ARTICLES

Mikel Burley

Contemplating Evil

Abstract

Via a discussion of various ways in which putative descriptions or explanations can be deemed to be morally insensitive, this article investigates the role of "contemplation" in philosophy of religion and ethics, and especially in connection with the "problem of evil". Focusing on the Wittgenstein-influenced methods of D. Z. Phillips, the question is considered whether a tension obtains between, on the one hand, a "contemplative conception of philosophy", and on the other hand, the sort of critique of theodicy according to which the theodicist's attempt to maintain a contemplative stance with respect to evil and suffering is morally corrupt.

1. The blinded architect

> The Cathedral of St Basil in the Kremlin is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen. There is a story – I don't know whether it is true but I hope it is – that when Ivan the Terrible saw the completed cathedral he had the architect blinded so that he would never design anything more beautiful. (Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury 1984: 165)

The above remark of Wittgenstein's is recounted by Maurice O'Connor Drury as having occurred during a conversation in 1949. "I was so shocked by Wittgenstein's hoping that this horrible story

was true", reports Drury, "that I could make no adequate reply; I merely shook my head" (Drury 1984: 165). In an editorial note to the volume in which Drury's recollections appear, Rush Rhees comments as follows:

> At an earlier time Wittgenstein had spoken of this, when Drury and I were both present; and after 'I hope it *is* true' he added with great feeling, almost awe: 'What a *wonderful* way of showing his admiration!' Drury said, 'A *horrible* way', and I think I agreed. I now think this was irrelevant, i.e. that Wittgenstein might have admitted it, without in any way changing the feeling he'd just expressed. And what he felt about Ivan's move could not be separated from what he (Wittgenstein) felt in seeing and and [*sic*] remembering the cathedral. I think that his 'What a *wonderful* way of showing his admiration!' is akin to what he might have said of certain forms of human sacrifice as a gesture of deepest reverence. If we had said 'But it's horrible!' he'd have said this showed we didn't know what was taking place. (Rhees 1984: 224–25, note 46)

Even after reading these comments from Rhees, many will, I suspect, regard Drury's shaking his head as the most appropriate response to Wittgenstein's remark. This response – and also that of exclaiming how *horrible* Ivan's action was – is a moral one, whereas Wittgenstein's original remark appears to be making a judgement that has an entirely different emphasis. This, I take it, is why Rhees, upon reflection, suggests that the sort of response exhibited by Drury misses the point of Wittgenstein's remark, and that "Wittgenstein might have admitted it, without in any way changing the feeling he'd just expressed".

Although there is much that is of profound interest in these respective points from Wittgenstein, Drury, and Rhees, it is not my intention to deal with them all thoroughly in this paper. Rather, I want to use the exchange between Wittgenstein and Drury as one example of a broad and complex phenomenon, or set of phenomena, that comprises cases where a mode of verbal expression is criticized on the grounds of moral insensitivity; on the grounds, that is, that the mode of discourse fails to do justice to its subject matter because of some moral failing – a moral failing that is evident within the mode of discourse itself and which may be taken on the part of the hearer to indicate a moral failing in the

speaker. In particular, I want to consider this kind of moral criticism in relation to the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion. For it is evident in the work of some important Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers, most notably D. Z. Phillips, that they have very strong moral objections to the ways in which certain other philosophers try to maintain a "contemplative disposition" in relation to instances of horrendous evil and suffering. Yet Phillips himself is well known for having styled his own approach to philosophy, and that of Wittgenstein, as a *contemplative* one. So there is a mesh of intriguing conceptual cross-connections and apparent tensions here, which have potentially significant implications for how we think, philosophically or otherwise, about morally relevant issues, and about evil and suffering in particular.

