

THEODICY BY OTHER MEANS?  
RETHINKING “GOD AFTER AUSCHWITZ”  
THROUGH THE DIALECTICS OF  
ANTITHEODICISM

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper poses a self-reflective critical question to antitheodicism that rejects all theodicies as morally unacceptable failures to acknowledge other human beings’ suffering in its meaninglessness. While theodicies may be argued to pursue a misconceived “cosmic” harmony in their attempts to find a higher meaning in suffering, a similar charge may apply to antitheodicies at the meta-level: precisely by rejecting the moral failure of theodicies, we may, in developing antitheodicies, seek a meta-level harmonious reconciliation with the reality of suffering. Therefore, antitheodicism, the paper argues, needs to be understood as an endless process of self-critical examination of our ethical response to otherness and suffering. This conclusion is relevant to, e.g., what we may claim to “learn from” historical moral catastrophes such as the Holocaust.

**KEYWORDS:** Theodicy; Antitheodicy; Theodicism; Antitheodicism; Suffering; The problem of evil and suffering; Holocaust

INTRODUCTION

Hans Jonas, a celebrated Jewish philosopher who started his career as one of Martin Heidegger’s students, delivered his seminal lecture, “Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz” (“The Concept of God after Auschwitz”), in München in July 1984 (reprinted in Jonas 1996). The lecture powerfully articulates Jonas’s idea of a processual, finite, and suffering God. The only divinity we may, morally speaking, be able to believe in “after Auschwitz” – after the devastating catastrophe of the Holocaust, which functions as a metonymy for unspeakable

evil and suffering in general – is, Jonas argues, a God of “contraction, withdrawal, self-limitation”, that is, a God who “renounced his being, divesting himself of his deity” in order to allow human life (and death) to emerge in the world (ibid., 134–135, 142).

Jonas, of course, is not alone in proposing an ethical rethinking of God in response to the ethical need to come to terms with evil and suffering. I have suggested on an earlier occasion that Jonas’s account can be usefully compared to what William James, one of the founders of American pragmatism, had to say about the concept of God several decades earlier (see Pihlström 2014). Jonas comes from an entirely different tradition, but his conception of the divinity as “involved” and as “run[ning] a risk” (Jonas 1996, 138) is strikingly parallel to James’s idea of a “finite God”, which James (e.g., 1975 [1907], Lecture VIII) set against the theodocist views propounded by his Hegelian absolute idealist contemporaries (such as F.H. Bradley). What is crucial for this comparison between two otherwise very different thinkers is the fact that both James and Jonas based their cosmic metaphysics of the divinity on *ethical* considerations. Both were prepared to revise the traditional metaphysically realistic picture of an absolute, atemporal, and infinite God in response to concrete temporal and historical events, and especially the uncompromising reality of human suffering manifested by such events.

Both for a pre-Holocaust thinker like James and for a post-Holocaust one like Jonas, the unavoidable ethical need to recognize the suffering other – especially the meaninglessness of their suffering that cannot be fitted into any allegedly purposive divine plan, or any secular teleological (e.g., Hegelian) proxy thereof – yields an ethical demand to adjust the concept of God (insofar as one employs that concept in the first place) in such a way that any theodicies seeking to justify suffering from a divine perspective are rejected as immoral. (Cf. Bernstein 2002; Kivistö & Pihlström 2016; Pihlström 2020a.)

I believe we need to follow Jonas and James in maintaining that one’s individual ethico-existential commitment to a truthful and sincere pursuit of personal ethical convictions and ideals in varying historical contexts – such as one’s attempt to desperately come to terms with the irrevocable historical fact that the Holocaust did take place – may legitimately lead even to rather fundamental revisions of one’s metaphysical and theological ideas, including those concerning the reality (or unreality) of God. This paper starts from the conviction that ethics

must not and cannot be based on religion or theology, but in a quasi-Kantian sense religion and theology need an ethical grounding, to the extent that nothing, not even our account of the divinity, can be immune to critical ethical reflection. Indeed, the moral necessity of revising our theological picture of the divinity is arguably one instance of the broader moral necessity of rejecting all (explicit and implicit) *theodicies* and embracing a thoroughly *antitheodacist* approach to the problem of evil and suffering.

