Must Evil Be Rendered Productive? Evaluating Ricœur's Response to the Problem of Evil

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Abstract:

This paper critically evaluates Paul Ricœur's 'Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology', in which he discusses the famous problem of evil's coexistence with an omnibenevolent, omnipotent God. The problem of evil remains one of the foremost and most impactful debates in philosophy of religion and theology, and Ricœur, a pivotal figure in 20th-century hermeneutic philosophy and theology, offers a distinctive response informed by his extensive focus on the concept of evil. In his paper, Ricœur argues evil is an aporia—without solution—and dismisses all prior traditional responses to the problem of evil. I contend that Ricœur's dismissal of these responses is inadequately justified, relying on the dubious criterion that a response to the problem of evil must be consolatory. Even granting Ricœur that evil is aporetic, I argue that his own proposed response—focusing on complaint, lament, and faith—is both insufficiently supported and structurally similar to responses he rejects. The similarity of Ricœur's response to the responses that he previously disregarded is significantly problematic as it poses a dilemma: either his critique of previous approaches fails, or his own response inherits their flaws. In either case, his argument fails in establishing a novel, superior, personal response to the problem. In sum, this paper analyses Ricœur's conception of evil, questions both the necessity and coherence of his response, and suggests that the supposed aporia itself may not require any response whatsoever. Ultimately, this essay challenges Ricœur's framework and reorients the debate, proposing that the value of the problem of evil may lie precisely in its resistance to final responses.

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Introduction

In this essay, I will critically assess Paul Ricœur's paper 'Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology'. I begin by outlining Ricœur's relevant claims, before arguing that Ricœur's conception of evil, whilst not necessarily incorrect, is unconventional. I then critique Ricœur's broad dismissal of traditional responses to evil—or stages of response, such as myth, wisdom, gnosis and theodicy—on the grounds that his requirement for consolation as a criterion for a response's adequacy is underdeveloped and insufficiently justified. Even if one accepts Ricœur's claims up to this point, it is unclear that the state of evil as an *aporia* requires a response such as that which Ricœur proposes. Finally, I argue that Ricœur's response to evil exhibits many of the same characteristics that he criticises in prior responses, and could in fact be incorporated into prior (mythical, theodical, etc.) responses. This poses a dilemma for Ricœur: *either* Ricœur's dismissal of prior responses to evil as inadequate fails, *or* his own response fails similarly to prior responses. Ultimately, I conclude that the problem of evil—*if* taken to be unanswerable; exemplifying a genuine logical contradiction—can *either* be understood as beyond language altogether, *or* as an unanswerable but intrinsically valuable aporia that does not require any conclusive response.

(1) Understanding Ricœur's Approach to Evil

I will begin by briefly outlining the significant and particularly relevant claims that Ricœur makes in 'Evil, a Challenge for Philosophy and Theology'. Ricœur begins his essay by exploring the unique semantic nature of the term 'evil', specifically its intertwinement of the heterogeneous categories *blame* and *lament*.[1] (Ricœur 1995, 250–251) Ricœur characterises 'evil' as enigmatic in its mixture of these distinct and ostensibly 'opposite' categories. (Ricœur 1995, 250) He suggests that this conjunction arises from the intimate relationship between the two, claiming that "to do evil [blame] is always, either directly or indirectly, to make someone else suffer [lament]". (*Ibid*) Ricœur's division of evil between blame and lament leads to various other parallel divisions within our discourse about evil: (*Ibid*)

- Blame and Lament
- Sin and Suffering
- Wrongdoing and What befalls us
- Evil committed and Evil undergone

These divisions highlight that Ricœur thinks 'evil' is a broad category, referencing various particulars.

Following this section, Ricœur discusses some stages (increasing in rationality) that one may go through when approaching the problem of evil. (Ricœur 1995, 251) Ricœur contends that increasing

