


The theodicies of Hans Jonas and Jürgen Moltmann: Proposing an alternative reformed angle



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Auschwitz had a profound impact on the theological landscape. It led to God's lordship, goodness and power being put on trial. If God exists and if he is a good and powerful God, why did he not intervene to stop the atrocities committed during the Holocaust? The theologies of the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas and the Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann were decisively structured by these questions.

Contribution: This article compares the theodicies of these two influential thinkers within the Jewish and Christian traditions by analysing their concepts of God, the nature of the cosmos and human history as well as their respective views on God's response to suffering. Despite showing appreciation for profound insights, this article points out impasses in their arguments. Drawing on a reformed approach to the question, the article concludes that the anthropodicy question is the real elephant in the room, not the theodicy question. Instead of asking questions about God's goodness, Reformed theology posits the incomprehensibility of human beings turning against God. We must ask: How does it happen that a self-conscious being possessing innate moral capacities, such as moral emotions and vicarious intersubjective capabilities, rebels against God and engage in atrocious acts? Seen from this perspective, the theodicy question seems to be undergirded by the human propensity to moral disengagement and blame-shifting. Perhaps, instead of putting God on trial, humans must resort to introspection.

Keywords: theodicy; Hans Jonas; Jürgen Moltmann; Auschwitz; divine nature.

Introduction

Few events in history had a more profound impact on the theological landscape than the Holocaust. Whenever the doctrines of God, creation, and sin come into view, questions about Auschwitz seem to surface. In a certain sense, we can speak of theology that existed before the Holocaust and one that came after. Auschwitz indeed put God himself on trial. If God is Lord over history, why did he not intervene? If God is omnipotent, why did he not stop those atrocities? If God is a good God, why did he create a world where such unimaginable evil is possible? For many, only one answer would do. God does not exist. This was the response of protest atheism. Others reverted to an agnostic line of thought. If God exists at all, Auschwitz serves as living proof that he does not intervene in the course of human history and that he does not care about human destiny. Thus, for all intents and purposes, questions about God's existence serve no end. For us today, the theodicy question remains as salient as it was after Auschwitz. The genocides in Rwanda and Kosovo during the 1990s, the war in Ukraine, the recent loss of life in Gaza, and ongoing conflicts in central-Africa again and again raises the question: Where is God?

Two intellectuals, whose theologies were decisively structured by the question of God after Auschwitz and whose answers evoked much discussion in their respective traditions, were Hans Jonas and Jürgen Moltmann. Quite surprisingly, these two great thinkers of the Jewish and Christian traditions never engaged with each other in any substantial manner. In fact, as far as it can be determined, Hans Jonas at no time entered in discussion with Moltmann, while Moltmann refers only occasionally to Jonas, and then not in any significant detail.

Yet, there are remarkable similarities in their arguments. Both argue that God is a *being in becoming* who suffers with us. Both make a serious attempt to come to terms with the theological implications of evolutionary history. Both view the cosmos as an open rather than a closed system. Both employ the Kabbalistic notion of *Tzimzum* as an essential point of orientation when speaking about God's power, and both claim that God is a good God who takes up human experiences in his own being. Nevertheless, there are also substantial differences to be found in their theodicies. Hans Jonas maintains a strict separation between God and creation. In doing so, he attempts to

insulate God from the theodicy question. Going against the traditional tenets of his own faith tradition, he maintains that God does not intervene in history (Jonas 1987). Moltmann, on the other hand, resorts to pantheism to explain God's role in human suffering. He claims that God stands in both a transcendent and immanent relationship to creation and that he is engaged in the ongoing process of 'gathering up' human history into divine history. Other significant differences centre on the concepts of God and the eschatologies that each employ. Jonas is a monotheist while Moltmann's theodicy shows a strong trinitarian character. Jonas rejects the idea of a resurrection or afterlife and believes that the future rests entirely in the hands of human beings, while Moltmann approaches the beginning from the end and regards the eschaton as God's final answer to the theodicy trial.

So why engage in a comparison between the theodicies of these two scholars? One important consideration is that they come from different religious backgrounds and thus employ different resources to address the topic of theodicy. Secondly, they experienced the World War II from opposite sites. Jonas's mother was killed at Auschwitz, while Moltmann was a German prisoner of war. By engaging these two thinkers from different backgrounds who experienced the same event (World War II) from different sides, one might discover new insights. For instance, the communalities in the thoughts of Jonas and Moltmann are noteworthy. But let us start by asking: How do these two theologians construct their theodicies?

The theodicy question revolves around three sub-questions: Who is God? What is the essential nature of the cosmos and human history? What is God's response to suffering? In what follows, the theodicies of Jonas and Moltmann will be analysed in terms of these questions. Thereafter, some suggestions of my own will be made from a reformed theological perspective.

