

Article

Parallax Theology: Reframing Compensation Theodicy

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Abstract: The reality of suffering and the existence of natural and moral evils appear to present significant obstacles to the doctrine of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Theodicy is an attempt to resolve the problem of evil. One formerly prominent theodicean response can be termed “compensation theodicy” (or “afterlife theodicy”), premised on the notion that, in the words of the philosopher Stephen Maitzen, “Heaven swamps everything,” that is, that God compensates for earthly suffering by way of heavenly reward. This approach has fallen into disrepute. Here, two minor responses and one major response are sketched, drawing on restorative justice, phenomenology, and the concept of parallax. Building on the critical philosophies of Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Žižek, parallax denotes a perspectival shift, or optical cycling, between two irreconcilable positions that nevertheless is in some sense productive. Viewed through the lens of parallax, compensation theodicy appears far less controversial than some theological thinkers have contended.

Keywords: theodicy; parallax; compensation; afterlife theodicy; problem of evil; suffering

“PARALLAX, *Parallaxis*, in astronomy is a change of the apparent place of any heavenly object in the sphere of heaven, caused by its being seen from different points of view.” (Croker et al. 1765)¹

1. Introduction

The problem of evil is on many accounts *the* fundamental problem confronting theological discourse, and the need to erect a defensible theodicy—that of reconciling an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent *Theos* (God) as bearer of *dikē* (justice), with the world’s patent evils and suffering—has for millennia been considered of central import to theologians and philosophers. The theodicean challenge is perhaps most famously encapsulated in Boethius’s (1918, I.105) probing question: “*Si quidem deus est, unde mala?*” (“If there be a God, from whence proceed so many evils?”). Amidst secularization and receding faith in late modernity, the thorny issue of squaring God’s goodness with worldly suffering, or providing an “answer to the question of why God permits evil” (Plantinga 1977, p. 10), has only become more pressing.²

One standard response has been to say that evil is really a kind of vacuum, a nothingness. The evil-as-privation view, which both Augustine and Aquinas espoused (Cary 2019; Grant 2019; see also ST 1.49.1), was rejected by Leibniz as folly (Murray et al. 2013): The painter who paints a deficient portrait is just as much responsible for the fine brushstrokes as the missing details that would turn the work into a true masterpiece. In 1755, the Lisbon earthquake, in which tens of thousands of people died, shook apparently settled positions stemming from Leibniz’s ([1710] 1985) *Theodicy*. In his poem commemorating the earthquake, Voltaire scorned prevailing theodicean orthodoxies, addressing himself to those “philosophers, who cry, ‘All’s well,’ / And contemplate this ruin of a world,” a thinly veiled allusion to Leibniz’s notion of the “best of all possible worlds”:

To that appalling spectacle of woe,
Will ye reply: “You do but illustrate
The iron laws that chain the will of God”?



Citation: Shammás, Victor L. 2023. Parallax Theology: Reframing Compensation Theodicy. *Religions* 14: 1003. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081003>

Academic Editor: Hans Zollner

Received: 3 July 2023

Revised: 1 August 2023

Accepted: 3 August 2023

Published: 7 August 2023



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Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
 "God is avenged: the wage of sin is death"?
 What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
 That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?
 Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
 Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid? (cited in Hyland 2003, p. 77)

Voltaire deftly rehearses two common theological responses to the problem of evil: Even God must obey the laws of nature, and the evils of the world are not God's work but the product of human sin. Voltaire sensed that both responses were inadequate. While one might find spiritual comfort in Pope Francis's claims that "God is respectful of freedom" and that "it would more dishonor man if God could take away his freedom, than if man, with his freedom, committed a crime", Quoted in Wenders (2018), a nagging question nevertheless remains: Surely God could make an exception in especially horrific cases? Would it really be such a great "dishonor," or affront to human dignity, to prevent exceptional suffering, such as saving an innocent child from the lethal consequences of plate tectonics?