The antitheodacist, in the sense in which I am using this concept (cf. Kivistö & Pihlström 2016), not only rejects all theodicies – that is, all attempts to justify apparently meaningless suffering from an imagined divine perspective yielding ultimate harmony and reconciliation – but abandons the very pursuit of theodicy by refusing to examine the problem of evil and suffering in a context defined by the normative expectation that a theodicy (or a secular proxy) ought to be delivered in the first place. According to (ethical) antitheodicism, there is something profoundly wrong in that context itself, not merely in the specific theodicies that might be provided in order to “justify the ways of God to man”. If we even ask the question of how to justify the suffering of, say, the victims of the Holocaust, we already fail to acknowledge those victims and their suffering in an adequate ethical sense. We are guilty of such non-acknowledgment by even entertaining the possibility that their suffering might conceivably be (theodicistically) justified.<sup>1</sup>

It remains to be investigated, however, whether an ethically motivated antitheodacist rethinking of religious and theological ideas, such as Jonas’s – or James’s – postulation of a finite divinity, amounts to something like a *theodicy by other means*. Furthermore, the same question can in principle be asked regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Varieties of this kind of ethical antitheodicism abound. As I have tried to show in earlier work, there is a tradition of “Kantian antitheodicy” seeking to avoid theodicies as violations of the very conditions for the possibility of a moral perspective on the world. In contemporary philosophy, this framework contains various Jewish (e.g., Levinasian), Wittgensteinian, and pragmatist antitheodicies, and there are also remarkable literary analogies to these philosophical ideas (cf. Kivistö & Pihlström 2016). Note that this paper does not seek to defend antitheodicism against theodicism – that is a much more comprehensive task – but only to examine critically some possibly problematic outcomes of antitheodicism, thus treating antitheodicism as a premise rather than a conclusion. Furthermore, it should also be acknowledged that, even though I am emphasizing ethical antitheodicism here, not all varieties of antitheodicism are primarily ethical; for a detailed recent critical engagement with the problematic metaphysical presuppositions of the theodicy discussion, see Snellman 2020.

any other specific antitheodist project as well. Indeed, I have referred to Jonas and James only in the interest of providing an obvious example. The issue that needs to be raised in their case is whether the revision of our metaphysics of God ultimately serves the “temptation” of theodicy (see Bernstein 2002), that is, our need (which is itself an understandable and natural human need) to render suffering a meaningful element of our world-picture, albeit at a meta-level? My worry, in brief, is that an antitheodicy such as Jonas’s or James’s may in the end yield a meta-level theodicy, and that this “dialectics of antitheodicism”, as we may call it, cannot be easily avoided. The meaningfulness of unspeakable yet concretely real suffering challenges any imagined theodist harmony, but acknowledging *this* – for example, by acknowledging the need to revise our concept of the divinity as a response – may at the end of the day amount to imagining a meta-level harmony, after the theodist confusions (including the concept of God they may have presupposed) will have been cleared away. We might thus speak of the dialectics of antitheodist enlightenment: as I will try to suggest below, theodicies tend to return as soon as we had believed to have left them behind. Such a meta-level pursuit of harmony and reconciliation may, but need not, take the form of a “finite divinity” theory.

#### “TEMPTATIONS” OF THEODICY

The “return” of theodicies in purportedly antitheodist contexts may take a number of different forms in different philosophical frameworks. In Emmanuel Levinas’s vocabulary (adopted by Bernstein 2002), the “temptation” of theodicy in our philosophical thinking is thus multifaceted.<sup>2</sup> Let me briefly take up only a few examples of attempts to respond to extreme evil and irreconcilable suffering in antitheodist terms, yet (arguably) involving an implicit theodicy.

Immanuel Kant himself, the arch-antitheodist (cf. Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, chapter 2), may – despite his vigorous criticism of theodicies – be argued to have

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<sup>2</sup> For reflections on what Levinas means by this “temptation”, see Bernstein 2002, especially the chapter, “Levinas: Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy”. (Bernstein’s volume also contains an insightful discussion of Jonas’s approach to evil and God.) In his seminal essay, “Useless Suffering”, Levinas (2006 [1996]) heavily criticizes both the explicit and the implicit theodicies of Western philosophy by emphasizing the utter uselessness and meaningfulness of suffering; clearly, what I mean by “theodicy by other means” has a lot to do with Levinas’s conception of *implicit* theodicy and its role in our philosophical tradition. However, this paper is by no means a study on Levinas’s views on evil and suffering.

postulated a theodicy by other means in his doctrine of the *summum bonum*, viz., more precisely, his account of our legitimate hope that the harmony of moral duty or virtue and happiness will ultimately be secured by God through an “infinite progression” of our existence. This postulation of God’s existence and the immortality of the soul is of course “practical” rather than “theoretical”, as we can know nothing whatsoever about the reality of these Kantian postulates of practical reason. They remain something we can merely hope for, from within our practical ethical standpoint. However, the ethical need to postulate God and an immortal soul is unavoidable for us, something that our very commitment to morality – which our reason in its practical use itself requires – entails.<sup>3</sup> While Kant firmly rejected Leibnizian and in principle any possible theoretical, speculative, rationalizing theodicies, he may thus be argued to bring theodicies back to his overall picture through his practical philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important antitheodacists in the early twentieth century, William James, in my view shares the same problem of being unable to completely avoid theodicism. He certainly successfully frames his entire discussion of pragmatism and pluralism by taking seriously the problem of evil and suffering and rejecting both Leibnizian and Hegelian theodicies (see James 1975 [1907], Lectures I and VIII; see especially 19-22, 138-140), but this does not prevent him from at least occasionally lapsing into a kind of mysticism that ultimately does not have to worry about the concrete reality of evil. While I am not generally a follower of Richard Gale’s (1999) controversial interpretation, according to which James had a “divided self” – the “Promethean” pragmatist self as opposed to the mysticist one – the potential return of theodicism in James’s tendencies toward religious mysticism (or at least his embracing such a possibility) is something that

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<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of the “postulates of practical reason” in Kant’s Second Critique (Kant 1983a [1788]).

