forms of agency and reflection (including science, religion, as well as, more specifically, both theological and secular discourses on evil and suffering). Yet, for any two (or more) practices, one may imagine, or construct, a *reflective meta-level practice* critically examining the relations between the original (“lower-level”) practices. Recognition is one of the concepts by means of which such meta-practices can be developed and articulated. Moreover, considerations of evil and suffering can, and should, play a key role in our developing and transforming those meta-practices when we are investigating the relations between our various practice-embedded attempts (and failures) to recognize other human beings and their experiential perspectives. Hence, evil and suffering also provide a veritable test case for a pragmatic evaluation of pragmatism itself. Can the different voices of suffering, and the meta-level philosophical, political, or theological voices seeking to recognize them as such voices, really be (mutually) adequately recognized? Can the unspoken and the unspeakable be really heard, and can the unrecognized be recognized? How are these recognitions and recognition-failures manifested in our various practices, political ones in particular? These are the kind of questions the pragmatist needs to raise.

Some questions and hypotheses

Taking departure from such tentative questions and equipped with the conceptual background canvassed above, we may list the following more specific *research problems*

that I think need to be tackled in a pragmatist political theology (of the kind sketched here) focusing on the problem of evil and suffering. Future work on these issues should focus on these questions much more specifically.

First, can the two major types of discourse on evil and suffering tentatively distinguished above *recognize each other* as attempts to resolve one and the same problem of evil and suffering? My hypothesis is that they can, but this requires antitheodicism. This raises the second question: can philosophies of religion aiming at a theodicy (or secular ethical and/or political versions of theodicy excusing or legitimizing innocent suffering) adequately recognize victims of evil as victims, or sufferers as sufferers? My hypothesis, as has become clear, is that they can't. Thirdly, however, we may ask: can theodacist and antitheodacist standpoints in the philosophy of religion (or more broadly) recognize *each other* as morally acceptable responses to evil and suffering? Certainly they should try to do so, but eventually antitheodicism, I think, must prevail.

Fourthly, further work is needed to examine what kind of arguments against theodicies have been presented (especially since Kant), whether they are sound, and how they should be developed in contemporary philosophy. What, in particular, are the prospects of *transcendental arguments* for antitheodicism as a condition for the possibility of the moral point of view itself (viz., of ethical acknowledgment of suffering)? My suggestion here is that while there are interesting varieties of antitheodacist argumentation in post-Kantian philosophical literature up to the present day, the fundamental and also most successful antitheodacist argument is transcendental – and this should be appreciated by pragmatism.

Fifthly, can *pragmatism and recognition theory* really be integrated as (ethically appropriate) approaches to the problem of evil and suffering, and if so, how exactly? How should the history and contemporary versions of these theoretical frameworks be re-evaluated in relation to this project of integration? How, in particular, should their Kantian background be understood and taken into account in interpreting them (in contrast to the Hegelian background they also undeniably have)? My hypothesis is that they indeed can and should be integrated, and their historical and contemporary versions should be examined by keeping this task in mind, primarily explicated as post-Kantian orientations. Thus, *both* may be seen as contributing to the transcendental antitheodacist argumentation attacking theodicies as failing to recognize constitutive elements of the moral point of view.

Sixthly, can victims of evil and suffering also be recognized (at a meta-level) as being themselves potential recognizers (or non-recognizers) of the (in)adequacy of theodicies, and if so, how exactly? My hypothesis is that cherishing the recognizing abilities of the victims (especially the non-recognized or less-than-adequately recognized ones) should be a core value in any ethically adequate inquiry into the problem of evil and suffering. Seventhly, can we develop a *systematic typology of different recognition relations* (and the corresponding recognition failures) exhausting all the relevant kinds of recognition of the victims and/or sufferers that are needed in a conception of the recognition of suffering understood as a necessary condition for the possibility of the moral point of view? My hypothesis is that such a project should be undertaken, though its exhaustiveness will remain debatable, because theodacist thinking patterns may always receive new formulations and manifestations in varying political contexts – and the pragmatist-cum-recognition-theoretical critique of such patterns should be flexible enough to be adjustable to such differing situations rather than sticking to a pre-organized typology.