2. Objectivity – so called

When Drury shakes his head in response to Wittgenstein's remark about Ivan's blinding the architect of St Basil's, a natural way of understanding this response is to see it as an expression of disapprobation and consternation at the mismatch between the act that has just been referred to and the sentiment that has been expressed in relation to it. To regard the blinding of someone as something "wonderful" that one hopes is true, is, it might be thought, to fail to recognize the moral character of the action. Rhees's comments, quoted above, suggest that he thought a legitimate distinction could be made between expressing one's moral opinion about an action – that the action is "horrible", for example – and expressing a feeling in oneself to which hearing of the action gave rise. The thought that there is such a distinction is implied by the suggestion that Wittgenstein might have admitted that the act of blinding was horrible "without in any way changing the feeling he'd just expressed". The distinction seems, at best, to be a precarious one, and some may wish to question its viability. For how could one exclaim of an action that it is "wonderful" and that one hopes it really took place without thereby offering a moral

endorsement of it? The same could be said of such a remark if it were made about human sacrifice. One can imagine someone – perhaps even Wittgenstein – being told of rumours that the inhabitants of a distant island practise human sacrifice, and exclaiming in response "How wonderful! I hope it is true!" Would one not be entitled, with Drury, to shake one's head in bemusement and dismay?

There are, no doubt, many ways of being morally insensitive – or, at least, of being perceived as such. One way is exemplified in the exchange between Wittgenstein and Drury: we might see Wittgenstein as having overlooked the morally heinous character of Ivan's purported action by attending only to the kind of aesthetic impression that it made on him, and to overlook an action's moral character is, *eo ipso*, to exhibit a kind of moral insensitivity. Another way of being morally insensitive might be to try to offer an unemotional and non-evaluative description of an action or event when that action or event in fact requires a morally and emotionally engaged response. Contextual factors, such as who one's audience is and the purpose for which the description is being offered, will be highly pertinent here. For instance, an emotionally detached recounting of how an architect was blinded upon the order of a tyrannical emperor could be entirely appropriate within certain contexts, such as a news report or an encyclopaedia entry on sixteenth-century Russian history. Sometimes, moreover, ostensibly emotionless presentations of "the facts" can themselves convey a powerful emotional impact, depending upon the prior knowledge and associations that the audience bring with them. Think, for example, of services of remembrance that consist almost exclusively of a list of names of the deceased being orated; on such occasions, the audience's knowledge of the individuals concerned, and of the circumstances in which they died, may be sufficient to infuse the event with a strong emotional charge.

A way of criticizing a piece of writing for its lack of moral and emotional engagement was exemplified by the screenwriter and novelist Candace Allen in an interview on BBC Radio 3, in which the subject of discussion was photography and journalism concerning the public extra-judicial executions of black American

citizens in the southern United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Reporting her reaction to certain items in a recent exhibition of such photographs and writings, Allen said:

> I am of a certain age and I've been engaged with African-American history for a very long time, so these things aren't shocking or unusual to me. However, the two longer articles [in the exhibition] from the Memphis [news]paper in which the journalist talks about [the fact that] there is going to be a lynching, and he talks about it in great detail – what the charges are, what people are planning on doing, who else they might lynch – and then he reports, really, the cooking of the body, the defacing of the body, and he isn't outraged; he is objective – so called – and that is as damning as anything in terms of *his* moral character. (Allen 2011)[1]

It is possible to discern at least two interrelated, though distinguishable, lines of criticism in what Allen says here. On the one hand, there is the condemnation of the Memphis newspaper journalist's failure to do justice to the moral character – indeed, we might say, the *evil* character – of the subject matter he is dealing with. There is a sense in which – depending on whom one's audience or readership is – describing morally outrageous incidents without an evident expression of moral outrage is to offer a *false* description, for it misses out something essential to the incidents themselves; and hence, if being "objective" was supposed to facilitate an accurate account of events, then the goal has not been achieved, and the report remains, at best, "objective – so called". In short, it lacks *truth*. On the other hand, what Allen is highlighting is that the very attempt to leave moral outrage out of his account exposes the journalist's corrupt moral character; it reveals him to be, not morally neutral at all, but rather an accomplice to torture and murder; for to see the burning to death of human beings as acts that *can* be described in terms that forego morality and emotion is, in effect, to condone those acts. Thus, the so-called objective account not only lacks truth: it also displays the moral turpitude of its author.