<sup>4</sup> For Kant’s rejection of theodicies, see his famous “Theodicy Essay” (Kant 1983b [1791]). I am not saying that this is my reading of Kant. On the contrary, I am fully committed to the picture of Kant as the starting point of antitheodicism in Western philosophy of religion (as argued in Kivistö & Pihlström 2016). What I am saying is that there is a *worry* that even Kantian antitheodicy, as compelling as it is, might slide into a theodicy by other means, and this is something that I feel has not been adequately discussed before, at least not in my own earlier contributions to these issues. In any case, the postulates of practical reason only remain something we can, according to Kant, legitimately hope for, not anything that we could know to be real, and as any such claim to know anything theoretical about God or his possible reasons for allowing evil and suffering is firmly rejected by Kant, this is one significant difference between Kant’s position and actual theodicies.

could, in my view, be analyzed in terms of Gale's perhaps otherwise simplifying distinction. Even James seems to be willing to grant us the right to believe that everything will ultimately – at a mystical level of religious ultimacy – end up in harmony, although on the other hand his “official” pragmatist position seems to be that no such “moral holiday” is possible for us and that we can only afford, instead of any cosmic or religious optimism, a healthy pragmatic meliorism, always seeking to make things better without any final guarantee about our succeeding in that challenge.<sup>5</sup>

So-called Wittgensteinian antitheodicism, based on the Wittgenstein-inspired approaches in both ethics and the philosophy of religion, might seem to be free of the problem of the return of theodicies, due to Wittgensteinian philosophers' (e.g., Phillips 2004) uncompromising rejection of theodicies as confusions of moral and religious language-use coming close to superstition or even blasphemy. However, insofar as Wittgensteinian antitheodacists genuinely take their departure from Wittgenstein's own writings, they cannot ignore the fundamental role played by the pursuit of a certain kind of ethical, metaphysical, and/or transcendental *harmony* in our relation to the world, especially in the early Wittgenstein. For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the pre-Tractarian *Notebooks* (Wittgenstein 1961, 1974 [1921]), happiness consists in a mystical kind of harmony with the world, as viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* (see Pihlström 2019 and 2020a, chapter 5, for further analysis). While we may, convinced by antitheodacist arguments, be committed to viewing the world “rightly”<sup>6</sup> in the sense of taking seriously the meaninglessness and irreconcilability of the suffering our fellow human beings have to undergo around us – suffering that cannot be brought into

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<sup>5</sup> On James's antitheodacist rejection of “moral holidays”, see Pihlström 2014, 2020a; for a discussion of James in the tradition of “Kantian antitheodicy”, see Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, chapter 5. The main source of James's views on mysticism is, of course, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1985 [1902]), but many of his other works exhibit a temptation (!) toward mysticism, too. On meliorism as a middle ground between optimism and pessimism, see James 1975 [1907], Lecture VIII. Furthermore, it could be suggested that insofar as the pragmatic meliorist position is James's final considered view – ultimately rejecting mysticism and moral holidays in favor of the inescapable moral demand that does not reduce evil and suffering away – then it is precisely the conception of a “finite God” that James, analogously to Jonas, offers as his proxy for theodicies. Instead of being an absolute harmonizer, God is merely a cosmic superhuman power that may assist us in realizing a better world – but *this* reconciliatory position may now yield a meta-level theodicy.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase, “viewing the world rightly”, obviously alludes to the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1974 [1921], §6.54).

any harmony or eventual reconciliation – it is precisely this world-viewing itself that may at the meta-level be taken to yield a reconciliation with the world that is ultimately harmonious in its ability to take disharmony seriously. The world of the “happy man” is, according to Wittgenstein, different from the world of an unhappy one, and even an antitheodist can be “happy” about having found a “right” way of viewing the world – thus inviting theodicism back simply by entertaining the idea of a harmonious total perspective.