Eighthly, is there any systematic difference between the concepts of *recognition* and *acknowledgment* (historically or in the contemporary discussion)? It seems that these are different concepts, but they are both useful when properly spelled out, and *their* (or their users') mutual recognition is yet another meta-level task to be taken up. Ninthly, and finally, what kind of possibilities and challenges of recognition and reconciliation between perpetrators and victims of evil are there in “real” socio-political and historical contexts of evil and suffering? Can we, e.g., develop a notion of *forgiveness* or *reconciliation* that adequately accounts for such challenges? My hypothesis is that the notion of forgiveness, in particular, is absolutely central here and is needed in more “applied” explorations of the relevance of antitheodicism.¹¹

The main hypotheses of my pragmatist-cum-recognition-theoretical program can be summarized as follows: (i) Theodicism is a failure of moral recognition. It is arguably even banally evil in Hannah Arendt's (1994) sense, as it encourages an “unthinking” attitude toward others' experiences of suffering (cf. also Minnich 2017). (ii)

¹¹ On the notion of forgiveness in an antitheodacist setting, see Jankélévitch 2005; and XXX. Approaching this notion in terms of recognition and antitheodicy, one can argue that forgiving evil-doers is in some cases (e.g., the Holocaust) an act of non-recognition, or a failure to recognize the victims. How such failures could be identified and avoided needs to be studied in detail.

Antitheodicism is a necessary condition for the possibility of occupying a moral point of view. (iii) Pragmatism and recognition theory need to be critically synthesized and integrated in the defense of antitheodicism. (iv) Theological and secular ethico-political discussions of evil and suffering thereby also need to – and can – be integrated.

The kind of non- or misrecognition paradigmatically exemplified by Job's friends' theodictic speeches may take a variety of different forms. One may fail to recognize (to acknowledge), e.g., (a) the *suffering individual* (e.g., the victim of evil, individual or collective); (b) the sufferer's *experience* of their suffering; (c) the *sincerity* of that experience, or their communication, report, or account of it; or (d) the *sufferer her-/himself as sincere* (as exemplifying sincerity) and, thus, as an intellectually and morally integrated subject. All of these are different versions of failing to acknowledge what can be called "the reality of suffering". The speeches by Job's friends manifest these different ways of non-acknowledgment and insincerity, while Job's key virtue, from the Kantian point of view, as noted, is his sincerity: he refuses to accept any theodictic explanation of his suffering as being based on God's alleged "reasons". (Needless to say, there are also insincere reports on suffering, and insincere sufferers, just as there can be sincere attempts to formulate theodicies. This, however, is not at issue here.) The insincerity of theodicism lies at a transcendental level. Appreciating the way in which the concept of sincerity functions in Kant's antitheodictic argumentation (cf. XXX), we may systematically analyze and further develop the categorization of theodicies as ethical failures of recognition and/or acknowledgment – as transcendental failures, violating the necessary conditions for the possibility of ethics. Furthermore, at the meta-level we may also speak about the self-reflective failure to recognize (acknowledge) (e) *the impossibility of ever fully acknowledging the other's suffering* (or the suffering other), in the sense of (a)-(d).

What is needed (but cannot be delivered here) is a detailed elaboration on the argument that antitheodicism, seeking to avoid the above-listed failures of recognition ((a)-(e)), is *constitutive of* a truly moral perspective on evil and suffering, and hence of morality itself, arguing that morality in general is largely (albeit not exclusively) a matter of responding to evil and suffering. This constitutivity is inseparable from the ways in which relations of recognition are constitutive of the ethical sphere as such.

Moreover, our ability to recognize otherness at all requires a sufficiently rich language. The worry that our language becomes ethically impoverished should be specifically addressed in antitheodictic argumentation based on pragmatism and recognition theory. Special attention ought to be drawn to the way in which our relations

to other human beings are misguided and the moral language we use becomes “dislocated” (to borrow a term from Phillips 1995), if we succumb to the temptations of apparently moral vocabulary such as “justice”, “compassion”, or even “love” in the service of theodicist goals. We fail to genuinely recognize otherness – other human beings’ distinctive perspectives on the world, especially their experiences of suffering – if we seek to accommodate their narratives within an overall legitimizing story, theological or political, allegedly making sense of their sufferings.¹² The kind of dislocation and corruption Phillips speaks about can be as serious as, albeit more subtle and more difficult to observe than, the moral horrendousness of the “Newspeak” imagined in George Orwell’s dystopic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Theology and philosophy of religion, as well as secular ethics and politics, all need to develop approaches, vocabularies, and ways of thinking and speaking that sincerely seek to recognize suffering – including sufferers’ experiences of the utter meaninglessness of their suffering – without reducing those experiences to any harmonious theodicist scheme. Our attempts to genuinely develop such sensitivity in our ethical and political language-use may be crucially enhanced by serious study of literature, as emphasized in James Conant’s (2000) reading of Orwell’s novel in the context of Richard Rorty’s (1989) interesting but problematic neopragmatist renouncing of the concept of truth in Orwell. More generally, maintaining and further developing this kind of sensitivity to suffering in an antitheodicist setting may be exactly what is required for us to avoid the kind of banality that (as analyzed by Arendt) is itself a key source of evil (see Minnich 2017).