[1] Allen was discussing *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, an exhibition of photographs, postcards and journalism at Rivington Place, London, 27 May – 30 July 2011.

Again, however, it is important to emphasize the relevance of context here. Our repugnance at the Memphis newspaper report does not depend exclusively upon the form of words of which such a report consists. Rather, it is intertwined with our knowing that the writer belongs to the moral community for whom he is writing, and that he shares with many of his readers a callous indifference to the cruelty and injustice typified by mob lynchings and burnings. Despite being in a position to speak out against such acts, he tacitly endorses them. Our reaction would, no doubt, be very different to the report of a visiting journalist writing for readers who, along with the journalist herself, already strongly oppose racist violence, even if that report, too, lacked any explicitly evaluative tone. The descriptive account itself might be understood as an eloquent condemnation; moreover, it could be argued that the addition of explicit outrage would soften its impact – as though the inherently outrageous nature of the act did not speak for itself.[2]

3. Losing one's humanity

A similar, or at least analogous, form of criticism to that which Candace Allen makes of the Memphis journalist can be seen in certain responses to philosophical works of theodicy. Richard Swinburne's theodical writings have been a particular target for criticism of this sort, from theologians such as Kenneth Surin and from a small number of philosophers of religion such as D. Z. Phillips. Swinburne is often selected because he is taken to typify a tendency, or temptation, that is pervasive among philosophical commentators on religious belief, especially within recent Anglophone philosophy. Acknowledging that his attacks on Swinburne are "rather aggressive", Surin maintains that this is precisely the attitude with which one *ought* to respond to Swinburne's attempts to offer explanations of evil (Surin 1986: 83). Again, an interweaving of two strands of critique can be discerned, which are perhaps best understood as two dimensions of the same

[2] The wording of this paragraph is much indebted to helpful suggestions from an anonymous referee.

overall argument. On the one hand, Swinburne is condemned for his "irremissable moral blindness" (*sic*), and on the other he is accused of being incapable of telling the truth, precisely because he is unable to see certain crucial features of the phenomena he is pretending to discuss (Surin 1986: 84). Echoing Adorno, Surin writes that "the failure to lend a voice to the cries of the innocent (and there can be few more glaring instances of this failure than the willingness to construct a divine teleology out of innocent suffering) is to have lost the capacity to tell the truth" (ibid.).

From Surin's perspective, Swinburne's speculations about God's purposes for allowing evil to obtain in the world rely on a conception of God that is morally and religiously unpalatable, and a large part of the reason for its being so unpalatable is its inadequacy for doing justice to *the truth of suffering*. Swinburne's speculations invoke a God for whom it is acceptable to oversee networks of pain and distress, wherein the screams of one anguished individual, tormented by the cruel behaviour of another, may serve the putatively useful function of enabling a third party to experience a sense of responsibility which would not otherwise have come about (see Swinburne 1977: 92). For example, "The possibility of the Jewish suffering and deaths at the time [of their persecution by the Nazi regime] made possible serious heroic choices for people normally [...] too timid to make them (e.g. to harbour the prospective victims) [...]" (Swinburne 1998: 151). In response to this instrumental or functional conception of the screams of the afflicted, D. Z. Phillips writes: "There are screams and screams, and to ask of what use are the screams of the innocent, as Swinburne's defense would have us do, is to embark on a speculation we should not even contemplate" (Phillips 1977: 115). While it is true, Phillips remarks, "that sometimes considering a matter further is a sign of reasonableness and maturity [...] this cannot be stated absolutely, since at other times readiness to be open-minded about matters is a sign of a corrupt mind" (ibid.).

