Thoughts on Theodicy in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)

"The sinner is at the heart of Christianity. Nobody is as competent as the sinner in matters of Christianity. Nobody, except the saint."—Charles Peguy

Exploratory Questions

- How is the basic problem of evil present in the novel? (76, 109-109, 111, 140-143)
- Which of the classic Christian responses seems to be present in the novel?
- Is Scrobie responsible for what happens to him? To Louise? To Helen?

Theodicy

Evil is understood as a problem when we seek to explain why it exists (*Unde malum?*) and what its relationship is to the world as a whole. Indeed, something might be considered evil when it calls into question our basic trust in the order and structure of our world. For theists, the problem of evil is intimately involved with the nature and purpose of God in allowing it, often called a theodicy [from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (righteous)]. A theodicy is an attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil by answering the following problem, which in its most basic form involves these assumptions:

1. God is all good and all powerful (and, therefore, all knowing).
2. The universe/creation was made by God and/or exists in a contingent relationship to God.
3. Evil exists in the world. Why?

Notice what this problem suggests. It begins with the assumption that such a being as God will want to eliminate evil. If God is all good but not all powerful or knowing, then perhaps he doesn't have the ability to intervene on every occasion. Likewise, if God is all powerful and knowing but not all good, then perhaps he has a mean streak. If God is somehow all these things, but the universe does not exist in a contingent relationship, then God has little to do with evil (even though God's design can still be faulted). However, if God is both good and powerful, then why does evil exist? There are a number of classic Christian approaches to this question:

Classic and Contemporary Christian Responses to the Problem of Evil

I. The Free Will Defense: God wanted us to freely love him, which meant allowing for the possibility that we might choose against him. And we have--all of us since Adam and Eve. Free will provides a great good—self-determination--and carries with it significant responsibility, which is also a great good. This is especially true of relationships involving love: such must be entered into freely. Evil is an unfortunate result of human free will. If God were to intervene at every point of our wrongdoing, our free will would be compromised. So evil in the world is not entirely God's fault; however, this position does not claim that God is not responsible in any way for evil. If you have the power to intervene and do not, that implies choices.

II. The Soul Making Model: We are incomplete souls in need of improvement and growth. Notice that this model also assumes free-will (Michael J. Murray calls the former "consequent free will" theodicies and soulmaking versions, "antecedent condition free will" theodicies.). Evil is a necessary condition for a world in which we overcome obstacles and struggles in order to develop. In fact, many *higher-order goods* (e.g. self-sacrifice, endurance, courage, compassion on the poor, etc.) are not possible unless we have to overcome evil. This model points out that God often allows the condition of suffering to improve

us. We become purified through life's trials. Some versions of this suggest that our purification and growth will continue in the afterlife.

III. The Possible Worlds/ Great Design Argument: This suggests that God designed the world in such a way that it included the possibility of evil, but that if rightly perceived, we would understand that all of it works together for a greater good. This is a subset of the first two because both models assume a world in which moral action/ growth is both possible and meaningful. Namely, a world with free will and the possibility of soul making is a better world than one with only automatons.

IV. The Eschatological Hope: Granting all the above, God has also promised that such evil and suffering is only for a finite time in human history. God will bring an end to it all, and evil will be rightly answered by its destruction. Furthermore, the future hope that God offers will judge, compensate and/or at least put into perspective this present world's evil. Of course, this model raises the question as to whether good can be said to actually "balance off" evil and suffering. This is alternately understood as either the afterlife and/or the final state of all things. An extension of this is that the Church should be a community that looks to that future justice by modeling it now: believers are to avoid fatalism and work toward God's promised *shalom, a future of perfect peace and justice* that begins in God's work on the cross. Resistance to evil and suffering can be a form of obedience to God.

V. *The Suffering of God Response:* This response assures us that God has not abstracted himself from the human situation--that he, too, suffers with us. God weeps for Israel, the Holy Spirit grieves over sin, and Christ suffered for us that we might have an example of how to undergo suffering. Strictly speaking, this response isn't about justifying why God allows evil, as much as affirming that *God is involved in the problem*. Some have suggested that God's suffering teaches us to move from self-absorption to cooperation and compassion for others in their suffering. In this view God's own suffering absorbs our hostile self-absorption. Others have gone farther, arguing that God actually feels and experiences our suffering and, by doing so, honors us as the infinite God and that this honoring actually addresses our experience of evil and suffering by defeating it in our own lives.

VI. A Theology of the Cross: Contained in each view of the suffering of God above is a suggestion that in some fundamental way the work of the cross is God's answer (or one of his answers) to the problem of evil, even that the cross is the only justification God gives of his responsibility for the existence of evil. In this sense, the work of redemption transcends the role of Christ's suffering, for the cross is atonement for, victory over, and judgment upon evil and sin.

VII. Faith and Trust: Sometimes called simple fideism—this position is one that seeks not to answer the question in any complex way but rather affirm basic Christian truths, such as God is ultimately good; God has everything under the divine control; God is to be trusted despite life's trails and difficulties.

VIII. A Theodicy of Protest: This position is one that complains to God, objecting that God could have and on the surface *should* have intervened in any number of horrific circumstances. The sheer weight of atrocity is often cited. The believer says to God, "As best I can understand from my limited position you appear to have allowed horrible things to happen. Why? Should you do such a thing?" Then, rather than walk away in disgust or disbelief, the believer waits on God. This is an approach modeled for us in the Psalms. Believers protest from the ground of covenant—this is what God has promised us and who he is; therefore, should not God intervene? (i.e. Ps 44, 74, 88, 102, 142) This position at its best seeks to continue to affirm God's mystery and goodness even amidst confusion and doubt. Likewise, this position

holds it important to identify with the suffering of others, not to make light of their pain by seeking easily to explain it.