Even post-Holocaust Jewish moral philosophers such as Levinas and Jonas may bring theodicism back through a side door. Jonas’s (1996) “limited” God is a case in point. Because we cannot harmonize our world-picture by any explicit theodicy “after Auschwitz”, we have to satisfy our need for harmony by revising the picture of the divinity (something that, as noted above, takes place in James, too). We cannot entirely reconcile ourselves with the suffering of the Holocaust simply by revising our picture of God, but doing so may be a vital step on the way to seeing the world – in a historical situation after the Holocaust – “rightly” and thus to arriving at a harmonizing reconciliation, again at a meta-level.<sup>7</sup>

Whether something analogous takes place even in Levinas’s resolutely antitheodist approach cannot be settled here. Levinas might in fact be one of the very few thinkers who succeed in avoiding all temptations of theodicy – but then again even in his case the nagging question might return: is our taking seriously the other’s suffering in its horrible “excess”, its naked meaninglessness and human bodily vulnerability, a way of ultimately (harmoniously) seeing the world “rightly” in its inescapable ethical dimensions? If we commit ourselves to viewing the world and our place in it in terms of the fundamental Levinasian ethical relation to the other, especially the other’s face, is everything *then* all right – have we then succeeded in finding a meta-level reconciliatory relation to the ethical challenge of being in the world? In this context, our taking seriously what I have elsewhere called “transcendental guilt” (Pihlström 2011) may be a meta-level defensive move hiding our humanly natural tendency to let our sense of moral guilt become corrupted. If we emphasize our unavoidable human

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<sup>7</sup> See also Bernstein’s (2002) chapter on Jonas (“A New Ethic of Responsibility”). Again, I am certainly not claiming that Jonas is simply a closet theodist. On the contrary, he is certainly sincerely committed to the task of thinking beyond theodicies after the Holocaust. I am again just suggesting that we should perceive a potential return of theodicies in his rethinking maneuver.

predicament of always falling short from the moral duty (at least set in Levinas's uncompromising and infinitely demanding terms), will we *then* have arrived at a meta-level reconciliation all over again? At least we ought to be constantly worried about this possibility (to which I will return toward the end of this essay).<sup>8</sup>

I have in my earlier work on antitheodicism tried to acknowledge the problematic possibility of ending up with a meta-level picture of harmonious meaningfulness by examining the full reality of meaningless suffering (see, e.g., Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, chapter 6; Pihlström 2020a, chapter 6). In brief, the key question is whether the antitheodacist can ultimately coherently escape theodacist tendencies and assumptions. While theodicism certainly operates with the idea of a harmonious overall picture – a kind of imagined condition of ultimate happiness in which the sorrows and sufferings that seem to define human life would eventually have been overcome or reconciled – the antitheodacist may be argued to seek a totalizing picture of their own, too. Antitheodicism itself seeks a kind of reconciliation with the absurd world of suffering and pain even when it claims to reject all reconciliatory attempts – indeed, precisely in making this claim itself.<sup>9</sup>

It may, then, be necessary to acknowledge the impossibility of ever driving through any fully antitheodacist argument. While there is a sense in which “everything changes” – we see the world and human life in a completely different light – as soon as we adopt antitheodicism instead of theodicism, and while I am

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<sup>8</sup> Examples like this could be multiplied. For instance, Albert Camus can with good reason be regarded as an antitheodacist not only blaming Christian theology for injustice but also perceptively analyzing the ways in which secular ideologies tend to lead to violence (see Sharpe 2019, 165-168), but his own views on “universal culpability”, our being all evil (ibid., 172), may reinvolve theodicism by reintroducing the commitment to an ultimately harmonious understanding of the general human tendency to evil. (This is, presumably, comparable to “transcendental guilt”.)

<sup>9</sup> This observation may be compared to the suggestion made by some Holocaust (and Holocaust literature) scholars who have maintained that there is an unbridgeable gap between any pursuit of understanding and what really happened; it has been argued that any attempt to understand is inevitably obscene, as it fails to appreciate the ineffability or unspeakability of Holocaust suffering, thus exhibiting a lack of piety. (See Adams 2016, 308, 317, 328.) On the other hand, explaining or understanding should never be confused with excusing or forgiving. Even so, no matter how deeply we understand what happened in the Holocaust, it is, I think, a legitimate concern that claiming to understand might to a certain degree be a way of non-acknowledging the victims. (But so could, conversely, our not caring to understand, or to understand ever more deeply.) This may, again, be regarded as analogous to the return of theodicism to the antitheodacist discourse claiming to acknowledge meaningless suffering.



still fully convinced that antitheodicism is needed for us to be able to see the world “rightly” in its dimensions of human finitude, vulnerability, and radical contingency (cf. Pihlström 2020a), the problem is that *this* antitheodacist standpoint will then be recommended as *the* correct one, the one and only ultimately true (or ethically acceptable) standpoint from which human suffering ought to be viewed. We may then end up raising antitheodicism to the status of a “totalistic” and ultimately harmonious worldview, despite its criticism of such worldviews. At least the antitheodacist should be constantly aware of this threat and should therefore self-critically recognize the impossibility of ever finally or completely acknowledging the sheer meaninglessness of others’ suffering and of really being able to avoid rendering it meaningful by incorporating it into some coherent meaning-making narrative.