One attempted solution to the problem of evil has been termed "compensation theodicy," which Reichenbach (2022) (critically) discusses as the view that some measure of reward in the afterlife can be said to *compensate* for temporal suffering. To compensation theodacists, the problem of evil is at least in part compensated out of existence, so to speak, with the bliss of the hereafter amply making up for the trials of earthly existence.³ Even a very significantly sized event recedes into near-nothingness in the face of eternal bliss, it seems. Indeed, consciousness of the rupture between this and the next world is fundamental to Christian thought; "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below. . ." begins one of John Henry Newman's well-known statements in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, suggestive of this foundational structuring split between a here-and-now reality and the hereafter. The Catholic Church teaches that heaven is the "fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness," a "perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, para. 1024). From some doctrinal standpoints, then, the idea of heaven as a perfectly fulfilling condition, and thus in some sense compensatory for earthly evils, is hardly controversial.

The "Heaven swamps everything" theodicy, as Stephen Maitzen (2009, p. 123) poignantly terms it, is really what we might call an *argumentum ad minusculum* (an appeal to the rather small) or an *argumentum ad imperceptibilem* (an appeal to the imperceptible): Measured against swelling infinity, any fixed quantity recedes into nothingness. Drawing on Hegel, Marx famously observed that "merely quantitative differences beyond a certain point pass into qualitative changes" (Marx 2010, p. 313). With Marx's law of the transformation of quantity into quality in mind, we might say that a shrinking entity sooner or later ceases to be a relevant phenomenological entity, falling away from the conscious horizon of the observer. Thus, I do not particularly worry about the microscopic bacteria that I step on and likely kill with each step I take, but I would worry very greatly indeed if I were to step on larger-sized, sentient organisms, such as kittens or puppies. Shrinking suffering does not nullify the original instance of suffering, but if divided and diminished to a sufficient extent, suffering would sooner or later undergo a phenomenologically pertinent qualitative change. Analogously, the evils of this world that I have suffered become like the microscopic bugs under my boots when viewed from the vantage point of Heaven: I simply do not worry about them any longer, having shrunk from my phenomenological field of view, which is now saturated with the limitless joy of the beatific vision. Suffering is no longer experientially germane or "at hand"; it lacks *Vorhandenheit*, to speak in Heideggerian terms. From the vantage point of Heaven, earthly suffering will be like old age's receding memories of schoolyard bullying, or the fading childhood reminiscences of a broken bone, only divided by an unimaginable scalar of ever-greater proportions, and therefore becoming an infinitesimal, a fixed quantity measured against an infinite expanse that therefore itself becomes, in relative terms, an ever-receding quantity. The corollary of *heavenly inflation* must be earthly deflation, the dwindling into nullity of mortal suffering.

We might think, then, of the problem of evil as an issue of perspective, of optics—the ineluctably contextual nature of experience. To take an example, when I speak with you, there are all sorts of physical processes taking place within and around us. However, for the most part, and assuming a basic state of normality, these processes do not enter our experience of reality: They are not felt to possess a “presence at hand.” We may be wrapped in philosophical discourse and care not one whit for the defensive actions of our white blood cells taking place at that very moment; metaphysics trumps metabolism. In theological terms, we might say that we “forgive” that which occurs or has occurred but which is of no relevance to the situation: There are objectively extant processes and events that leave us phenomenologically untouched because they lack salience to the situation in which we are immersed. They no longer “worry” us. Forgiveness is a kind of forgetting, an erasure of worrying about processes that might otherwise impinge upon our conscious horizon. Similarly, to be on the receiving end of God’s compensatory work—to be numbered among “the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46) or take up residence in the Father’s many-mansioned house (John 14:2)—is to be thrown into a situation in which the evils of the world lose salience, receding into the dimness of forgiving forgetfulness. Heavenly compensation outshines earthly suffering.

2. The Anticompensationist Position and Restorative Justice

To Reichenbach (2022) and others, however, this apparent solution seems questionable at best: How can a God who is good permit that which would seem to stand athwart the good, irrespective of the reward to follow, which might seem little better than a bribe? Maitzen (2009) thinks the argument confuses compensation with justification and that the two must be kept strictly separate. Now, there is something intuitively appealing about this anticompensationist argument. If you first beat me with a stick, then pay me handsomely, the payment does not, after all, cancel out the original act of violence. Compensation does not overwrite history. Payment would be mere restitution for damages, but the damages would not therefore be annulled. Of course, it might be objected, as Reichenbach (2022, p. 8, footnote 9) notes, that God is not like someone beating another with a stick, because God does not actively will evil into being. He does, however, seem to *permit* evil to happen. A better example, then, might be that God watches on as you beat me with a stick, and *then* (hopefully) rewards me handsomely at some later, otherworldly time, but I will surely still be smarting from the beating regardless; the reward as such will not make the welts go away. The beating itself has not been *justified*; rather, I have been *anesthetized*. Compensation theodicy seems, at least in its bare-bones (or, in Reichenbach’s (2022) terms, “weak”) form, untenable.