IX. Disavowal of Theodicy: This position argues from a number of different directions that the theodicy project is misfounded. Some suggest that theodical language tends to deny, trivialize, or downplay the suffering of others. Or theodicy is seen as a mistaken approach to the problem because it results in closing down what only God can truly answer. For some theodicy, if done at all, must be done within the praxis of sufferers, while theoretical discussions are guilty of the above. For others, theodicy is misfounded because one cannot "justify" the supreme being. John Philip Yoder goes so far as to suggest that theodicy is a form of presumption and idolatry because it seeks to judge God by human standards and ignores the biblical understanding of Christ's suffering and his mission for his kingdom.

A Practical Problem of Evil

According to Allender and Longman, the two most basic questions that are at the heart of the problem of evil for theists are: *Is God predictable? Is God just?* Such basic questions impact us because they point to some of our most personal questions: Are the world and my life predictable and just? Are they controllable? Are they flourishing? Here, we are dealing more with the practical questions, even the therapeutic questions of learning to change in accord with the suffering we experience, and learning to trust in the midst of suffering, deserved or undeserved.

We all experience three relational movements in the midst of any challenge to our human flourishing:

1) attack (anger or fear);
2) abandonment (jealousy or despair);
3) love (contempt or shame).

The first of each pair is a fight response, while the second is a flight response. Together they represent twin reactions to what appears as an assault on our dignity: 1) a withdrawal of intimacy, or 2) an arousal and deferral of love, that is the stealing away of hope.

At the heart of an existential problem of evil is a question of how our emotions can orient or disorient us in regard to our sense of what is fitting in the world, what is just, and what is life-giving. Our emotions can result in negative patterns that worsen our moral and spiritual condition or they can respond in positive ways that increase the habits of virtue and pursue the ends of justice and shalom:

	Negative	Positive	Psalms	Theodicy Questions
Anger	A refusal to wait for justice demands a more tolerable world now, suppresses choice, and consumes others on our own terms and for our own ends.	An assault against injustice uses a limited level of discomfort or pain in order to compel appropriate change, is willing to wait while we struggle, ponders in waiting our sin and desire, as well as the mystery and justice of God in his wounding of us.	2 90 10 9 13 7	Is God just? Will he let the wicked win?

Fear	A destructive anxiety is terrified at separation or incoherence, feels helpless before a loss of happiness, and distorts our perceptions of ourselves.	The fear of the Lord teaches us that God is neither impotent nor unloving; rather, it teaches us to experience his love in its radical-burning redemption of ourselves. We ponder our fears and worries and turn to his power and beauty.	27 46 55 75	Can I trust God to protect me from harm? Can the harm he allows have any good purpose?
Envy	Envy looks at an inequitable world and wants what it does not have, becoming obsessive with ambition and resentment.	Allender and Longman see no positive side to this one. Can there be an envy of what is good and a desire to live up to a standard that one has not lived according to?	73	Will God leave me empty while he blesses others?
Jealousy	Jealousy hoards in order to protect itself from scarcity, and guards what it loves in resentment.	The jealous love of God models the right response in protecting an exclusive, healthy relationship.	(Jer 31 Ezek 23)	Will God satisfy my hungers?
Despair	The loss of hope refuses to struggle amidst a sense of powerlessness, perhaps even concluding that life is not worth living; it grows in isolation from others.	The restoration of hope ironically can happen amidst our sense of being powerless; our struggle with feeling abandoned (even by God) can draw us onward to a desire for heavenly transcendence. (The cross transforms all despair.)	88 4 77 30	Will God leave me insolated and alone?
Contempt	Evil mocks and assaults the glory of the image of God in us; it seeks to wither and destroy what God has deemed as good; it claims to be equal to God in its gossip, slander, and blame-shifting.	The godly mockery of evil exposes the crime, renders poetic justice, and exalts in a trust of God over against evil while boasting in our weakness.	31 10 2 37	Does God love, or will he turn away in disgust?
Shame	The corrosion in human shame causes us to flee from exposure; it also results in violence against ourselves or others and reveals our deficiencies and flaws.	Redemption in divine shame results from exposing our self- worship and its foolish basis; It removes from us our idols and invites us to a place of dependent gratitude.	25	Will God hate me if he really sees me as I am?

The mystery of God is revealed in that God is not predictable; he will use pain to get through to us; he will expose us to his silence, a sense of being abandoned by him, even to direct assault. At the same time, his goodness is continually manifest in moving from suffering to glory; he loves us, parents us, restores us, glorifies us, and offers himself to us in the way of pilgrimage.

From Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III's *The Cry of the Soul* (1994)

Discussion Questions

1. Admittedly this is something of a reader response question and not one indicated by Greene himself: Of the models offered by Allender and Longman, which ones best fit the characters of Scrobie & Louise?
2. Can similar questions be asked of Wilson and Helen even in their ignorance of Christian faith?
3. How do hope and despair play a role in the characters' lives?
4. Is there a distinction to be made between the surface actions and duties of the characters and their true motivations?
5. How important is the nature of damnation and salvation to Scobie?