Accordingly, isn’t the antitheodacist who reminds us that disharmony will forever be with us to stay also still attempting to offer a meta-level harmonious total picture, albeit an antitheodacist one, that is, her/his own (only different) version of how to see the world rightly and how to live rightly (and perhaps even to be “happy” in the transcendental Wittgensteinian sense according to which the “happy man’s” world is different from the unhappy one’s)? Doesn’t antitheodicy, thus, lead to the very same predicament that it (with good reason) found theodicism guilty of, the self-deceptive pretension of happiness and harmony, only at the meta-level?<sup>10</sup>

There is no easy answer to such self-reflective critical questions. We just have to keep asking ourselves these questions, given that we are committed to the project of antitheodacist acknowledgment of others’ suffering. *This* is part of our never-ending concern with living rightly – and also with happiness and harmony. A world in which we were able to resolve this matter would indeed be too harmonious for us. One key problem is, then, whether every explicitly developed philosophical antitheodacist move ultimately results in a betrayal of the antitheodacist pursuit of taking evil and meaningless suffering ethically seriously

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<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, theodicies typically seek harmony *in* the world. A Wittgensteinian refusal to find harmony *in* the world while still seeking to find it in one’s transcendental attitude to the world as a whole might thus, despite its pursuit of harmony, be compatible with antitheodicy and its insistence on recognizing worldly disharmony. However, the worry here is that even the meta-level pursuit of harmony might in the end indirectly contribute to the theodacist project – or at least the antitheodacist ought to be aware of this potential risk.

and of recognizing the suffering other. This issue returns, preventing any full, complete harmony.

In terms of the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, a self-critically reflexive antitheodist also needs to ask whether the antitheodist argumentation s/he invokes in the interest of acknowledging experiences of meaningless suffering in the end constitutes a problematic pursuit of meaning, after all. Is there a self-reflective incoherence involved in the very attempt of viewing the world rightly, even if (or perhaps especially if) that attempt is structured in terms of antitheodicism? The question arises whether we will eventually move the horizon of meaninglessness out of our sight when engaging in such philosophical construals of meta-level meaningfulness. This, once again, is one of those problems that self-critical philosophical reflection on ethically appropriate responses to suffering can never avoid.

#### LESSONS FROM THE HOLOCAUST?

These critical questions may be intensified by taking a look at how a certain kind of theodicism may seem to return in the context of our attempting to “learn” something from an event as extreme as the Holocaust – or even from our acknowledging the inability to draw any meaningful moral “lesson” from it. It may be self-deceptive to continue to utter, “Never again”, as we know that history has unpleasant ways of surprising us and that the only thing the Holocaust really taught us is that something unimaginable could happen.

Possibly, an even more disturbing conclusion seems to follow from our taking seriously Primo Levi’s – one of the most perceptive analysts of the Holocaust – ruthless investigation of what he regards as blasphemous prayer. The case of the two prisoners, named Kuhn and Beppo, as analyzed by Levi (1996 [1958]) is famous: it constitutes an utter failure to acknowledge another human being and their purposeless suffering to thank God for one’s own survival – for one’s not having been selected to be murdered in today’s horrible *Selektion* – while the other person, one’s neighbor, *has* been selected to go to the gas chamber.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The case, briefly paraphrased, is this: A prisoner called Kuhn had avoided death (this time) and thanked God by praying aloud, while another (much younger) one, Beppo, was lying in the next bunk in the same barrack, knowing he had been chosen to be murdered. Levi’s moral condemnation of Kuhn’s attitude is harsh: “Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory

Now, the “lesson” of this case narrated by Levi might even be extrapolated to an ethical problematizing of *any* gratitude or thankfulness we are tempted to feel regarding our own fortunate situation – also outside the extreme circumstances of Auschwitz, in quite ordinary human life, religious and secular life included. If we seriously entertain the idea that *our* fortunate situation (in comparison to our less fortunate fellow human beings), whether in terms of health, wealth, social relations, professional success, or whatever, is in some sense an indication of divine grace that falls upon us rather than some others (or, again, any secular proxy thereof), are we not in a sense acting like prisoner Kuhn in Levi’s description? Are we not thanking God (or the world, or life, or fate, or history, or pure chance) in our inappropriately loud (even if silent) voice and thereby disregarding, non-acknowledging, the suffering other? Is gratitude by definition theodicy by implicitly accepting the immoral and unjust logic of a world – divinely or secularly structured – that lets some of us flourish while crushing others?

The problem, in other words, is that even mere gratitude, as purely positive and virtuous as it might be taken to be, may in the end seem to wear theodicy on its sleeve. It might seem like a morally virtuous attitude to acknowledge one’s own privileged position as something that one has not deserved by one’s own deeds but has somehow fallen upon one, but even if this acknowledgment is sincerely antitheodicy-intended, it may be implicitly committed to the temptation of theodicy, as it may (like Kuhn’s prayer) inadvertently endorse a theodicy logic of how goods and ills befall upon innocent human beings.