God as a being in becoming

Jonas and Moltmann reject the notion that God is an immutable and impassable being. Instead, they subscribe to the idea that he is a being in 'becoming' whose existence is characterised by ever-increasing fullness. For Jonas (1987), God's becoming means that he is 'affected' by worldly events and 'affected' means that his being is 'altered'. God is a 'risk taker' and 'adventurer' who emerges in time rather than one who exists from the start as a 'completed being' (Jonas 1987). Jonas (1987) further comments that:

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to chance and risk an endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held nothing back of itself. (p. 4)

Besides rejecting God's immutability, Jonas also questions God's omniscience. According to Jonas, God's adventure of creating a universe through processes of evolution serves his self-discovery. God possesses no foreknowledge of events,

and he does not predetermine the future (Takov & Cheo 2021). In fact, every new world experience brings a new self-experiencing of the ground of being and 'another modality for God's trying out his hidden essence and discovering himself through the surprises of the world adventure' (Jonas 1987:5).

To be sure, Jonas's God is not a ruthless God, nor a mere organising force. He is a good and intelligent being who cares and who suffers with those who experience pain (Jonas 1987). From the moment of creation, and certainly from the emergence of human beings, God experiences suffering (Jonas 1987). Nonetheless, God's involvement with creation is not marked by a pantheistic immanence. For the world to exist and to be itself, God effaces himself from the world and 'divests himself of his deity'. If God and creation were simply the same, God would have nothing to gain (Jonas 1987).

Moltmann's understanding of God's creative intentions follows a similar trajectory, but with crucial differences. God's overflowing love and desire to *relate*, and not merely the quest for self-experience, is the fundamental driving force behind God's actions. He created the world as a dwelling place with the purpose of taking it into his eternal sabbath rest (Moltmann 1993). The Son through whom God creates all things is Christ-in-becoming; he 'is on the road, walking with us' (Moltmann 1990). Like Jonas, Moltmann rejects pantheism but, unlike Jonas, who erects a wall of separation between God and creation, Moltmann reverts to pantheism. This allows him to differentiate between God and creation but also to relate the two. According to Moltmann, God creates the world *ex nihilo* but, at the same time, he also dwells in creation through his Spirit who animates all things and who leads them to God's future (Moltmann 1993; see Johnson 2003). On the one hand God is within himself in his sabbath but, again at the same time, he is outside of himself in his *Shekinah* [God's indwelling in creation] (Moltmann 1993).¹ This causes an immanent tension within God himself (Moltmann 1993). In fact, God's descent to human beings and his dwelling among people establishes a division within himself. He 'cuts himself of himself' (Moltmann 1993) and gives himself away to his people (see Langton 2013):

He [God] gives himself away to the beings he has created, he suffers with their sufferings, he goes with them through the misery of the foreign land. The God who in the Spirit dwells in his creation is present to every one of his creatures and remains bound to each of them, in joy and in sorrow. (p. 15)

Thus, as far as the creative intentions of God are concerned, both Jonas and Moltmann describe God as a being of becoming and both reject the classic theistic notions of God as an immutable and impassable entity. In Jonas's thought, God creates a diverse and flourishing reality for the purpose of deepening his own self-experiences. In Moltmann's theology, God's overflowing love leads to creation and the establishment of a new relationship within his being.

1. The Lurianic Kabbalah associates *Shekinah* with the presence of God that rests over the Ark and that dwells in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. Moltmann gave Christian content to the concept by relating it to the renewing and vivifying work of the Holy Spirit in creation. (cf. Johnson 2003).

Each of the positions create difficulties. Even though Jonas describes God as a caring God who suffers with us, Jonas's God seems to be quite self-serving. God undertakes an adventure, he risks, only to deepen his own experiences. If so, we human beings could rightly ask: Are we merely objects in God's journey of self-discovery? If we are simply the means to a divine end, why should we not surrender to despair? Considering Jonas's corpus of work on technology and human responsibility, we can safely assume that Jonas would respond by saying that hope for the future depends on human responsibility. For Jonas, the purpose of the divinely initiated evolutionary process is the development of self-autonomy, continuity, and flourishing. Humans must adhere to the 'imperative of responsibility' embedded in the natural order that the continuity of humanity must be preserved (see Langton 2013). Yet, Jonas's 'imperative of responsibility' does not resolve the instrumentalist anthropology underlying his God concept.

Moltmann's concept of a loving God, who creates so that he can relate, has a more hopeful sound to it. Nonetheless, Moltmann's panentheism creates questions of its own. Farrow (1998) rightly asks: 'How firm is the middle road' between theism and pantheism? What are we leaving behind in the process? Theists would claim that Moltmann sacrifices the distinctness of God's ontological being and his absolute freedom, and that he all too readily portrays God as a mutable being compelled by immanent inner necessities. Nevertheless, in Moltmann's theology, God's decision to create, is not borne out of free choice but overflowing love. God must create because creation is his 'destiny' (Johnson 2003).

The cosmos as an open system

The Newtonian worldview, which dominated the scientific landscape for centuries, was mechanistic and closed in nature. It saw reality as a stable and predictable system governed by natural laws. With the rise of evolutionary theory and quantum theory, a paradigm shift occurred. Now the cosmos was seen as an open system marked by a considerable degree of entropy and subject to an immense number of configurations. Attuned to developments within the natural sciences, both Jonas and Moltmann take note of this development within science. While not accepting the anti-teleological tenets of classic Darwinism, both subscribe to an open view of the cosmos, and both try to reconcile theology with evolutionary science.