Surin and Phillips are impugning Swinburne for trying to *explain* (and to thereby *justify*) the existence of evil, whereas what we saw in the quotation from Candace Allen was her condemning someone for trying to objectively *describe* evil events. The similarity between

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these forms of criticism consists in their both pointing to a moral deficiency in the one who is being criticized, a deficiency that involves remaining detached, or supposing that one can remain detached, about occurrences from which *it is not morally acceptable to remain detached* (and perhaps not religiously acceptable either); and, as I have noted, this sense of the unacceptability of moral and emotional detachment is informed by the view that such detachment obscures the *truth* about the phenomena that are being dealt with. These criticisms castigate the attempt to merely contemplate the world in those instances where contemplation is out of place. Seconding Phillips' objection to Swinburne, Surin writes that,

> To be 'open-minded' about certain realities, and 'more tellingly' to *insist* on retaining such a contemplative disposition, is to show oneself to be incapable of making certain exigent moral discriminations. [...] In cases where human beings are *in extremis*, to be 'open-minded', and thus to deafen one's ears to their cries, is to repudiate their flesh-and-bloodness, their being human. And in this hedging of one's acknowledgement of the humanity of the other, one has lost one's own humanity. (Surin 1986: 84)

In view of these attacks on what is perceived as a morally inadmissible "open-minded" and "contemplative disposition" with respect to evil, it is worth noting that Phillips has persistently characterized his own Wittgenstein-influenced approach to philosophy as a contemplative one. In order to see whether there is any tension in Phillips' position, we need to examine what he says elsewhere about "a contemplative conception of philosophy".

4. A perch above the fray

"A contemplative conception of philosophy does seek a perch above the fray", writes Phillips, "but not one from which it arbitrates between our beliefs and convictions in the name of rationality. Neither is it a view from nowhere. It is a contemplation of the world from the vantage point which comes from philosophy's disinterested concerns" (Phillips 2004b: 55). Phillips derived his view that philosophy's concerns are disinterested

primarily from Wittgenstein, who characterized a philosopher as one who "is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher" (Z §455).[3] While recognizing that some philosophers do use philosophy in order to advocate particular moral or religious values, Phillips maintained that this was not the kind of philosophy that he, or Wittgenstein, was seeking to practise. The way in which disinterested philosophers differ from those who have specific agendas to promote "is shown", according to Phillips, "in *the kind* of sensibility we find in Wittgenstein's work, particularly in doing justice to perspectives which are not his own [...]. Such a sensibility is precisely what is needed if philosophy, in the academy, is to get beyond apologetics, either for or against religion" (Phillips 2004b: 56).

Phillips strove to bring this disinterested sensibility to his contemplations on both religion and morality. He explicitly denied that these contemplations involved "an attempt to arrive at a specific moral or religious viewpoint". They were, rather, "an effort to understand the kinds of phenomena we are confronted by in morality and religion. No doubt", he added, "one's own moral or religious views will affect this endeavour but, nevertheless, they are different from it" (2001: 324). To illustrate how Phillips' method works in practice, I will here consider two essays of his which are especially relevant. In each of them, Phillips discusses forms of human behaviour that, were he to speak personally, he would (I presume) admit to finding morally unattractive, yet his discussions refrain – or at least, refrain for the most part – from passing moral judgement on the forms of behaviour themselves.

In "My Neighbour and My Neighbours," Phillips raises objections to a reading by Peter Winch of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Winch had argued that the Samaritan's act of kindness exemplifies the instinctive reaction of recognizing someone as a fellow human being, which is, according to Winch, equivalent to seeing the other as a soul (see Winch 1987). Thus, on Winch's view, to see someone who is in distress as a soul (as a human being) is to respond sympathetically towards that person; this is not because one draws an inference that, given that the creature in

[3] Phillips quotes this remark in his *Philosophy's Cool Place* (1999: 59).

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front of one is a human being, one *ought* to behave sympathetically, but rather because it is part of what it is to recognize another as a human being that one will be disposed to act sympathetically towards him or her. Phillips, however, is sceptical that recognizing another as a human being or soul entails having this disposition, and he adduces various counter-examples in which antipathetic or nonchalant responses are evinced despite – or in some instances, because of – the fact that the distressed individual is recognized to be a human being. While concurring with Winch, for example, that, under most conditions, if one is told that someone has just been bereaved then one knows that he will suffer, Phillips distinguishes between this kind of knowledge about human beings on the one hand, and the particular moral reaction of feeling pity or sympathy for the bereaved person on the other (see Phillips 1992: 234).