I have no proper response to offer to this worry that we may end up with upon reading Levi’s compelling work (and I am not implying that Levi himself would have intended his writings to be interpreted in such an extreme manner, viz., as problematizing the very idea of being grateful for undeserved good things in one’s life). In any case, the mere possibility of extrapolating the concern with blasphemous prayer in this way perhaps shows how central the responsibility for acknowledging another human being within the context of a shared human life

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prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty – nothing at all in the power of man to do – can ever heal?” And he adds: “If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer.” (Levi 1996 [1958], 129-130.) See also my more comprehensive discussion of this case (with some relevant references to secondary literature) in Pihlström 2020a, chapter 6.

is for Levi, and how vitally important his analysis of the destruction of such responsibility in the Holocaust is for all of us. More generally, we should note that any attempt to “learn a lesson” from suffering as extreme and absurd as the Holocaust may be faced with a similar extrapolation. *We* end up in blasphemous non-acknowledgment of the other when trying to suggest that now we (finally) know that this should “never again” happen (as if we had failed to “know” that earlier). We thereby tend to raise ourselves above the history of suffering, and such *hubris* may in the end destroy our moral integrity.

The self-deceptive obscenity of the mere claim to try to understand the extremity of meaningless suffering returns here, to the extent that repeating the slogan, “never again”, might in the end yield a (theodist) form of “Holocaust impiety” (cf. Adams 2016, 308-309).<sup>12</sup> Our (understandable) attempt to learn a lesson from the catastrophe of the Holocaust – or comparable catastrophes in history and the present – may thus unwittingly turn into a (secular) theodicy, even though the original aim may have been to acknowledge the victims’ horrible suffering in an antitheodist context.

#### THEODICISM, SINCERITY, AND SELF-DECEPTION

Different varieties of antitheodism thus run the risk of bringing theodicism back. What this reinforces is the need for continuous critical self-reflection that is (fortunately, one might suggest) built into the very concept of antitheodicism all the way from the start. We have to understand antitheodicism as an ethical *process*, rather than any sort of final theory. Accordingly, it could be suggested that *antitheodicism* will never collapse into theodicism, even though specific *antitheodicies* may very well collapse into theodicies (“by other means”). This also means that antitheodicism will never be completed but will always have to be continuously rethought, revised, and rearticulated – also in changing historical circumstances. In terms of the concept of “transcendental guilt” (cf. again Pihlström 2011), this further means that whenever (re)thinking our guilty human condition, we must do so by *never* letting our sense of universal human culpability liberate us from

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<sup>12</sup> Note, however, that neither Adams nor other Holocaust (or Holocaust literature) scholars would typically use the vocabulary of theodicism vs. antitheodicism. The relation between theodicism and the problem known as Holocaust (im)piety, or the “obscurity” of understanding, would clearly deserve a much more detailed elaboration.

our own unique guilt. We are, indeed, transcendently guilty for being unable to avoid the corruption of *our own* guilt for others' suffering.

Now, again at the meta-level, my next worry is the following. Does this meta-level reflexive and processual antitheodicism itself collapse into theodicism all over again? Such a collapse may happen if we are even for a moment *satisfied* with the antitheodacist account we have arrived at. The processual antitheodicism sketched here thus entails that we must never rest satisfied with our philosophical (or, as the case might be, theological) account of evil and suffering.<sup>13</sup> We can never reach final happiness in or harmony with our way of thinking about these matters, or in our way of approaching them philosophically, ethically, or theologically. Our antitheodicism must always be understood as incomplete and inadequate. Like ethics itself, it is a task in which we will inevitably fail; antitheodicism is an infinite project – as infinite as the Levinasian responsibility for the other. We must approach our commitment to formulating our antitheodicism itself via a “negative” philosophical method, focusing on our unavoidable failures and incompleteness.

The very project of antitheodicism begins from the observation that theodicies can, and should, be criticized for a certain kind of lack of sincerity, or a collapse to insincerity – as has been done in the antitheodacist tradition starting from Kant's (1983b [1791]) “Theodicy Essay” and its focus on Job's *sincerity* (*Aufrichtigkeit*), in contrast to Job's pseudo-consoling friends' *insincerity* (see again Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, chapter 2). There is, thus, a certain kind of pretense or even Sartrean-like “bad faith” embedded in theodicies.<sup>14</sup> However, what is crucial now is that the antitheodacist must perceive their own temptation toward such self-deceptive bad faith even within their own quest for sincerity. Antitheodacists should not simply blame others – theodacists – for insincerity but should focus their critical analysis of insincerity on their own thought patterns and assumptions.

For this purpose, we may utilize the concept of “transcendental self-deception”, especially its close connection with transcendental guilt (see Pihlström

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<sup>13</sup> We might label this duty to avoid even momentary satisfaction in the pursuit of antitheodicism a “Faustian” form of antitheodicism – perhaps also thus acknowledging our temptation of (always again) entering into a contract with the devil.

