

ANTI-THEODICIES – AN ADORNIAN APPROACH

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Abstract: The question of why bad things happen (to good people) has puzzled individuals over generations and across different cultures. The most popular approach is to turn the issue into a question about God: Why does he allow bad things that lead to the suffering of often innocent bystanders? Some have drawn conclusions that there can be no God. These attempts that seek to find meaning in suffering are called theodicies. Thus, theodicies promise that the torment of the innocent is not in vain. In this article, I argue that theodicy as a viewpoint, independent of its intention, does injustice to the experience of the sufferer. Furthermore, an Adornian approach to suffering avoids the instrumentalization of others' suffering and that instead of relating to another person's suffering through theodicy, Adorno's notion of non-identity opens up an alternative, non-coercive avenue.

Keywords: theodicy; anti-theodicy; suffering; Adorno; priority of the object; non-identity.

Introduction

The question of why bad things happen (to good people) has puzzled individuals over generations and across different cultures. While there have been versatile attempts to answer this question, perhaps the most popular approach is to turn the issue into a question about God: Why does he—if he is almighty and aware of all things in the world he created—allow bad (or evil) things that lead to the suffering of often innocent bystanders? Some have drawn the conclusion that, all things considered, there can be no God. Thus, suffering is taken as an empirical refutation of God's existence—or as evidence that he is not almighty or thoroughly good or aware of all things (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). These attempts that seek to find *meaning* in suffering are called theodicies. Thus, theodicies are the silver lining of suffering that promises that the torment of the innocent is not in vain. While the motives of these well-intended narratives about suffering may be understandable (they can create a sense of safety in an unpredictable world where unimaginable suffering takes place), theodicies are problematic in the sense that they are insensitive toward the experience of the individual sufferer. The contradicting viewpoint to theodicy is anti-theodicy, which, according to Sami Pihlström (2020, vi), is “an ethically motivated approach to the problem of evil and suffering, seeking to refute all theodacist attempts to force human beings' experiences of meaningless

suffering (or the sincere communication of such experiences) into grand narratives of alleged meaningfulness or purposiveness” (see also Pihlström, 2019).

In this article, I address the notions of theodicy, suffering, anti-theodicy, and nonidentity. An anti-theodicean account developed by Kivistö and Pihlström is, to a large extent, my starting point in the first section of the paper. Along the lines of Kivistö and Pihlström (2016; 2017) and Pihlström (2020), I argue that theodicy as a viewpoint, independent of its intention, does injustice to the experience of the sufferer. It does so by “explaining away” the subjective and intimate experience of the sufferer, as it places that experience in the service of some greater good (e.g., to allow God to cultivate an individual or humankind) and wrongly places the sufferer in the background (see Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). Moreover, I explore the possibility of deriving an anti-theodicean viewpoint from the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno. Even though (anti-)theodicy was not a central theme in Adorno’s works, in my view, his philosophy has a lot to contribute to the discussion. I employ particularly Adorno’s notion of nonidentity as a form of recognition—or, using Adorno’s vocabulary, *identification*—that does no injustice to the sufferer. I first flesh out the notion of theodicy by treating John Hick’s variant as a representative case for theodicies. I then discuss the critiques presented by Holocaust survivors Primo Levi (1959) and Emmanuel Levinas (1968/1994; 1982/1985; 1993/2006), and more recently by philosophers Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström (2016; 2017). In the final section of the article, I investigate Adorno’s view on suffering and his notions of the priority of the object and nonidentity. I argue that Adorno’s approach to suffering avoids the instrumentalization of others’ suffering as well as the problematic metaphysical standpoint (see Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017), and that instead of relating to another person’s suffering through theodicy, Adorno’s notion of nonidentity opens up an alternative, non-coercive avenue.

Theodicies

Kivistö and Pihlström (2017) point out that the mainstream views in philosophy of religion and theology on suffering focus on the question of how God can allow the wrongdoings of people that lead to the suffering of others. Secular views of theodicies, for their part, turn the attention from God to the wrongdoers: What leads an individual to conduct that entails suffering for others (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017)? Thus, the common denominator of theodicies is the search for explanations that seek to make sense out of suffering, to justify

suffering as having a place or purpose in the world order or God's divine providence.¹

According to Kivistö and Pihlström (2017, p. 1):

From such a perspective, all apparently unnecessary and meaningless evil and suffering there seems to be in the world we live in is rendered in some sense 'meaningful' or at least necessary for the overall goodness of the harmonious world system.

