



Introduction

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Why is there so much suffering in a world governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God? The problem of evil or suffering has occupied the attention of many of the best philosophical and theological minds throughout the world. In 1710, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) coined the term “theodicy,” which literally means the “justice” or “justification” (*dikē*) of “God” (*theos*) (Leibniz 1985). Theodicy is the attempt to explain why God permits all the suffering we observe in the world—including both moral suffering (suffering that results from the behavior of human beings) and natural suffering (suffering that results from natural causes such as a hurricane or a tsunami).

Philosophers and theologians in various religious traditions have developed a wide range of theodicies. Within the Christian tradition, for instance, two of the most common theodicies are the “free will” theodicy and the “soul-making” theodicy.¹ Free will theodicies, championed by numerous Christian thinkers from Saint Augustine to Saint Thomas Aquinas and Richard Swinburne (1998), hold that human beings suffer primarily as a result of the misuse of their own free will. By contrast, numerous recent Christian philosophers, beginning with John Hick (2010), have defended soul-making theodicies, which hold that God has created this world

¹ It should be noted that “free will” and “soul-making” theodicies are not necessary mutually exclusive. In fact, they have often been combined—for instance, in Hick’s (2010) soul-making theodicy.

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as a “soul-making” environment in which we are meant to grow morally and spiritually through various kinds of experience, including suffering.

Comparatively much less scholarly work has been done on Indic theodicies. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the first Western scholars to have recognized the importance and originality of Indic contributions to theodicy. As early as 1916, Weber effused that the “*Karma* doctrine...represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history” (1958: 121). Similarly, Arthur L. Herman, in his provocative and groundbreaking book, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, argued that all Western theodicies have failed and that the Indic doctrine of *karma* rebirth alone “solves the problem of evil” by providing an elegant and comprehensive explanation of all our present suffering as the result of our own past deeds, either in this life or in a previous life (1971: 287).

Since Herman’s pioneering book, a number of scholars have begun to examine critically a variety of Indic theodicies, focusing especially on the theodicies of the eighth-century Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara² and the eleventh-century Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntin Rāmānuja,³ but sometimes discussing the theodicies of other Indian thinkers as well.⁴ Nonetheless, much more work remains to be done, in at least three directions. First, while scholars have paid disproportionate attention to the theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, they have largely neglected theodicies in other Indic traditions, Vedāntic and otherwise. Second, although some scholarly work has already been done on the theodicies of figures like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Sri Aurobindo, there is still no consensus regarding how exactly their theodicies should be interpreted. Hence, it is often worth reexamining, in fine-grained detail and in light of recent scholarship, Indic theodicies that have already been discussed by scholars. Moreover, since traditions like Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and Mādhva Vedānta have developed and evolved in the course of many centuries, it is necessary to examine the theodical reflections of later figures in these traditions as well. Third, we have barely even begun the urgent project of what Francis X. Clooney calls “comparative theodicy,” which he nicely defines as “the construction of a broad, cross-cultural and cross-religious set of theodicies that support and refine one another on the one hand, and, on the other, reveal and deconstruct unquestioned sets of presuppositions about evil and what counts in explanations of it” (1989: 548). While in-depth work on theodicies in individual religious traditions is essential, it is equally important, in this age of globalization, to bring into dialogue theodicies across different religious traditions.

This special issue makes contributions in all three of these directions by focusing on theodicies in two non-Śaṅkaran traditions of Vedānta—namely, Mādhva Vedānta and the modern Vedānta of Sri Aurobindo—and by bringing Hindu and Christian theodical approaches into fruitful conversation. The *locus classicus* for most Vedāntic theodicies is *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34, which directly addresses the

² See, for instance, Herman (1971: 264–86); Clooney (1989); Matilal (1992); and Bilimoria (2013: 288–90).

³ See Herman (1971: 264–86); Clooney (1989); and Bartley (2018: 101–6).