Might we not, however, approach compensation theodicy with the pragmatist spirit of civil law instead and, more specifically, with a legal analogy from tort law? In this body of law, monetary remuneration is frequently offered to victims in compensation for some wrongful act committed against them. Again, compensation does not undo the original wrong, or tort, but it does seek to restore wronged parties to an improved state, who are, in successful cases, at the very least assuaged; moreover, they are more likely to feel assuaged if the compensating party was only indirectly responsible for the act by way of omission rather than commission. In offering a minimalistic encapsulation of tort law, Cooke (2009, p. 4) provides the formula: “act (or omission) + causation + fault + protected interest + damage = liability.” The theological implications are obvious: Although few theologians would hold that God actively or directly brings about evil, He might seem to be liable for the damages of suffering by force of omission—*not* hindering the “wrongful harms to every dimension of life from physical injury to property damage to personal insult” said to constitute torts (Madden 2005). No doubt the legal analogy can be pushed too far, but compensation theodicy, reconceived now as a kind of “divine restorative justice,” with overtones of the law of torts, is not inherently inimical to the interests of justice. Thousands of cases are settled in this fashion annually, often to the professed satisfaction of the victims

of wrongs—so why ought we to expect any different in the realm of divine justice and redress?

The legal logic of compensation is also found in that organized body of thinking about victims, harms, and communities known as restorative justice. In John Braithwaite's (2004) terms, restorative justice attempts to "repair the harm" wrought by a wrong, even as it recognizes the original wrong. Like all repairs, that which is repaired is not brought back to its pristine state: Even the most ably sutured wound is liable to leave a mark on the body. But there is restoration, an attempt at least to be "made whole," and we may to some extent be taught to grow by and through our wounds. The dichotomy Maitzen (2009) establishes between compensation and justice is undermined by the restorative justice school, which (in addition to its participative dimension) operates on the seam between compensation and justice, trying to bring the two into alignment through its restorative practices.

3. Thinking in Terms of Parallax

Leaving the legal analogy behind for now, I propose coming at the problem-complex from a slightly different angle, certainly departing from Reichenbach's (2022) more analytical theology, using the concept of *parallax*, derived from the works of critical theorists like Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Žižek. Originally a technical term in optics and astronomy, its literary-philosophical pedigree is equally distinguished, stretching back to Kant and Joyce's *Ulysses*, with more recent appearances in the works of philosophers such as Karatani, Žižek, and others (see, e.g., Finkelde et al. 2021). More straightforwardly, in astronomy, parallax denotes the effect by which an object appears to be displaced depending on the position of the observer: A shift in viewpoint, then, seems to affect the position of the object. The more philosophical appropriation of parallax no doubt springs from its inherent affinity with postmodern sensibilities, suggesting that the object is at least in part constituted by the gaze of the observer. As Žižek formulates it, with parallax, "an 'epistemological' shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself" (Žižek 2011, p. 244). The radical claim implicit in the concept of parallax is that perspectivism is ontological: Shifting one's position does not merely add additional information about the object being observed but would seem to transform the object, too.

In his youthful work, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant describes the notion of "pronounced parallaxes":

I formerly used to regard the human understanding in general merely from the point of view of my own understanding. Now I put myself in the position of someone else's reason, which is independent of myself and external to me, and regard my judgements, along with their most secret causes, from the point of view of other people. *The comparison of the two observations yields, it is true, pronounced parallaxes, but it is also the only method for preventing optical deception, and the only means of placing the concepts in the true positions which they occupy relatively to the cognitive faculty of human nature.* (Kant 2002, p. 336; emphasis added)

Kojin Karatani (2003) warns against what we might call a straightforwardly epistemically triangulating reading of Kant's statement. Francis Bacon thought of parallax in exactly this sense, writing in *The New Organon* of "the case of parallaxes, where astronomers have remarked that there is a true place and a perceived place" (Bacon 2000, p. 188). To Bacon, parallax is simply an observational problem to be corrected through more, and better, observations. This is not Karatani's way of thinking about parallax—that is, as distinguishing between a false, subjective position and a true, objective position. Karatani says we should not take Kant's statement to mean that our subjective viewpoint is false and so we need to "objectivize" our subjectivism with the aid of another's viewpoint, because "if one's subjective view is an optical delusion, then the objective perspective or the viewpoint of others cannot but be an optical delusion as well" (Karatani 2003, p. 1).