Among Phillips' counter-examples are selected excerpts from Jonathan Swift's wickedly humorous poem *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift*. There, we read, for example:

> Dear honest Ned is in the gout
> Lies rack'd with pain, and you without:
> How patiently you hear him groan!
> How glad the case is not your own! (Swift 1843: 655)[4]

Imagining the future response to his own death, Swift writes:

> My female friends, whose tender hearts
> Have better learn'd to act their parts
> Receive the news in doleful dumps:
> "The dean is dead: (Pray, what is trumps?) (Swift 1843: 656)[5]

In these verses, we see responses to another's pain or to someone's death that are deeply unsympathetic, yet we are liable to recognize them as human responses with which we are all too familiar. Indeed, the biting wit of Swift's poem relies on our recognition of these tendencies, perhaps even within ourselves.

Again for the purpose of drawing our attention to the *lack* of sympathy in many common responses to the suffering or death of

[4] Phillips quotes these lines (from a different edition of Swift's text, with slightly different formatting) in Phillips (1992: 235).
[5] Quoted by Phillips (again from a different edition) in Phillips (1992: 236).

others, Phillips quotes from *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, where Tolstoy writes that,

> Besides considerations as to the possible transfers and promotions likely to result from Ivan Ilych's death, the mere fact of the death of a near acquaintance aroused, *as usual*, in all who heard of it the complacent feeling that, "it is he who is dead and not I." (Tolstoy 1960: 96, quoted in Phillips 1992: 236; Phillips' italics)

Phillips' point is that, however much we may regret that reactions of this sort occur, we can hardly deny their prevalence. Nor can we plausibly maintain that to display reactions of these kinds is to show that one has somehow failed to recognize that the one who has suffered and died was a human being. Indeed, were this genuinely to be the case, then it would be just as difficult to make sense of an obdurate response as it would to make sense of a caring and sympathetic one. Instead, Phillips argues, it must be admitted that the repertoire of ways in which one may recognize another as a human being is very broad, and includes within it reactions such as indifference, envy, contempt and disgust, as well as love, admiration, generosity and sympathetic concern.

With regard to the Good Samaritan, it is clear that Phillips finds his action admirable; indeed, part of his worry about Winch's view is that it appears to diminish the specifically moral quality of the Samaritan's act by implying that what he did is really just the default response, exemplifying not a particularly virtuous instance of benevolence, but merely how we would naturally expect someone to behave, given that he recognized the man in the ditch to be a human being. What Phillips argues is that the priest and the Levite recognized the injured man to be a human being no less than did the Samaritan, and that is why we should be careful to distinguish between the mere recognition that someone is human, and the moral character of the form that the recognition takes.

My own purpose in citing this argument of Phillips' is neither to commend nor to reject it, but to highlight how it demonstrates a way in which he seeks a perch above the fray in writing about ethics. Without going out of his way to disguise his own moral preferences, Phillips tries to prevent these preferences from obscuring the variety of attitudes and modes of behaviour exhibited

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in human life. By bringing forward the range of examples that he does, Phillips aims to avoid aligning his philosophical view of what it is to be human with any particular community of ideas.

The other essay of Phillips' to which I want to draw attention is "Kill or Be Killed," wherein he describes and reflects upon the moral tug-of-war that manifested in the life of Isaac Babel, a Jew who became a Cossack in early twentieth-century Russia (see Phillips 2006). Throughout the essay, Phillips emphasizes the distance between the aggressive "manly virtues" of the Cossacks and the "way of peace" affirmed both in the Judaism with which Babel had grown up and in the Christian ethos epitomized in Christ's Sermon on the Mount. While acknowledging the often brutal character of the Cossack code of honour, Phillips does not condemn it. Rather, he seeks both to understand the attraction that it had for Babel, and to bring out what it might be about Jewish and Christian moralities that Babel and the Cossacks found repulsive. Intermixed with the bloody and vengeful Cossack ethic, wherein a desire to live without enemies is viewed as a sign of weakness, there are forms of courage and heroism: a strength of will in the face of injury and death which contrasts starkly with the creeping servility that is sometimes displayed by those who claim to espouse religious values. Phillips, of course, knows that religious faith need not entail faint-heartedness, and he notes that Babel himself was not immune to seeing how there can be "greatness in suffering, a greatness involved not in the glorification of the self, but in dying to the self" (2006: 167) – the sort of spiritual greatness that Babel may have glimpsed when he described a painting of Jesus being chased by a mocking crowd as "the most extraordinary image of God I had ever seen in my life" (Trilling 1961, quoted in Phillips 2006: 167).