In this article, I also understand theodicy simply as an attempt to provide a vindication for seemingly meaningless suffering.

John Hick (1922–2012), one of the key contemporary philosophers of religion, well known for his contribution to the theory of theodicy, describes the purpose of suffering as follows:

[T]he very mystery of natural evil, the very fact that disasters afflict human beings in contingent, undirected and haphazard ways, is itself a necessary feature of a world that calls forth mutual aid and builds up mutual caring and love.... God has set us in a world containing unpredictable contingencies and dangers – in which unexpected and undeserved calamities may occur to anyone – because only in such a world can mutual caring and love be elicited. As an abstract philosophical hypothesis, this may offer little comfort. But translated into religious language it tells us that God's good purpose enfolds the entire process of this world, with all its good and bad contingencies, and that even amidst tragic calamity and suffering we are still within the sphere of God's love and moving towards the divine kingdom. (Hick, 1981, p. 50)

In the quote above, Hick teaches us that suffering is needed because without it we would not know love and care. Thus, suffering is a *necessary* element in the world. Hick's formulation of theodicy is termed the "vale of soul-making" theodicy. Another common formulation of theodicy is a "free will theodicy"² according to which suffering exists on the earth because God gave human beings free will, which they are able to use in the way they choose (including in bad ways). In this formulation, suffering is needed so that humans can have free will. For if God had created human beings as morally perfect, they could not choose but to love him. As mentioned in the introduction, I treat Hick's formulation of theodicy as a representative case of the theodicist approach and the problems connected to it. According to Scott, Hick claims that because human beings are born imperfect, suffering offers them the possibility to develop toward perfection (2010). The above quotation conveys that Hick

¹ This is not to claim that all theodicies treat suffering as valuable or positive in any sense.

² See, e.g., Plantinga (1965) and for a more recent formulation Swinburne (1978).

believes that suffering brings out the best in human beings, as it enables us to love and care for the other. As I see it, Hick's line of logic proceeds as follows: I become a better person because I see suffering around me, and I know that suffering might strike me where it strikes others. Thus, I need to help and care for others because I too might soon be in need of love and care. In other words, Hick seems to argue that the awareness of the unpredictability and randomness of suffering drives human beings together in a favorable manner. At the same time, suffering is taken as a given, as it happens in a world that God, in his great wisdom, has created. What is more, in Hick's theory of theodicy, the acts of care and love are *born* of suffering.

While it is true that love and care are proper responses to suffering, it seems problematic to root them in suffering. Thus, Hick is right in the sense that the vulnerability and interconnectedness of all life should motivate us to appreciate and look after each other, but he errs when he makes suffering the precondition of these things. It appears that by taking suffering as an inevitable condition of life—one that is worth keeping—we may escape feeling uneasiness regarding others' suffering and thereby set our minds at ease, regardless of the suffering around us. The problem is that Hick's starting point allows for an indirect approach to suffering by leaning on a meta-narrative. As I see it, his theodicy *justifies* suffering and can even *excuse* one from attempts to decrease suffering. A similar observation is made earlier by Phillips, who condemns Hick's moral perfection model as instrumentalism: "if my moral development is offered as the justification of others, such justification leads towards ... an egocentricity and self-centeredness" (Phillips, 2001, p. 57). In the same spirit, Davis (2001) claims that since Hick's account necessitates "intolerable" evil for the sake of our moral perfection, "the further implication appears to be that we ought not to protest very much" (Davis, 2001, p. 63). In Hick's defense, one might argue that his account is a moderate one, in a sense, in that it does not propose that God would directly send distress upon human beings (Hick, 1981). Nevertheless, in his account, misfortune has its assigned place in the divine world order.