To elucidate this somewhat cryptic remark, Karatani offers the example of photography. Developing his example, we might say that a photograph can be thought to provide an "objective" appraisal of a person; as opposed to the subjective first-person view, the

“third-person view” of the camera appears to render persons and scenes objectively, from without. This early understanding of photography was on display when, in 1940, Stalin said, “Literature cannot be a camera,” that is, cannot be (seemingly) impartial and objective like a camera was thought to be (cited in Clark and Dobrenko 2007, p. 300). But this “objectivity” was in the early history of the medium of photography experienced as an alien, horrifying force, “just like hearing a tape recording of one’s own voice for the first time” (Karatani 2003, p. 2), suggesting that some early observers were more sensitive to the subjectivity of a form that others were and have become desensitized to. Similarly, a wide-angled overview of a crowd might be thought to produce an “objective” rendering of the scene, over against the multiple subjective viewpoints of all those in the crowd, which would be hemmed in by the subjectivism of each individual perspective. But of course, this objective overview is no *more* objective than the aggregate of individual viewpoints; as Bourdieu reminds us, it is of paramount importance to *reinscribe* the subjective in the objective, precisely because the subjective is always “objectively subjective.”

Parallax is, as a first pass, a rift or fracture, or a fundamental disunity, between two views, systems, discourses, or positions. On Žižek’s account, the “parallax view” or “parallax gap” (the terms are used interchangeably) denotes the unresolvable contradictions of antinomial positions, “the irreducible gap between the positions themselves, the purely structural interstice between them” (Žižek 2013, p. 201). Although the parallax gap constitutes a really unbridgeable antinomy, one can, like certain animals, attempt to rapidly shift between perspectives to compensate for this optic lacuna. The two positions that together constitute the parallax gap cannot be brought together in harmony, but *sliding between them* allows, if not for correction, then for a kind of bringing-into-sympathy of the antinomial positions with each other. The only way to approach the omissions of parallax, it would seem, is to shift between perspectives, never fastening onto one as offering “true” sight or the privileged site of truth. Parallax necessitates *motion*. To Karatani, parallax precisely does *not* mean “thinking from a place between [. . .] two poles” (Karatani 2003, p. 4) but denotes a *movement*, a “critical oscillation,” that causes us to see more and better, a “reality that is exposed through difference” (Karatani 2003, p. 3).

There is an obvious parallel here with the problems of theodicy. If our individual perception of suffering and evil is distorted by the limitations of individual subjective perception, one might have thought that the solution would be to take the “God’s-eye” view on reality, understood as an external, totalizing gaze upon the entirety of the universe. But this view would precisely erase the objectivity of subjective limitation—the real existence of miserable fleshly reality—which is incapable of grasping the whole. There would indeed be something “monstrous” about this move: Telling a survivor of the Nazi death camps that God should not be held responsible for permitting the sin of the Holocaust, that all will be set right in Heaven, and that the individual survivor is not “grasping the full and whole picture” of God’s providence—or, as one of Saul Bellow’s (1985, p. 17) characters caustically asks their interlocutor, “Do you mean that every gas chamber has a silver lining?”—could rightly be dismissed as both a pastoral monstrosity and bad theology. The standpoint of the whole is liable to be just as false as the standpoint of the partial, in the measure that the whole fails to incorporate the very limitations of the partial into its account of reality.

In a more straightforwardly sociological context, Bourdieu repeatedly emphasized this need to “break with the break” on this point: If objectivism is a necessary break with particularism, there nevertheless needs to be a “reincorporating break” with universality that reintroduces the “objective” limitedness of subjectivism. In Christian theology, the name for this reincorporating move, of course, is the Incarnation, by which God takes on the finite corporeal reality of the human creature, that reality which is lived by the “sensate, suffering, skilled, sedimented, and situated creature of flesh and blood,” as Wacquant (2015) poignantly phrases it, in order to draw closer to the creatures of His creation.