<sup>14</sup> See also my brief comments on this, in response to a point raised by Steven Crowell, in Pihlström 2020a.

2007). Our tendency toward self-deception is something that we should all, theodacists and antitheodacists alike, be seriously concerned with.<sup>15</sup> If we so much as entertain the idea that by having formulated an antitheodacist approach to the problem of evil and suffering we would be somehow protected from insincerity and an (itself evil) instrumentalization of others' suffering in the service of some imagined ultimate harmony, we are already sliding down a slippery slope back to theodacism. This is the general pattern of what I have called "theodacy by other means" or the "dialectics of antitheodacism".

Not only philosophical formulations of antitheodacism but artistic and literary ones as well might be examined critically from this perspective. For instance, Holocaust literature could be studied by asking the question (as difficult as it is to even pose such a question in such a context) of whether the very attempt to describe and interpret the meaninglessness of suffering as experienced by Holocaust victims in antitheodacist terms inadvertently yields a meta-level picture of harmony and meaningfulness. This could, again, be comparable to the above-mentioned popular tendency to repeat the words, "never again", in the context of responding to the Holocaust – as if we had "learned a lesson" or as if something positive had come out of that unimaginable yet concretely real horror, after all. Even a Holocaust writer as firmly antitheodacist as Levi (see above) has been claimed to have rendered his own Holocaust experience "meaningful" in terms of his testimony – and somehow this may be the tragic fate of all such moral testimonies. The moral witness (cf. Margalit 2002) cannot avoid witnessing, but they must at the same time be acutely aware of the impossibility of ever fully witnessing (see also Agamben 2002 [1999]).

What I have elsewhere (Pihlström 2007) called transcendental self-deception is, I think, directly relevant to this situation. In the Kantian context, we may understand our temptation to arrive at rationalizing metaphysics – due to the natural tendencies of human reason, as analyzed in the Transcendental Dialectic of Kant's First Critique (Kant 1990 [1781/1787]) – as a kind of self-deception of the transcendental self whose cognitive structures are necessarily constitutive of the world insofar as it is experienceable by us but who cannot legitimately

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<sup>15</sup> For an intriguing analysis of the way in which self-deception relates to Kant's conception of our being radically evil, see Madore 2011.

transgress its cognitive limits. Extending this notion beyond the dialectical transcendental illusions of metaphysics, it may be argued that we engage in ethical self-deception insofar as we forget the human condition presupposed by our being *selves* in the first place, always already structured by moral responsibility and the ineliminable possibility of our being morally guilty (cf. Pihlström 2011). If we lack full understanding of our necessarily (constitutively) being potentially guilty, we are in the grip of transcendental ethical self-deception. And this is precisely the kind of self-deception at work in our hubristic belief that we have learned a moral lesson from the Holocaust, a lesson that we could ever appreciate with adequate “piety”. Transcendental self-deception is, we might say, at the same time metaphysical and ethical. It results from our misunderstanding our own place in the world and leads to an ethical mis- or non-acknowledgment of others’ perspectives, especially their experiences of meaningless, non-reconcilable suffering.

Let me supplement the rather extreme Holocaust example by a somewhat more mundane, albeit certainly not trivial, one. In the context of the covid-19 pandemic raging through the globe in 2020 (at the time of this writing), the antitheodist ethical thinker presumably finds it necessary to take very seriously all the protective measures and restrictions that most countries have introduced in order to prevent the spread of the potentially deadly virus, because otherwise the health care system would be overburdened and a great number of innocent people would catch the infection and some of them (especially the elderly and people in certain risk groups) might develop a serious disease and even die. Following the general logic of antitheodicism, this line of thinking avoids instrumentalizing other human beings’ suffering in the service of some overall good. None of the potential victims of the virus can be sacrificed for the benefit of the system. Thus, we cannot just let some people die in order to prevent the collapse of the economic system – we cannot use those people as means even to protect the (later, predictable) victims of that collapse (some of whom will perhaps eventually die, too, from causes at least indirectly related to such a collapse). However, still lacking an efficient vaccine, we might, precisely by being careful to avoid catching the virus and thereby spreading it further, in a sense problematically *try to let other people catch it first*, insofar as we maintain that only after the virus has infected a certain (relatively large) number of people will the

population as a whole be better protected from the pandemic. Shouldn't the Levinasian ethical antitheodist, firmly rejecting even the slightest temptation of using other people as instruments for her/his own benefit, rather volunteer to be among the first to be infected? But wouldn't s/he then also easily spread the infection to others, those s/he wishes to protect?<sup>16</sup>