If we fail to respond to this need to develop a sufficiently rich language, in a political and literary way, our philosophy and theology may become ethically and perhaps also politically corrupt. We must therefore continuously critically examine the necessary conditions for the possibility of conceptualizations of acknowledgment and/or recognition that avoid such corruption. However, we also need to take up a reflexive question: insofar as antitheodicism is a condition for the possibility of morality, as I have suggested, how can we *argue ethically* for antitheodicism itself (against the moral

¹² Such language-use may be as dislocated and out of touch with genuinely moral concerns as the religious discourse on immortality as an infinite temporal continuation of the existence of something like an immaterial soul or a disembodied spirit is out of touch with any truly ethical attempt to recognize the relative unimportance of one’s own life in comparison to others’ (cf. Phillips 1970, 1995).

corruption of theodicies)? We must *already* occupy a moral perspective in order to be able to do so. Antitheodicism and the moral perspective are, thus, *co-constitutive*.

Let me very briefly propose the meta-level (methodological) hypothesis that a kind of *pragmatic pluralism* is needed to make sense of this situation. I have suggested that theodicism justifying or excusing innocent suffering violates the conditions that make morality itself possible (in political as well as theological contexts). By developing this transcendental argument, we must critically examine the challenge of co-constitutivity. Only a pragmatically enriched transcendental method can make sense of the idea that antitheodicism constitutes the moral point of view while itself constitutively depending on moral argumentation emerging from that point of view. A pragmatically pluralist argumentation strategy enabling us to switch the (transcendental) perspective of argumentation is needed to articulate this. The co-constitutivity of antitheodicism and morality requires us to be able to change the “direction” of transcendental argumentation. This in turn requires a pragmatically *perspectivalist* understanding of transcendental argumentation. Such a methodological commitment thus emerges as a meta-level condition for the possibility of transcendental moral antitheodicism.

This meta-level argument, of course, also needs considerable further scrutiny. Here I have been able to present it only in a barest outline. It is, in any event, a continuous task for both pragmatism and recognition theory to examine how exactly the versions of transcendental argumentation they employ can be further developed in response to challenges such as the one concerning the kind of co-constitutivity mentioned here.

Concluding reflections

My programmatic suggestions in this paper can be seen as addressing the question of *how* – by means of what kind of philosophical methodologies or, more generally, approaches – the problem of evil and suffering ought to be examined. As explained above, we should both employ and critically assess two philosophical frameworks, pragmatism and recognition-theory, synthesizing them into a systematic theory of antitheodacist ethical responses to evil and suffering, transcendently grounded. Therefore, there is a *metaphilosophical* dimension running through the kind of argumentation proposed, an attempt to reflexively examine what kind of methods are appropriate for dealing with evil and suffering. Such a reflection is in the end possible only by using the same methods of

analysis and argumentation that are being examined. This is a *reflexive* process of philosophical self-examination; it can, moreover, be argued that evil provides a crucial test case for such a process. It must also be investigated whether philosophical methods alone are sufficient in this area or whether they should be enriched by methods drawn from, e.g., literary analysis and criticism as well as political theory and critique.

My proposed integration of pragmatism and recognition theory might also lead to a re-examination and renewal of the concept of recognition, possibly by critically comparing it to the concept of acknowledgment (cf. again Cavell 1979), which may not require the same kind of “as” clause as recognition relations always involving the recognizer’s recognition of the recognize “as” something specific and which may therefore avoid some of the political power struggles inherent in recognition acts. Moreover, we should, I have argued, not only integrate pragmatist and recognition-theoretical methodologies in philosophical analysis and argumentation but also examine whether, and in what sense, both are indebted to, or can be seen as articulations of, the Kantian methodology of transcendental argumentation in this context. (The historical contrast between Kantian and Hegelian orientations can thus also be illuminated from a new angle.)

Let me finally provide my conclusions as a catalogue of four general themes to which further studies ought to be devoted. These cut across the research questions identified above.