Detractors of theodicies

The theodist position is not without its detractors. In particular, the horrific events of the Second World War gave rise to vigorous criticism against theodicies.³ The Italian philosopher Primo Levi (1919–1987) and the Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), both Holocaust survivors, were among the thinkers who rejected the project of theodicy. More recently, contemporary philosophers such as Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström have developed their account of anti-theodicy. Before proceeding with the contemporary critique of theodicy, it is necessary to explore the critiques of Levi and Levinas, as their critiques vividly capture the moral dilemmas and the insensitivity at the core of theodicy. Moreover, in the post-Auschwitz world, Levi’s and Levinas’s accounts should be taken into consideration when we seek to find meaning in the suffering of the other. As we will see, Levi’s non-philosophical description of the events in Auschwitz powerfully expresses the absence of social dimensions in theodicy. Levinas’s account, for its part, accentuates the particular asymmetry that characterizes relations between individuals and the ethical answerability that arises as a result of the suffering of the other.

After experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust, Levi and Levinas see no possibility of seeking meaning in suffering. In his work *If This Is a Man* (1959), Levi describes a scene in which his fellow inmate, Kuhn, sobs intensely, thanking God for (barely) saving him from the gas chamber. Kuhn fails to give a thought to another inmate lying close to him and witnessing Kuhn’s gratitude, while dealing with his own misfortune of being sent to the gas chamber (Geddes, 2018). This event is utterly unacceptable to Levi: “If I were God, I would spit Kuhn’s prayer out upon the ground” (Levi, as cited in Geddes, 2018).

Levi’s response encapsulates the core problem of theodicies: their insensitivity toward the one who is suffering. Instead of paying attention to the suffering at hand, theodicies turn attention away from the subjective embodied experience of suffering by abstracting it into a necessary component of a bigger scheme, e.g., a divine plan, as discussed below. As will be argued later, this abstraction is a symptom of problematic subject-centeredness. What is worse, theodicies can function as unintended *defenses* for suffering. As we recall, this concern is epitomized in the passage from Hick quoted earlier, in which he portrays suffering not “only” as meaningful, but as a necessary part of the elevation of humankind: the widely valued characteristics of humankind, love and care for others, owe

³It should be noted that while in the context of the 20th century and in the tradition of continental philosophy, the Second World War forms a fixed point, in the broader context, the problem of theodicy has been discussed by theologians for centuries (for more, see, e.g., Assman, 2001).

their existence to suffering in his account. In my view, it seems likely that taking this kind of stance may indeed lessen our motivation for defeating suffering, as it implies that without suffering, we would also be deprived of love and care.

Similar to that of Levi, the starting point of Levinas—that suffering is always useless and the individual is always profoundly responsible for it—stands in stark contrast to that of Hick (Levinas, 1968/1994). Levinas states: “To be a self is to be responsible beyond what one has oneself done” (1968/1994, p. 49). Elsewhere, he continues: “the least one can say about suffering is that, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless: ‘for nothing’” (Levinas, 1993/2006, p. 79). Levinas sees suffering not only as pointless, but as evil, and says “the justification of the neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality” (Levinas, 1993/2006, p. 85). The above passages surely rule out all attempts to entertain theodicies as ethical responses to suffering.

According to Levinas, we are all inescapably responsible for the other’s suffering by merely existing. Levinas argues that the ethical perspective on suffering maintains that there is a radical difference between the suffering in the other, where it is unforgivable to me, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else (Levinas, 1993/2006, pp. 80–81).

Because we are irrevocably responsible, relations between individuals are characterized by a particular asymmetry: being-for-the-other always comes before being-for-oneself (Levinas, 1982/1985). Hence, Levinas anchors his ethical theory and account of subjectivity in the other. In his view, theodicies destroy our moral agency, as they indicate resignation from the ethical commitment of being-for-the-other (see also Aaltola, 2018). What is more, Levinas thinks that the sufferer disappears into suffering as it absorbs their consciousness and subjectivity and thus can be of no benefit to the sufferer (Sachs, 2001).