Can we not read the Incarnation, then, as a kind of parallax? God Himself appears to obey the dynamic movement of parallax, pivoting between the subjective view of the first-person creature and the apparent “objectivity” of the third-person, God’s-eye view of

the world. With the Incarnation, God allows Himself to cycle between the divine and the fleshly, precisely *not* as synthetic unification but as parallax, a cycling of opposites, “without ‘mixing, mingling, or confusion’” (Barron 2007, p. 269), in a formulaic phrase capturing the coexistence of Jesus’s humanity and divinity. If it were *simply* a matter of coming to learn to accept the objective necessity of the divine perspective, then the Incarnation would not, strictly speaking, be necessary, at least from the standpoint of perspectival epistemology. We might even go so far as to say that the Incarnate Christ is God’s *wrestling with parallax*: Recall that to Karatani, parallax denotes “an antinomy between different positions (or discursive systems) that never resolves into any unified or static positionality” (Lippit 2004, p. xvii). The Christ-man is parallax embodied, with all its impossible contradictions contained and unresolved.

4. Christianity, Religion of Parallax

Doctrinally speaking, Christianity is predicated on parallax through “the Gospel”: Does not the false unity of this substantive itself suggest the necessity of parallax theology, which is needed to parse this quadripartite text? The polyvocality of the four gospels, which all contain important inconsistencies—from the differing genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke to minor incompatible claims, such as the injunction to *not* carry a staff in Luke and Matthew against the claim that the disciples should bring nothing *except* a staff in Mark—means that Christianity has always had to attend to the problem of the gap, the irreconcilability of difference. And this is quite apart from stylistic, affective, and theoretical differences, such as the abyss between the economical, modernist prose of Mark and the rich, mystical–theological messaging of John. In this sense, Christianity is inherently “postmodern,” keenly sensitive to the effects of parallax: Its truth resides not in any *one* gospel but precisely in the rapid cycling, or Karatani’s “critical oscillation,” between them, trying (impossibly) to account for their paraconsistency within a framework of disunified unity.

Christ, too, is the voice of parallax theology: So much in Christ’s parables and pronouncements is both *p* and *not-p*, so to speak, betraying strange, jarring incompatibilities across the textual record. Think only of Jesus’ proclamation, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34), which contrasts starkly with his later rebuke: “Put your sword back in its place [. . .] for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Similarly, the most consistent message of the Bible may be the repeated injunction to *not be afraid*—in 2022, the Bible application YouVersion reported that Isaiah 41:10 (reading in part, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God”) was the “most popular verse of the year” (Mbakwe 2022). And yet, in the allegory of the True Vine, Jesus says, “If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are gathered up, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6)—hardly the soothing message of one who proclaimed to his disciples: “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6:20). Or what of Jesus’s injunction that his followers be “wise as serpents” and yet “harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16), perhaps parallax at its purest? Both are strictly speaking impossible *in combination* as there can be no synthetic unity of opposites here: Serpents swallow doves, doves flee from the serpent’s approach.

Does this make Christ an inconsistent figure? He must be to the classical logical–analytically trained mind—and perhaps this accounts in part for the relative decline of Christ’s appeal in postindustrialized late modernity, but *not to persons sensitive to parallax*. Parallax theology embraces radical inconsistency and contradiction on the view that cycling or oscillating between contradictory positions nevertheless *produces information*, that is, gives rise to a new position, not understood as a harmonious unity but precisely as an “incarnate” position dually composed of opposites. This cycling between polar opposites is intended to force a perspectival shift, to gain new footing, to critically oscillate between contradictory positions on the wager that this yields fresh insights.

What sort of consequences flow from what we might call this *parallax scoping*? Like a closed fist that appears to move if one cycles between opening and closing one's left and right eye in rapid succession, parallax involves a sensation of *movement*. But is this movement intellectually meaningful, or does it remain trapped at the level of pure sensation? Recall, as the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr (2016) says, that "mystery isn't something that you *cannot* understand—it is something that you can *endlessly understand*." Mysteries are not dead ends but sites of generativity, eruptions of what Deleuze terms "lines of flight."