[1] Ricœur also mentions 'death' as a third prong of evil, though he scarcely mentions death thereafter. His focus is rather on linking lament with suffering, and blame with sin. (Ricœur 1995, 250)

our level of rationality ultimately fails to adequately address the problem of evil.[2] He supposedly demonstrates the failure of Myth, Wisdom, Gnosis, and Theodicy as responses to the problem of evil.[3] (Ricœur 1995, 251–258) This ultimately led Ricœur to a response to the problem of evil that is grounded in the recognition of evil as an *aporia*. (Ricœur 1995, 258) While this renders a *solution* to the problem impossible, Ricœur insists that we must still *respond* to it in some capacity; that is, we must "render the aporia productive". (*Ibid*) Ricœur then goes on to suggest that practically, we ought to think of evil as that which is to be struggled against, asking 'What must I do?' rather than merely focusing on the apparent problem this supposes for God's existence. (Ricœur 1995, 259) Ricœur then suggests a tripartite method of affective emotional response to evil, through catharsis, mourning and lament. He specifically highlights three stages that one can go through, or guide another through, in responding to evil:[4]

1. We must say 'God did not want this; I do not know why it happened; Chance and accident are part of the world'.
2. We must formulate a complaint to God, a 'theology of protest' (protest against divine 'permission'): "How long O Lord?".
3. Emphasise that the reasons to believe in God are separate to, and have nothing in common with, the desire to explain evil's origin: that is, believe in God in spite of evil, courageously.[5] (Ricœur 1995, 260–261)

In short, Ricœur suggests we respond to evil by struggling against it, by admitting we do not know why it happens, by complaining to God, and believing in God in spite of evil.

Finally, Ricœur supposes potential existential outcomes of his proposed response to evil. These include the renunciation of complaint about evil, recognising in suffering educative or purgative value, renunciation of desire to be without suffering, renunciation of desire for immortality, and the possibility of loving God "for nought"—that is, without expectation of compensation. (Ricœur 1995, 261) Ricœur immediately tempers these claims with a caution: such a response to evil cannot become an objective, systematised prescription.[6] Instead, this response is a necessarily subjective, personal process. (*Ibid*)

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[2] This, in some ways, mirrors (early) Wittgenstein's thoughts on ethics; that a concept such as evil is beyond the limits of language. (Wittgenstein 1965; 1998) 'Language' for Wittgenstein at this point in his writings refers only to truth-apt meaningful propositions. (Wittgenstein 1998, 1.1, 6.12)
However, a comparison that may be more suitable is to Kierkegaard (and Tertullian), and his insistence on the separation of faith (Jerusalem) and reason (Athens). (Kierkegaard 2006, 46; Tertullian 1957, 98) Though, I do not think Ricœur is quite so extreme as Kierkegaard in this regard—as Ricœur does indeed believe there are rational 'reasons' for belief in God, at least to some extent. (Ricœur 1995, 260)

[3] It far eludes the scope of this essay to analyse the plausibility of the various ideas Ricœur references. Thus, I will rather focus on Ricœur's general method for dismissing responses to the problem of evil.

[4] Note here that Ricœur is referring to human-to-human relations, such as chaplaincy or ministry.

[5] This, once again, mirrors a Kierkegardian leap of faith. (Kierkegaard 2006)

[6] Though beyond the scope of this essay, note that this idea of unteachable but somehow attainable truth is widely debated. Some examples can be found here: (Wittgenstein 1965; 1998, 4.1212, ; Plato 1997, Republic, 509a, 515e–516a; Letter VII, 341c–d)

(2) Critical Assessment of Ricœur's Claims

(2.1) Ricœur's Conception of Evil

I will now analyse Ricœur's aforementioned claims. First, Ricœur's understanding of evil is peculiar and perhaps under-argued. It seems that he exaggerates—perhaps even to the point of conflation—the degree to which sin and suffering are linked through his understanding of evil. Whilst Ricœur repeatedly insists that sin necessarily leads to the suffering of another, this claim needs further justification. Consider, for instance, a hermit living in complete isolation committing suicide. While it seems the hermit has (potentially) wronged himself, it does not seem anyone else will suffer as a result of his action. Indeed some sin, may not cause suffering at all—such as concensual incest between informed adult relatives using birth control.[7] Now, perhaps both of these examples cause the acting moral agent suffering in some sense—perhaps psychic or spiritual suffering—but Ricœur repeatedly claims that sin causes suffering to someone *other* than said moral agent. (Ricœur 1995, 250, 259) Thus, these two examples raise doubts about the plausibility of Ricœur's intertwining of sin and suffering.[8]

Furthermore, one may not agree on what is or is not 'evil'. One may require there to be blame for something to be evil. That is, an atheist may claim that a tsunami caused suffering, and is upsetting, and so on, but they could reasonably pause at the claim that it was *evil* as there is no moral agent to blame. From this perspective, so-called 'natural evil' is a strictly theistic concept, presupposing divine culpability for natural suffering. Matters of definition, and understanding of terms such as 'evil', too readily lend themselves to arbitrariness, and so I will not attempt to argue for an alternative 'right' definition of evil. However, these challenges to Ricœur's usage of the term demonstrate that his usage cannot be treated as all encompassing and agreed upon.