Contemporary philosophers Kivistö and Pihlström (2017), for their part, refer to theodicies “as ethical failures of recognition.” According to Kivistö and Pihlström, even the most noteworthy academic formulations of theodicy are subject to extirpating ethical criticism (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2016). The rejection of theodicies includes any atheist attempt to answer the problem of suffering (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). Because of the difficulty of doing justice to the experience of the sufferer through strictly intellectual, philosophical arguments, Kivistö and Pihlström (2016) develop an alternative approach to the problem of suffering (theodicy vs. anti-theodicy), in which the philosophical arguments are enriched with

figures and characters from (selected) classical literature. Samuel Todes (2001) also makes use of the integration of “a great novelist” perspective when we try to make sense of the inconceivable suffering that took place in Auschwitz in an ethically sound manner. According to Todes (2001), empirical knowledge about suffering in Auschwitz interferes with the genuine acknowledgment of the horrific experiences that took place in the concentration camps.⁴

The merit of Kivistö and Pihlström’s methodology is, according to the authors, that it enables one to address suffering and the problem of evil without the pitfalls of the theodist approach. In particular, it enables an ethically sustainable way of discussing the suffering of the other, as it rejects the problematic background assumptions of theodicies that are derived from metaphysical realism (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). Before discussing their unconventional union of literature and philosophy in constructing a more sensitive approach to the problem of suffering, it is necessary to explore the link between the theodist approach and metaphysical realism, which, according to Kivistö and Pihlström (2017), is built into theodicies.

As we recall, theodicies presume that suffering is a part of a larger meta-narrative that makes suffering somehow worthwhile. The narrative, however, is not fully discoverable by human beings. A theodist would argue that *if only* we knew this hidden narrative, we would see exactly how suffering is necessary, and thus it would be morally, as well as cognitively, plausible for us—we would understand its necessity. While it may be safe to assume that there is more to the world than the human perspective allows us to discover (that is, how the world is in itself should be distinguished from the capability of our cognitive faculties and sensory systems to make sense of it), the metaphysical standpoint that theodicies inescapably entail encounters serious problems. The chief problem is that by assuming such a viewpoint, which is beyond our grasp, and grounding the starting point of our inquiries in that abstraction, we do not directly encounter what is right in front of us: namely, the other human being in distress and our ethical responsibility to alleviate that person’s suffering. As Kivistö and Pihlström put it: “‘God’s-Eye View’ narrative structures overlook or neglect the truth about what really happened to an individual sufferer or how they experienced their suffering” (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017, p. 6). In other words, theodicies construct a narrative according to which there is a remote position (“God’s-Eye View”) from which it is possible to detect a comprehensive design of the world and its orderly arranged elements to which suffering also

⁴ Todes does not deny the importance of sociological and historical knowledge about the events (Sachs, 2011).

belongs. However, this kind of narrative ignores the difficult and perhaps undesirable information *about* suffering.

Indeed, according to Kivistö and Pihlström (2017), the commitment to the “God’s-Eye View” (termed also “view-from-nowhere”) is unethical because it reduces “others’ experiences of suffering into mere objective processes and events in the world taken to be independent of our ethical acknowledgement of suffering in its meaninglessness irreducible to any alleged theodist meaningfulness” and makes ethics secondary to metaphysics. To elaborate, the metaphysical assumption about an unrestricted viewpoint from which the world can be accurately and thoroughly explained functions as a starting point for theodicies. If we view the other’s suffering from such a remote position in order to find purpose in it—instead of engaging in ethical consideration toward the other in distress—we give metaphysics priority over ethics (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). A more proper response would be to view the conjunction of metaphysics and ethics as a characteristic of the human lifeworld (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). As we will see, Adorno sees the assumption of a “God’s-Eye View” position (of any absolute conceptions of reality) as a symptom of bloated subjectivism. In regard to theodicies, this means that instead of de-centering oneself to encounter the suffering of the other (so that one would be genuinely available to the other), the experience of suffering is appropriated for one’s own purposes. In other words, theodicy instrumentalized the suffering of the other.

Because of the overwhelming ethical difficulties, Kivistö and Pihlström assert that we should give up the project of theodicies completely. Discussing the objective reality (of suffering) and truth requires, to a certain degree, a more realist, “earthly” way of speaking about the human aspect. This new way of speaking, however, is not possible through metaphysical realism (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). Instead, the way in which unmerited suffering can be portrayed in fictional literature (Kafka and Joseph Roth, for example) enables us to talk about suffering without appropriating it for some other purpose. Fictional literature more adequately captures the tensions around the moral conflicts of the experiences of suffering and maltreatment. In this way, literature can further philosophical consideration of the problem (Kivistö & Pihlström, 2017). Suffering that is not our own remains always, by necessity, inaccessible to us. The sort of horrid suffering that took place in the concentration camps of the Second World War,⁵ in particular, is approachable through words only to a

⁵ While stressing the atrocities of the past, we should not forget ongoing suffering. At the time of writing, Genocide Watch had announced a “Genocide Emergency” alert—the most severe level, which is declared when genocide

limited extent. It seems that Kivistö and Pihlström are correct that employing alternative ways—the use of art and literary works that involve more of our imaginative, empathetic, and corporeal dimensions—in conjunction with philosophical reflection allows us to treat suffering in a more ethical way.