Parallax theology is dialectical, but a strange dialectics: a dialectics (at times asymmetrical) without synthesis, oscillating between thesis and antithesis, without their *Aufhebung* (or cancellation and preservation) into a higher form. The parallax thinker operates within antinomy *qua* antinomy. This "impossible stance" allows one to inhabit theological contradiction *productively*. Thought does not come to an end, as in the idea of synthesis; the mystery of parallax contains this endless quality of the utility of opposites. The dialectic of parallax does not fall to rest, which would be the *rigor mortis* of frozen and finalized thought, but moves restlessly, one might even say *vitally*, onwards.

And it is from the standpoint of parallax thought that we can create a renewed sense of compensation theodicy: The compensatory moves of the divine do not justify the evils of the world, but compensation nevertheless has utility or bears value as a mechanism for generating restoration. Restorative justice is a kind of parallax: Accepting restoration in the face of past crimes is the "impossible act" of forgiveness, which is a kind of forgetting, receding quantity transformed into qualitative change. We might say that a compensation theodicy is necessarily dialectical, in the strict sense of a parallax, or unreconciling, dialectics—a dialectics that does not try to sublimate opposites into a synthetic unity but embraces contradiction as contradiction. It is a theodicy awake to the radical antinomy of the subjectivism of individual suffering and God's totalizing "objectivity," eking out a faith-filled existence in the interstices between the two. Faith must be lived out in the parallax gap. At best, we can attempt to rapidly scope—this term is purposefully chosen, from *skopein*, "to look"—the field by shifting between the view of fleshly reality and (what we may imagine to be) the God's-eye view.

If God's compensatory moves function, it is not because they "solve" the problem of evil but because they force an oscillatory motion between humanity's legitimate hurtfulness and an acceptance of the objective God's-eye view of reality, from which suffering, somehow or other, providentially "makes sense." To simply uphold one of these two optics will lead us into theological error: To simply affirm the subjective suffering of the hurt human subject can only lead to *ressentiment*. But conversely, to deny suffering with an affirmation of God's total sovereignty and the epistemically superior vantage point of His view must necessarily lead to callousness, an imperviousness to the reality of subjective suffering. The solution lies precisely in the rapid scoping of the parallax believer, pivoting between positions and accepting—in the strict sense of *learning to live with*—the dialectical disunity of these antinomial opposites.⁴

An example of parallax theology is found in Giorgio Agamben's (2013) *Opus Dei*, in which the Italian philosopher reflects on the problem of liturgy and the priestly function. Agamben dwells on the categorial distinction between that which is *ex opere operantis* ("from the work of the agent") and *ex opere operato* ("from the work worked"). It is wrong to say that the priest who carries out their liturgical function is simply a passive vessel for divine action; but similarly, it would be a mistake to exclusively emphasize the subjective efforts of the priest, that which springs "from the work of the agent" alone. What Agamben shows is that rightly ordered liturgy attempts to establish a parallax third category, but one that is not merely a synthetic unity of the two opposite categories: the priest as "animate instrument," on Aquinas's self-contradictory phrase (cited in Agamben 2013, p. 22). The priestly subject is in some sense a matter of indifference from the sacramental standpoint; on the other hand, this instrument cannot be wholly passive but must maintain a minimum of "active" dispositionality. This tension between *opus operatum* (the divine "work done") and

opus operantis (the human “work of the worker”) does not resolve itself in a mere coming together of opposites but precisely in the oscillatory disunity of parallax, the “both/and” of antithetical opposites. An “animate instrument” is, of course, a contradiction in terms (either the priest is God’s instrument, and so passive, or else active in their own right and so no longer a mere instrument for another’s will), but this contradiction holds if one approaches it in the spirit of parallax.

We can think analogically about the therapeutic situation as a relation calling for parallax. A psychotherapist who takes on the *purely heteronomous, structural, “objective”* view of their patient’s suffering—recognizing all the externally derived traumas and structural causes of the patient’s current predicament, from abuse to poverty—will likely never make any meaningful progress toward a cure or resolution of the patient’s symptoms. On the other hand, taking a purely volitional, “spontaneist,” autonomy-centered approach—emphasizing the patient’s willpower, personal responsibility, and need to “bootstrap” themselves into an improved state—will likely also engender significant therapeutic blockages. Both are partial, true-and-false, contradictory stances, which, taken on their own, lead to a dead end. Attempting synthesis will not work either; the positions make mutually exclusive claims: Either the patient is structurally determined by forces beyond their control or the patient possesses a “spontaneous” willpower able to engage in truly free action. Instead, the proper therapeutic response is a kind of parallaxic oscillation between the two views as productive yet partial “moments” of truth. Parallax denotes this restless cycling between antinomial positions that remain locked in irreconcilable contradiction. Only in the *movement* between them does a true view of the situation emerge, or, as in the example here, a possible cure.