⁴ For instance, Bilimoria (2013: 285–88) briefly discusses Nyāya theodicy, while Gupta and Gupta (2012) discuss Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theodicy.

problem of evil: *vaiṣamyanaigr̥ṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati* (“No partiality and cruelty [can be charged against God] because of [His] taking other factors into consideration. For so the Vedas show”). All traditional Vedāntic commentators—including Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, Baladeva, and numerous others—take this *sūtra* to be a response to the objection that God is (a) cruel, since He permits so much suffering in this world, and (b) partial, since He places some of His creatures in fortunate circumstances and others in unfortunate circumstances. *Sūtra* 2.1.34, according to traditional commentators, refutes this objection by claiming that God places us in varying circumstances by taking “other factors” into account, including the law of *karma*. The basic theodical implication of the law of *karma* is clear: we are responsible for our own suffering, since we suffer as a result of our own behavior earlier in this life and in previous lives.

However, as numerous scholars have noted, the traditional theodical appeal to the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth raises a number of difficult questions.⁵ How exactly should the *karma* doctrine be understood? Is it a law of punishment or a more teleologically oriented mechanism meant to promote our spiritual growth? Is it possible to provide empirical verification of *karma* and rebirth? Is the law of *karma* compatible with human free will? Do the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth serve as a stand-alone theodicy, or are they part of a broader theodicy involving other doctrines as well? Is the law of *karma* inviolable, or can it sometimes be modified or suspended? If the law of *karma* is inviolable, then wouldn’t God’s omnipotence be curtailed, since He would be constrained to govern the universe in accordance with this law? On the other hand, if God can modify or override the law of *karma* when He chooses, then the problem of evil seems to reemerge. If God could have prevented certain instances of suffering from occurring by overriding the law of *karma* in those cases, why didn’t He? If the answer, say, is that God suspends or modifies the karmic consequences of the actions of only those creatures whom He favors or who have earned His grace, then God seems once again to be open to the charge of partiality.

As the three contributors to this special issue have shown, figures in various Vedāntic traditions explicitly grappled with such questions and provided a range of sophisticated answers to them. Michael Williams’s article, “Theodicy in a Deterministic Universe: God and the Problem of Suffering in Vyāsātīrtha’s *Tātparyacandrikā*,” examines the deterministic theodicy of the Mādhva Vedāntin Vyāsātīrtha (1460–1539). According to the deterministic worldview of Mādhva Vedānta, there is a hierarchy (*tāratamya*) of souls based on their immutable *svabhāvas* (“inherent natures”), with some destined for eternal salvation and others destined for eternal damnation. Vyāsātīrtha, in his discussion of *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34 in the *Tātparyacandrikā*, claims that God distributes happiness and suffering to individual souls by taking into account both their past actions in this life and in previous lives as well as their volitions. However, he argues that these volitions are not ultimately free, since they are grounded in the *svabhāvas* of the individual souls. At the same time, Vyāsātīrtha argues that the Mādhva doctrine of *svabhāva* provides

⁵ See Reichenbach (1990); Kaufman (2005, 2007); Chadha and Trakakis (2007); Edelmann and Bernet (2007); Sharma (2008); and Barua (2017).

the basis for a more satisfactory theodicy than that of Śāṅkara or Rāmānuja, since the doctrine explains why God causes some to commit good deeds and others to commit evil deeds. Williams suggests, however, that in spite of Vyāsātīrtha's subtle argumentation in favor of such a deterministic theodicy, it is difficult to see the justice and goodness in God's decision to condemn souls with an inherently evil nature to eternal damnation, since these evil souls did not freely choose to have an evil *svabhāva* in the first place.