Wouldn't, moreover, *any* attempt at an antitheodist acknowledgment of others' suffering as something that ought not to take place run the risk of using the others as means ("by other means")? The risk of (quasi-theodist) self-deception cannot be fully eliminated from any serious response to a moral crisis such as the covid-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The antitheodist must be constantly wary of the continuous threat of transcendental self-deception right at the heart of their (our) antitheodist project itself. This insecurity and incompleteness – a kind of meta-level disharmony – *defines* the project of antitheodicy; it is constitutive of the very possibility of adopting an antitheodist perspective. Antitheodicism must never be *easy* for us. Indeed, it *cannot* be easy and remain genuinely antitheodist at the same time. A sincere antitheodicism must avoid the kind of insincerity (cf. Kant 1983b [1791]) that would make things easier for us by self-deceptively claiming that we have moved "beyond" the agonizing meaninglessness of suffering by having found the "right" antitheodist approach to it. A sincere antitheodicism admits, among other things, that there is no proper lesson to be learned from the Holocaust: the slogan, "Never again", is naïve insofar as it claims to have left the horror behind. So is any attempt to just "rethink God after Auschwitz", unless it acknowledges a kind of impossibility of such rethinking analogous to the impossibility of ever truly witnessing (cf. Agamben 2002 [1999]).

Indeed, the sincere antitheodist should acknowledge our impossibility of ever leaving behind – ever truly recovering from – the Holocaust, or any horrible suffering our fellow human beings have had to go through. Such suffering is

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<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, such an apparently ethical volunteering might also be motivated by hidden selfish reasons: one might believe that the earlier one catches the infection, the better resources will there still be left in the health care system for one's possibly demanding hospital care. However, this may just be a mistaken assumption, as considerable clinical progress is of course constantly taking place in the treatments available to those catching a serious form of the infection even in the absence of any major breakthrough.



irrevocable, and acknowledging this is part of our antitheodist challenge. But then again we must acknowledge this irrevocability not in the easy way of insincerely claiming to have moved beyond the horror by means of such an act of acknowledgment. We should sincerely acknowledge our own inability to be sincere, to avoid the self-deception of theodicism even when developing antitheodicism.

It might be finally suggested that the dialectics of theodicism and antitheodicism I have sketched here yields a specific form of *agnosticism* – a “humanistic” form of agnosticism as distinguished from the kind of agnosticism that would be standardly available in the theism vs. atheism debate within natural theology and its alternatives.<sup>17</sup> This kind of agnosticism focuses on our philosophical resources for dealing with others’ suffering in a humane manner, on our chances of ever truly embracing a form of antitheodicism that would not run the risk of instrumentalizing such suffering into serving some alleged overall goods, such as the (antitheodist) attempt to see the world “rightly” and meaningfully. Due to our unavoidable tendency to slide into theodicism, it might be advisable to adopt an agnostic view on our ability to develop a sustainable form of antitheodicism, no matter how sincerely we hope to acknowledge others’ suffering.

We may therefore also suggest that something like a form of Jamesian “will to believe” is needed for us to sincerely embrace an antitheodist attitude to others’ suffering in a dialectical situation that appears to make any argument in favor of antitheodicism desperately inconclusive. While James (1979 [1897]) famously argued that we have the pragmatic right to adopt “the religious hypothesis” at our own risk insofar as it is a “live option” for us and the matter cannot be decided on purely evidential grounds, a Jamesian pragmatist might analogously argue that we do have a similar right to stick to antitheodicism even in the argumentatively inconclusive dialectical situation we have here seen to arise. This insecurity and groundlessness may itself, again at a meta-level, be considered part

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<sup>17</sup> For obvious reasons, I cannot here dwell on the theism vs. atheism issue, or natural theology more generally, in any way whatsoever. The antitheodicism I am (self-critically) seeking to defend presupposes no specific theistic or atheistic commitments, and it firmly rejects both militant atheist materialism and any natural-theological attempts to claim to find any evidential reasons for theistic belief. For a discussion of the relation between antitheodicism and (meta-level) agnosticism, see Pihlström 2020b.

of the human predicament. Our antitheodicism rests on such a thin ice that we need to put our pragmatic energies into action in order to maintain it, or something close to it, in our attempts to view the world “rightly”. This may be painful, but not even nearly as painful as the real suffering that antitheodicism is designed to acknowledge.

Antitheodicism must, therefore, not only acknowledge others’ suffering but make *us* suffer – in Levinasian terms, suffer for the suffering of others (cf. Levinas 2006 [1996]) – but even then the problem remains that such antitheodicism, possibly backed up by a quasi-Jamesian “will to believe”, may yet again recreate meaning into our experience of responding to suffering, yielding a kind of “meta-theodicy” by other means. I can see no easy way out of this dialectic constitutive of our uneasy human condition, and admitting *this* is, we may conclude, itself a constitutive feature of any thoroughgoing antitheodacist process of reflection. But then again, possibly even *this* is, at the meta-level, too harmonious a picture of our ability to engage in ethical thought – and so it goes, potentially *ad infinitum*.<sup>18</sup>

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