5. Conclusions

There can be “no theodicy without eschatology,” as Hick (2010a, p. 102) has noted, a “slogan” whose validity he reiterates against the free-will defense outlined above, precisely because “the final responsibility for both our human sinfulness and for the harsh and challenging world in which we live, has to be God’s” (Hick 2010a, p. 9). Even if we admit the machinations of human freedom in explaining an atrocity such as the Holocaust, an event so “utterly evil, wicked, devilish,” composed of “horrors which will disfigure the universe to the end of time” (Hick 2010b, p. 361), God is ultimately responsible for the ontological make-up of reality as such: The basic set-up of existence is all God’s. If this is so, there must be some hereafter whose contents are salvaging if theodicy is to be salvaged. Hence Hick’s pointed formula.

Is heavenly compensation an untenable reply to the problem of evil? Although Reichenbach criticizes compensation theology—miscategorizing it along the way, incidentally, on grounds that it is alleged to have played a “minor role in Christian thought but a more important role in Islamic thought” (Reichenbach 2022, p. 1)—the eschatological, compensatory, and *parallaxic* split between a “higher world” and the “here below” has clearly been of central import to Christian theology. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). This is not to say that compensation theodicy has not, historically speaking, been put to highly reactionary political uses. On the contrary, compensation theodicy can all too quickly devolve into an “*anything goes*” *political theology*: There can seemingly be no end to which societal injustices and modes of domination might be expunged from the realm of conscious political agency simply because of the tantalizing promise of the goodness of the Kingdom of God. This political *misuse* of compensation theodicy, however, does not of itself invalidate the approach as such in strictly conceptual terms.

It has been felt among some critics that the concept of compensation somehow infringes upon the dignity of God, doing little to remove the stain of “natural” evils such as earthquakes and pandemics (which are, however, always interwoven with political-economic structures and therefore human agency and sin) or moral evils such as the Holocaust (which are, however, the result of free human action and therefore sinfulness). I claim,

however, that there are three major replies, sketched out above, that bolster compensation theodicy against such criticisms:

(1) Tort law and restorative justice. From a tort law perspective, compensation is entirely uncontroversial: It is a legal mechanism deployed regularly and across thousands of cases to meet the needs of victims of harms, and it is all the more effective in those cases where the wronged party can only hold the other side *indirectly* responsible for their harms.

In the most progressive versions of restorative justice, there is a built-in premise that wrongs are an *unavoidable aspect of communal life, and so one must develop social mechanisms of redress and restoration*; these processes of coming together, forgiveness, and redemption are also learning opportunities, though clearly such processes are far easier, and less problematic, when dealing with petty crimes, such as shoplifting or vandalism, than with large-scale “truth and reconciliation” efforts in the wake of institutionalized racial segregation or atrocities such as genocide. Central to restorative justice is the acceptance that no mechanism of redress can ever roll back history: The best one can hope for is (partial) reparation and learning. And yet this is not to be balked at: Restoration *is* a form of justice. A person is wronged by another person; the latter apologizes sincerely, makes amends, and restores the former by way of compensation, even if this does not undo the past. If this is an acceptable account of restorative justice in interpersonal relations, let us expand the notion of person to include “God,” who, *qua* God, can make amends not only satisfactorily but also to an infinite degree.

(2) Phenomenology: The infinity of reward and, consequently, a finitude-onto-nothingness of suffering are near-mathematical principles in the earthly–heavenly calculus, bringing about a fading from the phenomenological field of view of mortal suffering: Heaven is a place of forgiving forgetfulness or forgetful forgivingness. Past trials no longer seem *salient*; they lose *phenomenological conspicuity*. Again, heaven does not erase history, but it enables a perspectival shift such that earthly evils no longer appear to be, or are, experientially “at hand.” Heaven is not so much a bribe meant to coax the suffering out of its residents as a mathematical nulling out of suffering (with infinite bliss trumping the finitude of earthly suffering), with a consequent optical recalibration of mere mortals’ restricted frame of view.