First, the general historical development and systematic character of the problem of evil and suffering still needs to be examined by philosophers, theologians, and historians of philosophy. While, as we have seen, this topic is usually approached *either* from the point of view of theology/religion *or* from the point of view of secular moral and political philosophy or political theory, we are challenged to integrate these discourses. The systematic argumentation regarding theodicy in contemporary (primarily analytic) philosophy of religion must therefore be critically studied in order to show its limits – or, perhaps better, the limits of its relevance. Therefore, it is necessary to critically analyze contributions made by both theist and atheist theodacists.¹³ A systematic contribution to the argument needs to be offered, if one plans to move beyond the

¹³ Such as, e.g., Plantinga 1977; Hick 1978; Mackie 1982; Martin 1990; Swinburne 1998; several contributors to Rowe 2001; van Inwagen 2006; Stump 2010; as well as several contributors to Sterba 2017.

opposition between the standard controversies between theism and atheism by emphasizing the meta-level dispute between theodicism and antitheodicism.

Secondly, the theory of recognition must explicitly take up the task of ethically investigating evil and suffering. How (if at all) is the problem of evil and suffering currently addressed in the theory of recognition, and how should it be addressed? How can, or should, different responses to this problem be themselves recognized, or denied recognition (e.g., as ethically or politically adequate)? Insofar as theodicism is analyzed as an ethical failure of adequate recognition, antitheodicism emerges as an ethical condition (for the possibility) of any (religious or secular) philosophy of human experience and history, instead of theodicy-construction being a condition for theism.

Thirdly, pragmatist philosophy of religion and its applications to the problem of evil and suffering needs to be examined in both historical and systematic detail. Does the work of classical pragmatists like James and Dewey, or neopragmatists like Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, offer hitherto unexplored resources for addressing the problem of evil? This topic should not remain marginal but should rather be brought into the focus of pragmatist philosophy of religion. How, moreover, does pragmatist philosophy of religion “translate” into the language of recognition theory, or vice versa? Can we (and if so, how exactly) read the pragmatists as articulating a view of rational and morally responsible religion – and politics – as based on the recognition of a plurality of different voices, i.e., of otherness and of the suffering of those who have not been adequately recognized?¹⁴

Fourthly and finally, it can be argued that it is possible to apply pragmatism and recognition theory to the real-world political challenge of supporting peace, multicultural understanding, forgiveness, and non-violence in the increasingly polarized global scene. Issues of recognition have obvious political and cultural relevance not only to our attempts to deal with violent conflicts but also to peaceful encounters among religious and non-religious groups in multicultural societies. Scholars of pragmatist political theology should therefore specifically examine the significance of the concept of

¹⁴ Pragmatism can in this regard be compared to other antitheodicies (such as Wittgenstein-inspired ethics and philosophy of religion represented by Phillips, Gaita, and others, as well as Jewish post-Holocaust ethics represented, e.g., by Jonas, Bernstein, *et al.*), especially with respect to the Kantian background of all these antitheodicies (see again XXX). More work is to be done in order to show whether, and if so, why (and how exactly) pragmatism is superior to its rivals in the pursuit of antitheodicism.

mediated pragmatic recognition for concrete cases of recognition and non-recognition. Various forms of social or structural evil inherent in political structures and practices can be addressed through such investigations.

These avenues of further inquiry are interconnected in various ways. They also motivate us to integrate pragmatism and recognition theory rather than relying on any neat division of labor between them. Moreover, as the theodicy discourse could itself be regarded as “evil” (presumably banally evil in Arendt’s sense, as suggested above), we must develop, defend, and further articulate the critical view that theodicism itself contributes to the evil it seeks to understand and justify – precisely by failing to adequately recognize the victims of evil and suffering in situations in which such recognition is a moral and political requirement. We must do this without going down the (politically incorrect) slippery slope leading (at an extreme) to a kind of censorship willing to destroy the theodicy discourse altogether. It must be possible to ethically and transcendently criticize theodicism while avoiding such a slippery slope, just as it must be possible to engage in uncompromising moral and political criticism of, say, anti-immigration populism without sacrificing the fundamental democratic value of the freedom of speech typically misused by such populists. It is the task of pragmatist and recognition-theoretical antitheodacists to show how we can be committed to such core values (in politics, theology, and political theology alike) while resolutely pointing out the recognition-failures inherent in theodicies, both religious and secular.

Acknowledgements [to be added later].

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[self-references marked with XXX in the interest of anonymity, to be spelled out in the final version]

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