Adorno's notion of suffering

In this section, I examine the Adornian notions of suffering and nonidentity. The programmatic purpose of critical theory was to decrease suffering in the world, particularly suffering and oppression that is derived from the social aspects of human life (see, e.g., Horkheimer, 1968/2002; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997; Adorno, 1966/2004). Horkheimer defines the aim of critical theory as “the rational organization of human activity” that will emancipate man from slavery (Horkheimer, 1968/2002, pp. 245–246). While traditional theories seek to explain reality, critical theory sets out to change it (Horkheimer, 1968/2002). Importantly, Adorno asserts that the prevailing social reality is antagonistic to the degree that a harmonious state of things is unfeasible both as a starting point and an outcome of our inquiries. This commitment already implies the rejection of all kinds of theodicies, as they reconcile suffering with the unfolding of the world.⁶ Hence, critical theory is *critical* in the sense that it strives to keep the discrepancies and tensions visible (Huhtala, 2018).

Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational. Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany. (Adorno, 1963 & 1969/2013, pp. 26–27)

In the above quotation, Adorno describes suffering as physical experience that, to a large extent, evades intellectual ways of knowing and conceptualizing it. Suffering is something

is already taking place—for several different locations (Mali, Yemen, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Syria). Genocide Watch describes itself as “the Coordinator of The Alliance Against Genocide. Founded in 1999, the Alliance is made up of over 50 organizations from around the world and was the first coalition of organizations focused completely on preventing genocide” (<http://genocidewatch.net/aboutus-2/>).

⁶ See Sachs (2001) for an excellent comparison of Adorno with Levinas on theodicies. According to Sachs's reading, Adorno holds a negative theodicy. Following Bernstein (2001), Sachs claims that Adorno's approach should be understood as a negative theodicy in order to acknowledge the organized sweeping spiritual demolition of which death was nothing more than an afterthought (Sachs, 2011).

that words cannot properly convey. For Adorno, suffering takes place in the “somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life” (Adorno, 2004, p. 365). However, the fact that he mentions post-Hitler Germany indicates that his account of suffering also has a historical character. Due to the instrumental rationality that enabled the atrocity of the Second World War (the logistics, calculations, careful preparation and execution of the events), Hitler’s Germany serves as a horrendous landmark in the history of civilization. The most important lesson history can teach us is “to arrange ... thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno, 2004, p. 365). Unlike theodicies that treat suffering as void of historicity—as something that characterizes human life throughout time—Adorno highlights the social and historical aspects of suffering: suffering always takes place in particular social and historical settings.

In accordance with the critique by Kivistö and Pihlström, Adorno’s philosophy also rejects metaphysical assumptions connected to the meaning of suffering. As Adorno asserts:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.... actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience. (Adorno, 1966/2004, pp. 361–362)

Above Adorno claims that at a corporeal level we can know the moral failure of such attempts: our feelings, which are informed by our corporeal experience, are able to oppose metaphysical thought that tries to justify suffering as somehow purposeful. The lived experience of those who suffered in Auschwitz makes reality utterly incompatible with metaphysical attempts to make sense of it. Indeed, Adorno refutes the idea that after the events of Auschwitz, immanence could derive any kind of meaning from metaphysics. Instead, he calls for a proper way of speaking about suffering and truth (Zuidervaart, 2015). “The innervation that metaphysics might win only by discarding itself ... is not the last among the motivations for the passage to materialism” (Adorno, 2004, pp. 364–365).