Swami Medhananda's article, "A Great Adventure of the Soul': Sri Aurobindo's Vedāntic Theodicy of Spiritual Evolution," seeks to shed new light on Sri Aurobindo's (1872–1950) multifaceted response to the problem of evil in *The Life Divine* (CWSA 21–22). According to Medhananda, Aurobindo's theodicy has three interrelated dimensions. First, Aurobindo refutes arguments from evil against God's existence by appealing to skeptical theism, the view that in light of human cognitive limitations, our inability to understand why God permits a given instance of suffering does not justify us in inferring that God had no good reason for permitting that suffering. Second, Aurobindo develops a theodicy of spiritual evolution, according to which the "psychic entity" within each of us—the reincarnating soul that is a "portion" of the Divine—consents to participating in God's cosmic adventure, gradually evolving in the course of many births through various experiences, including that of suffering, until it finally achieves salvation. Third, Aurobindo defends the panentheistic view that the sole reality is Divine Saccidānanda, which playfully manifests as all individual souls, and he argues that any theodicy that presupposes an ontological difference between God and His suffering creatures is doomed to fail. Reconstructing the subtle chain of reasoning underlying Aurobindo's various theodical arguments, Medhananda suggests that his approach to the problem of evil may have been shaped, in part, by the teachings of the Bengali mystic Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836–1886), whom Aurobindo explicitly acknowledged as a formative influence in his early development. Medhananda concludes his article by arguing that there are conceptual resources within Aurobindo's thought for responding to some of the most serious objections scholars have leveled against his theodicy.

Finally, Ankur Barua's article, "The Mystery of God and the Claim of Reason: Comparative Patterns in Hindu-Christian Theodicy," contributes to the still nascent field of comparative theodicy. In his historically wide-ranging study, Barua brings into critical, constructive dialogue Christian theodicies grounded in the doctrine of Christ's atonement and Hindu theodicies based on the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. He begins by examining the work of the early twentieth-century Christian missionaries in India, Sydney Cave (1883–1953) and Alfred George Hogg (1875–1954), both of whom made various criticisms of the Hindu *karma*-based theodicy and argued for the greater cogency of a Christian atonement theodicy that emphasizes the sanctifying power of suffering, which enables us to participate in Christ's own unmerited suffering on the cross. Barua then examines two famous debates about divine grace and justice within Christianity and Hinduism respectively. In an early Christian debate, Saint Augustine (354–430) advocated a doctrine of divine predestination—somewhat akin to that of Mādhva Vedāntins—and held that God's justice was an inscrutable mystery, while the Pelagian Julian of Eclanum

(386–455) argued that divine predestination would make God *unjust*, since it entailed that some souls were destined for eternal damnation. Barua finds echoes of this debate in the later intra-Vaiṣṇava dispute between exponents of the Teṅkalai and Vaḍagalai schools of the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition, who advocated differing understandings of the nature and role of God's grace and justice within a world governed by the law of *karma*. Then, after critically examining some of the main arguments both for and against the Hindu doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, Barua discusses Rammohun Roy's (1772–1833) criticisms of the Christian doctrine of atonement in his debate with the Baptist missionary Joshua Marshman (1768–1837). He concludes his article with a metainquiry into the conflicting presuppositions underlying Hindu and Christian theodicies, which may account, in part, for the frequently intractable nature of doctrinal and theodical disputes between Hindus and Christians.

The three articles in this special issue should be seen as paving the way for future scholarly work on Indic approaches to the problem of evil. Theodicies in a vast range of Indic traditions remain to be explored. For instance, scholars have not yet examined in detail the theodical speculations of classical Vedāntic thinkers like the Bhedābhedavādin Nimbārka, the Śuddhādvaitin Vallabha, the Śivādvaitin Appaya Dīkṣita, or the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas Rūpa Gosvāmin, Jīva Gosvāmin, and Baladeva. Theodicies in modern Vedāntic traditions like Svāminārāyaṇa, Rāmakṛṣṇa-Vivekānanda Vedānta, and ISKCON also require more in-depth investigation. There are also numerous Indic traditions besides Vedānta—including Nondual Śaivism, Śaiva Siddhānta, Śāktism, and Nyāya—that offer a variety of distinctive approaches to the problem of evil. Finally, since the problem of evil cuts across the disciplines of theology, philosophy of religion, and religious studies, it is important for scholars to explore interdisciplinary and cross-cultural methods for examining the problem and bringing Western and non-Western theodicies into fruitful conversation.

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