(3) Parallax theology: Cycling between the subjective and the objective, involving not a denial of either view but an attempt to “Incarnate” our view of social reality, an (impossible yet productive) imitation of Christ, who was the “God-man,” the parallax view entails pivoting between multiple positions: the view from *miserable fleshly reality*, a “cruciform” view that recognizes full well the reality of suffering (Christianity being the religion par excellence of suffering, with, e.g., Luther’s “theology of the cross”), confronts it head on, at times perhaps standing even in *accusation* against God for bringing about an ontological configuration within which horrors can be perpetrated, but then, the *heavenly view*, the view from reward and recompense, perhaps, too, the view from God’s own totalizing view, involving the totalizing harmoniousness of a providential plan, for “when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end” (1 Cor 13:10). What is this “complete”? Is it a cancellation of subjective particularity of the mortal view? Parallax theology would instead posit that it is the raising to a higher degree of perfection the incompleteness of subjectivity but also, perhaps more interestingly, the perfection of *God’s own view* by way of incarnate knowledge of embodied suffering.

One great virtue of compensation theodicy is that it reorients our gaze away from one’s own subjective suffering toward ethical effort. In Thomas à Kempis’s austere fifteenth-century text, *The Imitation of Christ*, we hear of the rewards of heaven:

If only you had seen the everlasting crowns of the saints in heaven and the great glory they now enjoy! What a difference, from the time they were on earth where they were treated as objects of contempt and were considered unfit to live. If you had seen their crowns and glory you would have immediately humbled yourself to the very earth and sought to be everyone’s servant rather than to be lord over a single individual. (Thomas à Kempis 1998, p. 148)

Here, we see parallactic oscillation in action, cycling between the (ethically false) “lordly” view of the earthly dweller and the (macroscopic) compensation to come, which will be so significant that not only will all suffering be forgotten but also the faithful will regret not working even harder (ethically speaking) for the great rewards they might obtain. Similarly, in one of the *Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, we hear of an “elder” (*geron*), Abraham, who recognizes the validity of afterlife theodicy to his own ethical life:

The brothers begged one of the elders to refrain from his excessive labour. He answered them: “I am telling you, children, Abraham is going to be sorry that he did not strive harder when he sees the great gifts of God.” (Wortley 2013, N. 197)

Both the elder Abraham and Thomas rely upon the theologically weighty meaning of *sight*: There is a parallactic cycling between the here and now and final things. To see the “great gifts of God,” to see the “everlasting crown of the saints in heaven”: These ought to produce a fundamental kind of shift in attitude.

Christianity does not shy away from suffering; indeed, it is a religion *founded upon an absolute recognition of the reality of suffering*. But its theodicean response is, finally, that suffering does not, in any ultimate sense, matter. All will be set right in the end.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See the entry “Parallax” in Croker et al. (1765).
- ² Incidentally, committed atheists like Richard Dawkins have not been overly bothered by the problem of evil. To Dawkins, the problem of evil “is an argument only against the existence of a good God” (Dawkins 2016, p. 135). But, Dawkins claims, “Goodness is no part of the *definition* of the God Hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on” (Dawkins 2016, p. 135). The solution to the problem of evil, on Dawkins’s account, is therefore remarkably straightforward: “Simply postulate a nasty God.” Problem solved, it would seem—the only trouble being, of course, that this posited attribute marks a radical departure from all the major canonical understandings of God, who is, as Aquinas puts it, the “*summum bonum*” or “highest good” (Aquinas 1920, 1.6.2).
- ³ Of course, compensation theodicy constitutes but one part of a more comprehensive theodicy; it does not stand alone nor make up the entirety of the theodicean field. Compensation is one element within a composite whole that would have to make sense of how God structures a physical universe wherein suffering is minimized yet tolerated but nevertheless justified.
- ⁴ The concept of parallax should not be taken to entail an “anything goes” theology, as some might fear, admitting anything and everything into the pantheon of belief. Rather, parallax theology is an epistemic stance of (vigilant) openness to radical disjuncture—what Finkelde calls an “enlightening figure of thought” (Finkelde 2021, p. 2), aiding Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith in search of reason). A doctrinally grounded believer open to parallax is not required to depart from doctrine or accept anything whatsoever in an attitude of total relativization, but might rather be assisted in more deeply comprehending faith by way of an invitation to critical, reflective movements between irreconcilable positions.

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