(2.2) Ricœur's Requirement of Consolation

A further peculiarity in Ricœur's approach is his insistence that a viable response to evil must offer consolation. (Ricœur 1995, 254, 256) This requirement appears problematic: the emotional impact of a response—whether it consoles, outrages, or has minimal emotional effects—does not necessarily validate (or invalidate) its truth or accuracy. Indeed, we ought not conflate emotional comfort with philosophical adequacy. Perhaps Ricœur may argue that consolation is needed to maintain hope or human endurance, but this requirement of hope has similar problems.[9] That is, plausibility and accuracy cannot be dissolved due to a lack of consolation, neither can they be dissolved due to a lack of hope. Indeed, if one were to claim that it is a basic fact that a response to evil must be consoling,

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[7] Some may argue this is not sin or wrongdoing, and is rather something else, such as 'taboo'. (Foucault 1978, 4–5, 24, 38, 157) But it is at least clear that one may reasonably understand this as 'sin', and many do classify it as such.

[8] Indeed, perhaps this understanding of 'evil' could better describe a broad category of 'violence', including things like lying. (Scarry 1985, 63, 134)

[9] Lennox—though perhaps misinterpreting Ricœur, in his work that is seemingly influenced by Ricœur—does shift this requirement from consolation to hope. (Lennox 2020, 23, 31)

they would be unduly optimistic, which is itself a route Ricœur explicitly does not condone. (Ricœur 1995, 255–256) Consider the various 'unhappy truths' one may face: true conclusions that one has reached and that they maintain despite their displeasure.

(2.3) Must We 'Render the Aporia Productive'?

Ricœur's eventual conclusion relies on the classification of the problem of evil as an *aporia*. (Ricœur 1995, 258) There are two reasonable interpretations of this claim. The first, and likely Ricœur's intended meaning, understands questions of evil to be substantial and meaningful, but to exclusively lead to failed answers, or at least, to puzzling and seemingly paradoxical conclusions. I believe this is likely Ricœur's intended use of the term 'aporia'. On this interpretation, Ricœur's response seems counterintuitive. Traditionally, if our basic assumptions (allegedly) necessarily lead us to contradiction or paradox, this would prompt a reassessment and negation of—*reductio ad absurdum*—one or more of our initial assumptions.[10] However, Ricœur need not disregard one of his three basic propositions (God's goodness, God's power, there being suffering), as he does state that reasons for believing in God are separate from explaining the nature of evil. (Ricœur 1995, 260) This of course implies that there are reasons to believe in God that Ricœur finds to be convincing.[11] With this in mind, I will grant—that is, assume temporarily for the sake of argument—that removing any of these initial propositions also fails in a similar sense to how theodicy, or myth supposedly fails. Thus, we are left with a genuine *aporia*—a problem that truly only has seemingly paradoxical, or failed responses (Theodicy, Atheism, Myth, Etc. are all puzzling outcomes). This conception of *aporia* can be called—to borrow **X**'s terminology—a wonder-question.[12] If we do classify the problem of evil as such, it does not seem to call for any further response. It cannot be answered and in its unanswerability there is inherent value. That is, the aporetic nature of the question is *enough*, and no further response is called for, except out of habit.[13] We need not 'render the *aporia* productive' in some utilitarian, calculative way; the *aporia* is itself valuable.

A second, more analytical, interpretation of evil as an *aporia* is as follows: One could claim—as Kant began to and, more pointedly, Wittgenstein did claim—that such discussions of evil and the problem of evil are beyond our conceptual limits. (Kant 1960, 35–38; Wittgenstein 1965, 11–12; 1998, 6.421)

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[10] This, of course, is exactly what leads many to discard the claim that there is omnibenevolent, omnipotent God.

[11] Though of course, a proper treatment of such reasons far elude the scope of both Ricœur's essay and of this essay.