Adorno's materialistic approach,⁷ in the scope of this article, means that instead of connecting conceptual narratives, theodicies, to suffering, it should be met in a more direct manner. The discursive treatment of suffering imposes sovereignty over the experience of the other by conveying suffering as something to be known from outside. As mentioned above, Adorno stresses the material aspects of human life and thus thinks they should also be at the core of philosophical considerations. Suffering is always an embodied experience that takes place in particular, historical settings.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/1997), the root cause of treating other human beings inhumanly is the instrumental way of relating to ourselves and others. Adorno thinks that the excessive instrumentalism⁸ in our way of reasoning has enabled human beings to treat and destroy others as mere objects (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; Huhtala, 2018). As Adorno's remark regarding the "objective side of feelings" above indicates, human beings are not completely colonized by instrumental reason, but there is a more intimate side to us that is outside the scope of instrumental reason (see also Holma & Huhtala, 2016):

The minimal offences are so relevant because in them we can be good or evil without smiling over it, even if our seriousness is a little delusive. Through them we get the feel of morality in our very skin—when we blush—and assimilate it to the subject" (Adorno. 1951/1984, p. 181).

By paying attention to the "minimal offences" that emerge from the nature within us, it is possible to break free from the hold of instrumental reason (see Holma & Huhtala, 2016). According to Adorno, these impulses and hints, often unobtrusive and spontaneously occurring in our experience, contribute to our moral knowledge. This is not to say that we should follow our immediate bodily reactions or emotions, but rather that these corporeal aspects can add to our moral knowledge from a source within us that is not in reach of "the

⁷ To avoid any possible misunderstanding: Adorno's materialism does not indicate a thoroughly physical conception of the world where there would be no room for moral considerations. According to Adorno (and Horkheimer), human beings emerge from nature and stay bound to it. However, the human consciousness is also qualitatively different from nature. Adorno (and Horkheimer) find it crucial for human beings to sustain the awareness of themselves *as conscious parts of nature* (see, e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997; on Adorno's critical materialism, see Cook (2006).

⁸ The critique of instrumental reason is at the heart of the philosophy of the Frankfurt School. The key idea is that instrumental reason became a dominating mode of reason due to the particular dynamics of the Enlightenment process (see, e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997). Basically, instrumental reason is about finding the most efficient means to a goal. According to critical theorists, it was particularly adapted by science but gradually extended to all fronts of human life. Critical theorists understand instrumental reason as a necessary dimension of reason—however, when overemphasized, it is highly destructive. The main problem is that instrumental reason does not involve any reflection about the goals (Horkheimer, 1968/2002). The epitome of the triumph of instrumental reason was the Nazi concentration camps where (instrumental) human reasoning was employed to find the most efficient means of destroying other human beings.

damaged social fabric” (see Huhtala, 2016, p. 691). The emphasis on materiality and corporeality refers to one of Adorno’s key thoughts, the primacy of the object, which means:

that subject for its part is object in a qualitatively different, more radical sense than object, because object cannot be known except through consciousness, hence is also subject. (...) Object is also mediated; but (...) it is not so thoroughly dependent upon subject as subject is dependent upon objectivity. (Adorno, 1969/2013, pp. 249–250)

In the above quotation, Adorno expresses the point of view that object and subject are both mutually mediated and, in this way, require each other. The subject of the mediation is the “How” and the object the “What” (Adorno, 1969/2013). The mediation of the object is more prominent compared to the mediation of the subject as the former involves an inquiry about the object itself while the latter expresses the manner in which the object is being mediated. To put it bluntly, in Adorno’s account, subject is always tied to the distinct finiteness of also being an object, but the object is not always a subject. Here, Adorno comes close to Levinas, as he highlights the asymmetry connected to the subject’s relations, but unlike Levinas, who stresses the other as prior to the subject, Adorno stresses the priority of the object. The misconception of the subject–object relation has severe consequences: in Adorno’s sinister view, mainstream Western philosophical tradition and culture exemplify harmful identity thinking, whose root can be traced to the problematic overemphasis of the subject. Following Adorno’s line of thinking, theodicies can be seen as a problematic subject-centeredness, where the other’s experience is not allowed to take precedence but is employed as an instrument in the service of something else. At most, theodicies represent the enterprise of bringing earthly values into an abstract theory with no foundation in reality (see Adorno, 1965 & 1966/2008).

