

**THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD by D. Z. Phillips, SCM Press, London, 2004, Pp. xxiii + 280, £19.99 pbk.**

Anyone who has stood in front of a Year 10 class (14–15 year olds) and fielded questions on God and evil will find him or herself nodding in agreement with D Z Phillips as he demolishes various modern theodicies in *The Problem of God and the Problem of Evil*. For Phillips, modern analytical philosophers of religion go wrong not merely in attempting to solve the problem of evil, but in imagining that a theoretical solution is possible in the first place. To illustrate his point Phillips works through ten modern explanations of God and evil, concluding that not only do these explanation fail to convince, but they imply a certain limiting conception of God and a failure to take suffering seriously. Hence the title of the book: if we attempt to solve the problem of evil by justifying the existence of evil, we reduce God to the terms of our given justification.

The first part of the book is therefore primarily negative, an attempt to destroy the false images of God we are apt to create when we start attempting to explain why God allows evil. To this end Phillips invokes the *Book of Job* with modern theodicians playing the role of Job's friends and Phillips supplying the voice from the whirlwind. The second part of the book in contrast lays out what Phillips describes as a neglected inheritance. Phillips presents this neglected inheritance as a possible response to evil, rather than as a solution to the problem of evil. It is a response rather than a solution because Phillips believes that our existential response to evil involves a certain grammar of God. Again the title of the book gives us the clue: we cannot separate our response to the problem of evil from our life lived *in* God.

Up to this point in the book the spirit of Wittgenstein is never far away, and Phillips's familiar remarks about the grammar of God are certain to mystify and infuriate some as they bring light to others. Phillips defends himself from the charge of linguistic idealism, but how successful his defence is depends on how convincing we take his response to evil to be. Interestingly it is not primarily Wittgenstein to whom Phillips turns in outlining the neglected inheritance (though Wittgenstein is present throughout in seeing the world from eternity), but Simone Weil. Here we might expect two philosophical worlds to collide, and it is the collision of these two worlds that much of the book's interest is generated. On the one hand we have the Platonic influence running through Weil's treatment of evil, on the other hand we have Phillips's Wittgensteinian instincts calling him back to examine the grammar of God-talk (albeit from the extreme context of the concentration camp).

In discussing Weil, Phillips adopts a language rarely used by good Wittgensteinians: 'To recognise that one is nothing, is to recognise that one is not the centre of the universe. The "I" is not sacrosanct, immune from harm' (p. 183). The response that Weil proposes to evil and suffering is one in which 'I' come to see that I am nothing before God, that any attempt to assert my power or dominion is a failure to accept this nothingness and that suffering can help us accept our nothingness. Phillips sees the danger that this response could itself contain a predictive element, similar in kind to those of theodicies he has so vehemently opposed: 'There is still a predictive element in the religious belief I have described. It seems to say that, no matter how great the darkness, faith will abide and sustain' (p. 186). He is also aware of the quietism that Weil's reaction could imply. The danger is that the isolated 'I', viewing the world from the perspective of eternity, becomes completely divorced from the historical reality of human suffering.

So how does Phillips attempt to maintain the perspective of eternity whilst paying witness to the temporal reality of human suffering? If he is to avoid the charge of idealism his response to evil must be more than just self-purification. Here Phillips sets before us the figure of the suffering servant and the crucified Christ. Again he draws on the writings of Weil (under the guidance of Rush Rhees) who argues that the crucifixion was more than martyrdom and more than sacrifice, because on the

cross Christ was *abandoned* and *broken*. Here Phillips adds: 'It is in this extreme affliction that the dependence of the creature is revealed. In reaching out, the only reciprocating touch is a compassion for the human condition *as such*' (p. 239). Not only does Christ teach us how to act in the face of evil, he *is* the lesson.

The theology expounded here is quite familiar to anyone acquainted with modern soteriology, and has more than the odd echo of von Balthasar. I will not go into the question of whether or not Phillips is successful in connecting the temporal sufferings of Christ with the eternal love of God. One weakness, however, that I would argue is present throughout the book is a failure to distinguish between our temporal response to contingency and God's eternal response to evil. At times Phillips seems to identify contingency and evil, making our response to contingency identical to our response to evil. In his classic book *Prudence* Josef Pieper sees prudence as the virtue that governs our response to temporal contingency. For Phillips there seems to be no distinction between prudence and faith, so our response to life's contingencies is either egotistical self-assertion or self-giving through the gift of Christ. Another weakness of the book is its identification of theodicy with the works of a few analytical philosophers. It is one thing to say that these philosophers present bad arguments, another to say that all theodicies are therefore doomed to a similar fate. Much here turns on the question of what a theodicy is trying to establish. It is one thing to defend God against the charge that he is responsible for evil, another to attempt to *explain* why God allows so much evil in the world.

So is Phillips successful in presenting a response to evil that both acknowledges the reality of evil, but also avoids solipsism? This is a difficult question to answer, and at the end of the book Phillips reiterates what he says at the outset: 'the problem of evil should be discussed with fear and trembling' (p. 274).

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