As in the other essay outlined above, Phillips does not try to hide his own moral predilections, and nor, in this case, does he hold back from occasional critique. For example, at one place, having quoted a passage in which Babel describes a Cossack officer reaping revenge on his ex-master by trampling him to death, Phillips contends that there is something inadequate about the form that revenge takes in Babel's account; for although the

revenger claims that trampling is superior to shooting because it enables one to "[get] to know life through and through" (Babel, quoted in Phillips 2006: 161),[6] in fact he is simply repeating the cruelties that he wished to revenge: "all he does is to exhibit power in ways alarmingly similar to the power once exhibited by the master he kills" (Phillips 2006: 161). Were Phillips to leave his commentary there, we might suspect that he had exchanged his contemplative stance for one that advocates a particular moral perspective, a perspective that is antagonistic to at least certain forms of revenge. But Phillips does not leave it there. He proceeds to inquire into how the vengeful behaviour displayed by the Cossack officer has a place within the broader scheme of Cossack warrior values, and how these values could appear attractive to someone such as Babel.

Phillips seeks neither to condone nor to condemn, but to place alternative ethical standpoints alongside one another for the purpose of comparison. Agreeing with Lionel Trilling that Babel's life and stories embody a tense dialectic between Jewish spirituality and Cossack honour, Phillips emphasizes that it is philosophy's task, as he sees it, not to vindicate one side of this dialectic and vilify the other, but to

> bring out what is involved in such opposition, and clarify possible misrepresentations of each other by the parties involved. Religion need not be a form of weakness. As for what Babel saw in the Cossacks [...] it brings no credit on religion to deny that they, too, have their moral perspectives. They may not see God above the sky, but they have addressed life at certain of its limiting horizons, and, in doing so, emerged as heroes of their kind. (Phillips 2006: 168)

In the light of these remarks, we might ask how far philosophy should go in adopting such an ostensibly neutral, non-committal position. Should the philosopher seek merely to contemplate the variety of moral perspectives without passing judgement upon them, or is the important task, as Marx famously pronounced, to change the world, not merely to "interpret" (or describe) it (see Marx 1994: 98, 101)?

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[6] The quotation is from Babel's *The Life and Adventures of Matthew Pavilchenko.*

As we have seen already, in the context of discussing responses to the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion, Phillips certainly does not refrain from attacking philosophers such as Swinburne on the grounds that they are remaining *too detached*, *too "open-minded"* in the face of pain and suffering. How can such criticisms be reconciled with the kind of contemplative disposition that Phillips himself seeks to maintain in essays of the sort I have outlined? Let us consider this question further.

5. Against theodicy

Some critics of the very project of theodicy have emphasized the inadequacy of any merely theoretical response to pain and suffering. They have, as it were, concurred with Marx, that the proper response to human misery is to try to alleviate it. Nicholas Lash, for example, has written of there being "a kind of obscenity in diverting ourselves" from cultivating the conditions wherein suffering can be relieved by indulging in mere theoretical speculations which, while "sooth[ing] *our* unease," do nothing to assist those "whose suffering disturbed our tranquillity" (Lash 1978: 283–84). This talk of "diverting ourselves" could be taken to imply that what is most fundamentally wrong with theodicy is that it occupies time that would be better spent participating in charitable activities. But what Lash also argues is that searching for an explanation of "the mystery of evil" in the Gospel involves a profound misunderstanding of what Christianity can teach us about death and resurrection. What it has to teach us cannot be neatly summarized – it requires sustained personal reflection as well as action – but if one tries to leave behind the darkness of Christ's suffering and death upon the cross, one moves "not into paradise, but fairyland" (Lash 1978: 284).