The primacy of object is closely connected to another central theme in Adorno’s philosophy: the concept of nonidentity, the meaning of which is extensive and complicated in his thought. Here, I shall discuss it insofar as it is relevant to this article. Most important, the concept of nonidentity opens up a non-dominating way of responding to another person’s suffering. For Adorno, nonidentity is a particular way of using concepts and relating to the world through them—one that it is not based on “the ‘application’ of a priori concepts to a priori intuitions via the ‘schematism’ of the imagination” (Zuidervaart, 2015; Adorno, 1966/2004, p. 5, p. 146). Here, Adorno develops his account of nonidentity through Kantian terminology. Although Adorno favors Kant’s idea that objects themselves are not directly

accessible to us, but that a “block” remains in our grasp of objects, he rejects Kant’s idea that pure concepts could be applied without any involvement of human experience (Adorno, 2001). Nonidentity aims to describe the relation between conceptual and non-conceptual, which always involves experience. Like identity thinking, nonidentity aims at identification of the object, but in doing so it “identifies to a greater extent and in other ways” (Adorno, 1959/2001, p. 2). The concept of non-identity cannot be fully captured because it represents remembering of nature that goes beyond our conceptual understanding (Huhtala & Giacchetti, 2015). Adorno holds crucial that this pull between the properties of nature exceeding the limits of human understanding and perception of nature through the human conceptual understanding is maintained (Huhtala & Giacchetti, 2015). Ambiguously, concepts are the only way to approach non-identity (Huhtala & Giacchetti, 2015). Adorno sees that an authentic experience is enabled with that which surpasses the reach of sensibility and thought (Zuidervaart, 2015; Adorno, 1966/2004). Thus, instead of seeking identification and closure, the subject meets the limits of its experience (Thompson, 2006). Because of the disrupted and unfulfilled identification, the subject cannot presume sovereignty over the object but experiences nonidentity not only with the object, but also within itself.

Similarly to Levinas, Adorno thinks that subjectivity starts by radically de-centering from it. Adorno’s accounts of ethics and subjectivity are both founded on nonidentity. Adorno states that in the subject, the “distinguishing element necessarily appears as nonidentity” (Adorno, 1966/2004, p. 277). Nonidentity contains identity, but it simultaneously encloses that which exceeds the limits of fixed identities (Adorno, 1966/2004). According to Adorno, the unresolved tension and the dialectic between identity and nonidentity enables the establishment of relationships to ourselves and others that are not based on identification and domination. Adornian subjectivity is amenable to historicity and change (Adorno, 1966/2004; Huhtala & Giacchetti, 2015). To sum up, nonidentity is a way of relating to others that acknowledges that the other always remains partly an enigma (Thompson, 2006). Through nonidentity, the other and their experience are encountered without an attempt to master them. Thus, it is a way to meet the experience of the other in an ethically responsible manner, as it avoids drifting into the sphere of metaphysics or treating others as mere objects in our concrete world of objects. By not assuming (full) identification with the other’s experience, it does not instrumentalize suffering.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the ethical problems of theodicies. While there is an extensive body of theodicies, I examined Hick's formulation as an illustration of the problems common to theodicies. Building on the philosophies of some post-Auschwitz thinkers (Levi and Levinas) and more contemporary sources (Kivistö and Pihlström), and particularly the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno, I argued that theodicies are insensitive toward the individual sufferer, and thus likely to increase suffering due to their built-in, detached metaphysical "God's-Eye view"—and that they describe suffering as a necessary element of the world, which normalizes suffering instead of motivating us to alleviate it. In light of Adorno's philosophy, theodicies represent erroneous identification of the experience through concepts.

Indeed, from the Adornian viewpoint, theodicies are manifestations of a problematic subject-centeredness that imposes unwarranted sovereignty upon another person's experience. The erroneous identification of the object harms not only the one who suffers but, more generally, the human ability to have authentic experience. Moreover, theodicies create distance between individuals, as they enable individuals to rise above the conditions at hand. In this way, theodicies seriously neglect the world and moral reality we live in, possibly undermining social change. Through the Adornian lenses, the material and corporeal aspects of suffering point to the vulnerability and evanescence of human life and require readiness to meet difficult experiences instead of turning away from them. Thus, I suggested that an adequate way of relating to another person's suffering would be through Adorno's notion of nonidentity, as it recognizes the inconceivability of the other and the priority of the object in the structure of our experience. At any rate, an ethical response to suffering seems to start by refraining from theodicies.

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