[12] For the purposes of this essay, a wonder-question is simply a question that ostensibly has only paradoxical or failed answers, and one that inspires the *feeling* of wonder in us. That is, rather than 'wondering' (e.g. about what you will have for breakfast tomorrow) you are in a state of true 'wonder' and 'awe' at such aporetic questions. This *wonder* at the question provides value in itself, simply due the question's absolute resistance to response. The foundation of this distinction was outlined in a lecture by **X**, though he has not yet published a paper regarding this particular distinction. **X** does have a tangentially related paper wherein some foundation for this distinction can be found. (**X**)

[13] That is not to say that some (or perhaps all) of Ricœur's pleas for action and emotional catharsis are 'uncalled for' generally speaking; nor is it to say that there is anything wrong with that which Ricœur suggests in his response. Rather, it merely shows that the problem of evil itself, does not necessarily call for such a response.

That is, beyond the limits of language, and thus beyond the limits of knowledge. (Wittgenstein 1998, 5.6) Wittgenstein's 'A Lecture on Ethics' outlines this foundation for the claim that the problem of evil is an *aporia*. On this reading, the problem of evil is not to be solved, but the important experience can be *shown* to one through religious *experience*. (Wittgenstein 1965, 8–10) Whilst it is unlikely that Ricœur spoke of *aporia* with this intended meaning—especially considering his claims regarding propositional form and coherence (Ricœur 1995, 249)—it does allow for reasonable reinterpretation and development of his position. Perhaps combining Ricœur's existential method with the Wittgensteinian doctrine of 'religious experience'—including Wittgenstein's rigorous defence of the importance of 'good and evil' despite their being beyond the limits of rational discourse—could result in a less problematic response to evil.

(2.4) Ricœur's Response to Lament

Even *if* one is willing to grant Ricœur his peculiar requirement that an adequate response to the problem of evil must be consolatory, and further accept that a response is both possible and required, we must still determine if Ricœur's response is acceptable—acceptable according to Ricœur's own requirements, and acceptable more broadly. Ricœur requires that a response to evil: must console, must not silence the lament of 'Why me?', must not be self-contradictory, must not require overt optimism, and so on. (Ricœur 1995, 254–256) Ricœur's response to evil begins with admitting the unanswerability of the lament 'Why me?'; we must respond first with "I don't know". (Ricœur 1995, 260) Following this, by formulating this lament into a complaint to God and believing in God in spite of evil, we may eventually cease in our lament, or even find value in suffering. (*Ibid*) However, this process seems indistinguishable from *silencing* the lament, which Ricœur does not permit. (Ricœur 1995, 254) That is, Ricœur's own response does not aid or dissolve one's lament, but rather redirects it to God, away from any consoling response and towards silence.[14]

This issue becomes more apparent when we apply Ricœur's own standards to his response and to other potential responses (Myth, Wisdom, Gnosis, Theodicy) equally. Consider the Book of Job. If one of Job's companions had offered Ricœur's own response to evil—admitting ignorance, protesting to God and maintaining faith in spite of evil—Ricœur would seemingly still reject this as an inadequate response. Indeed, according to Ricœur, all Myth and Wisdom necessarily cannot respond to evil adequately, so this alternate version of the Book of Job would either cease to be Wisdom, or fail. This suggests an inconsistency, which Ricœur does not permit. (Ricœur 1995, 254) If Ricœur dismisses such a response in myth, wisdom, or theodicy, he cannot coherently propose a relevantly structurally similar response himself. Thus, it follows that *either* Ricœur's response fails, or his dismissal of all prior responses to the problem of evil fails.

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[14] Perhaps complaining to God does not *necessarily* imply a lack of consolation in response. However, it seems that in the Book of Job, God—appearing as a whirlwind; that is, appearing as an archetype of what one may want to call 'natural evil'—does not aim to console, but to silence Job's complaint. (Job 38:1–3 [NIV])

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ricœur's pairing of an idiosyncratic conception of evil with an unjustified set of criteria for responses to the problem of evil, leads him to prematurely disregard prior responses to the problem of evil—such as myth and theodicy—without sufficient justification. His proposed—and potentially unnecessary—response to the problem of evil ostensibly fails to fulfill his own criteria. This tension leads us to revisit prior responses to evil, rather than rejecting them outright. Furthermore, if all these responses are shown to ultimately fail, then it may be our foundational assumptions that ought to be reevaluated. Should these assumptions prove to be necessary truths, then we are left in a state of necessary *aporia*. This leads us to either classify such a problem as beyond language, or as a wonder-question that provides meaning and value in its very irresolvability.

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