This accentuation of the misconception or *confusion* involved in treating religion as something that can yield a theoretical answer to the existence of evil in the world is vividly present in Phillips' antitheodical polemics. Indeed, Phillips tries to present his objections to theodicy as "*logical* and *conceptual* in character", rather

than moral (see Phillips 2004a: 50). Yet there is a persistent and forceful moral dimension to Phillips' critique, one especially prominent form of it being the complaint that theodicists operate with an untenable dichotomy between what they are prepared to say as theoreticians and what they, and we, "*already know morally*" (2004a: 38). While everyone who shares our moral community, including the theodicists, already knows that the atrocities committed in Nazi extermination camps, for example, cannot be compensated for or redeemed, the theodicist, when speaking as a philosopher, looks for reasons why such atrocities may not be so bad after all. Thus, Phillips stresses the incoherence in the standpoint of those theodicists who want to deny that they are being morally insensitive: logically, they cannot claim to share the same level of horror at the Holocaust as the antitheodicist, "while at the same time talk[ing] differently about it" (2004a: 39).

The assertion that someone's denial of moral insensitivity is incoherent does not diminish the charge of moral insensitivity itself; if anything, it increases its severity, for it adds that the theodicist is so confused as to be unaware of the degree of their own insensitivity. There is thus something disingenuous in Phillips' attempts to play down the moral dimension of his disagreement with theodicy: it is clear that he finds such theoretical enterprises morally as well as philosophically repugnant. We might wonder, therefore, whether there is a kind of incoherence in Phillips' own approach to philosophy: can he both concur with Wittgenstein's contention that the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas, and at the same time censure theodicists for apparently separating what they are prepared to say as theoreticians from what they are prepared to say for themselves? Is it not the theodicist who, in this context, is seeking a perch above the fray, and Phillips who is urging that no such perch is available?

6. The limits of contemplation

One response that could be made on Phillips' behalf is that the appropriateness of seeking a perch above the fray – of adopting a

contemplative stance in relation to the phenomena under investigation – depends on what the investigation is intended to achieve. When Phillips is contemplating the myriad ways in which people can and do react to the suffering of others, and noting that the reaction of the Good Samaritan is not one that we should automatically expect, the aim of his inquiry is to establish whether particular forms of moral response are essential to the recognizing of another as a human being. In order to carry out this inquiry, the philosopher is required to remain emotionally and morally detached rather than passing judgement on the moral character of the respective reactions described. Similarly, when comparing and contrasting Judaeo-Christian and Cossack moralities, Phillips' purpose is to describe them in order to clarify their nature; and in the case of the Cossack warrior ethic in particular, it is to show that this *is* a moral perspective comprising a discernible set of ethical values, regardless of what we, when speaking for ourselves, may think of it.

In the case of the problem of evil, too, Phillips sees the philosopher's task as being to clarify or elucidate alternative ways of responding to evil – not philosophical responses, but non-philosophical ones, both secular and religious. While admitting that he himself devotes most space to a specific response which he regards "as religiously profound", Phillips denies that he is advocating or trying "to provide a philosophical foundation for it" (2004a: xiii).

Phillips, it seems, has no quarrel with the attempt to retain a contemplative disposition in cases where the purpose of the investigation is to describe or elucidate the phenomena at issue. What he finds objectionable is the contemplative disposition adopted by those who seek to *explain*, or explain *away*, the phenomena, especially when the phenomena in question are horrendous evils which people have suffered. Wittgenstein wrote of philosophy that it "just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us" (PI §126). Phillips fully endorses this anti-explanatory conception of philosophy, and finds the theodicists'

efforts to disclose what they take to be God's hidden purposes thoroughly misguided.

Still, however, we might question whether a distinction between description and explanation succeeds in relieving the apparent tension within a philosophical view that regards itself as disinterestedly contemplative while at the same time condemning others for remaining too detached. Like Kenneth Surin, Phillips holds that the first duty of anyone who writes about the problem of evil is to not "betray the evils people have suffered" (2004a: xi).[7] This implies that an attitude of respectful concern for those about whom one is writing should be present in one's work, and hence there is no option of relinquishing *this* commitment even when one is wearing one's philosopher's hat. The philosopher cannot adopt a purely contemplative perspective on human suffering – a perspective that feels no obligation towards the victims of evil – without thereby losing his or her own humanity. To this extent, at least, the philosopher cannot perch entirely above the fray; she must remain a citizen of the community of decent moral concern. And so, however much Phillips may have admired Wittgenstein's ideal of "a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them" (CV 4e),[8] it seems clear that there are some contexts within which this coolness would be wholly out of place.

It is not my purpose to specify where the limits of appropriate disinterestedness lie; indeed, I am doubtful that anyone *should* try to specify those limits in abstraction from particular cases. My purpose, rather, has been to highlight the issue that arises here, and to indicate the difficulties that attach to a contemplative conception of philosophy. When, for example, a philosopher considers the trampling to death of one man by another, and then, rather than passionately oppugning the action, looks to see how this action fits into a broader framework of values, has the victim's suffering been betrayed? Could a comparable philosophical investigation be

[7] Cf. Surin (1986: xi): "An author can perhaps be forgiven for producing so many sentences on evil and suffering if he strives to meet one requirement: namely, that none of these sentences should obscure or efface the lived experience of those who happen to be the victims."

[8] Phillips uses this quotation as the epigraph to his *Philosophy's Cool Place* (1999: vi).

carried out into the value-system of which burning African-American people to death was symptomatic in the southern United States; or would any attempt to "clarify" such a value-system without forthrightly condemning it amount to a complicity that was damning of the philosopher's moral character? Would even raising the possibility of a disinterested perspective in such circumstances be indicative of a "corrupt mind"?

The moral dangers for anyone engaging in the project of theodicy are immense – as Phillips, Surin, and many others have appreciated.[9] These dangers derive from the delusion that one can calmly contemplate the horrors of torture and murder, devising putative reasons why God may allow them to occur, without thereby trivializing the suffering of the victims. What I have suggested is that there may be dangers, too, in supposing that a neat bifurcation obtains between occasions when it is appropriate for a philosopher to adopt, or to seek to adopt, a contemplative disposition, and occasions when this would be wholly inappropriate. Phillips is an example of someone who, notwithstanding a general commitment to a "contemplative conception of philosophy", implicitly recognizes that contemplation must come to an end somewhere. Clearly, he considered the forms of contemplation involved in theodicy to be beyond the pale. That view of Phillips' is, no doubt, bound up with the fact that theodicies, by their very nature, seek to go beyond description; the aim of explaining and justifying God's ways is internal to the theodical enterprise. As Phillips sees it, no such problem attaches to the task of describing Cossack violence and showing how it fits into a broader ethical framework. Such a task, Phillips maintains, can constitute part of a disinterested comparison between alternative moralities designed to elucidate without judging.

Wittgenstein himself exemplifies a kind of morally insensitive detachment by expressing an apparently delighted wonder at the story of the blinding of a man. To be able to see this story as wonderful, and to hope that it is true, will strike many as callous, as

[9] Among the many others, we might mention, for example, Hauerwas (1994), Tilley (1989), Williams (1996), and, most recently, Trakakis (2008, 2010).

it did Drury. Such apparent overlooking of the moral character of an act, seeing it instead under an aspect that we might call aesthetic, cannot be criticized on the grounds of logical or conceptual confusion from the standpoint of disinterested philosophy. The standpoint from which it can be criticized is that of a human being speaking for himself – or merely shaking his head in disbelief.[10]

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[10] This paper has benefited from conversations with Sue Richardson and from the comments of two anonymous referees for this journal.

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Biographical note

Mikel Burley is Lecturer in Religion and Philosophy at the University of Leeds. His publications include *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips* (Continuum, 2012) and *Language, Ethics and Animal Life: Wittgenstein and Beyond* (Continuum, 2012; co-edited with Niklas Forsberg and Nora Hämäläinen). His work combines approaches from philosophy, theology and religious studies.