Jonas holds that cosmic being offers possibilities of its own. Like God, the cosmos is in its own process of becoming. God does not interfere in the becoming of the cosmos, because a 'prejudiced' form of becoming would compromise its autonomy and integrity (Jonas 1987). Having brought into being a universe that makes endless configurations possible, God has given all there is to give (Jonas 1996). From now on, the ground of being enriches God's own experiences as he observes how the cosmos swells in sensing, striving, and acting (Jonas 1987).

According to Jonas (1987), the emergence of life after aeons of slow cosmic change was totally accidental. It was a 'world accident for which becoming deity had waited' (Jonas 1987). Carried by its own momentum, the evolutionary process passed a 'threshold' where 'innocence' ceased and decisions under 'disjunctions' of good and evil became possible (Jonas 1987). The appearance of human beings constituted the awakening of knowledge, freedom, self-awareness, and moral responsibility. As such, it was an event of the utmost importance within being (see Vogel 1996). Unhindered by God, and having the capacity to freely decide, the destiny of humanity lies completely within its own hands. It is up to humanity, not deity, to determine whether it will 'complete, save or spoil' itself (Jonas 1987). For Jonas, the human future is radically open and undetermined: it is an adventure full of risk. Even God cannot predict the outcome of the 'evolutionary game' (Jonas 1987). Human responsibility will eventually play the most decisive role in determining the future of creation.

Moltmann also addresses evolution and the open nature of the cosmos. He reflects theologically on these phenomena by resorting to the doctrine of *creatio continua*. For him, 'creation is not yet finished, and has not as yet reached its end' (Moltmann 1993). Evolutionary history tells a story of emergence and the increasing complexity and amalgamation of 'communication in open systems' (Moltmann 1993). The open nature of creation in principle establishes the 'conditions that make possible its history of perdition and deliverance' (Moltmann 1993). In the ongoing opening of closed systems, we see the self-movement of the divine Spirit in creation (Moltmann 1993). The Creator is present in creation through the Spirit, and he partakes through the Spirit in unilateral and reciprocal relationships. God's actions of 'making, preserving, maintaining, and perfecting' point to his unilateral relationships, while his actions of 'indwelling, sympathising, participating, accompanying, enduring, delighting, and glorifying' denote reciprocal relationships (Moltmann 1993).

Whereas Jonas regards the future as radically open and undetermined, Moltmann (1993) sees the universe as only partially undetermined. While all the stages of evolution contain elements of chance and randomness, from a theological point of view, evolution is not a process of 'blind chance' but 'intentional fortuitousness' (Moltmann 1993). The God, who is involved in creation through the outpouring of its creative energies, is the constant factor that steers history towards glorification and entry into his sabbath rest. The future into which things are evolving, is 'transcendent'. Moltmann (1993) formulates it as follows:

The world in its different parts and as whole is a system open to God. God is its extra-worldly encompassing milieu, from which and in which, it lives. God is its extra-worldly forecourt, into which it is evolving. (p. 206)

The unfolding of history does not occur in a determinist or deistic manner. The continuation of evolution lies to a

considerable degree in the hands of humans themselves. Humans are agents directly involved in the 'open process of time'. Moltmann (1993:196) suggests that 'they can destroy this stage of evolution, or they can organise themselves into a higher form of common living than before, and advance evolution further'.

By describing the cosmos as an open system, Jonas and Moltmann avoid determinism, assert the autonomy and freedom of creaturely reality, and reconcile the ideas of creation and evolution. This allows them to ascribe evil and wrongdoing to humanity's misuse of freedom, and not God's will. However, while both understand the cosmos to be an open system, they entertain hugely different concepts of history. Jonas views history as a linear event with an open beginning and unpredictable end, while Moltmann's concept is circular where the end (eschatology) is presupposed in the beginning and enjoys priority over the beginning. God's transcendent future comes to human history, gathers it up and transforms it (see Farrow 1998).

Again, both positions run into difficulty, Jonas's non-interventionist view of God allows him to insulate God from the theodicy question, but it leaves one with a feeling of desolation. What hope does Jonas bring by depicting God as someone who leaves us to our own devices? How does this position serve his otherwise laudable agenda to counteract the nihilism of the modern age? To Moltmann's credit, his circular concept of history is designed to create hope. God sustains history and gathers up human history in divine history through the life-giving power of the Spirit and the opening up of communication systems. But what does this mean in practical terms? What is life-giving and what is not? What does the opening up of communication systems actually mean? Where does divine involvement in creation stop? Farrow (1998) rightly critiques Moltmann for subsuming all things into a 'universal affirmation' that remains extremely vague.

God's self-contraction and response to suffering in history

Jonas and Moltmann insist that God is good. Yet, if God is a loving God as Moltmann suggests and a caring one as Jonas presumes, why would he use a method of creating that is permeated with randomness, suffering, waste, and death? One response, following Leibniz, could be that God created the best possible world through the only effective or available means of creation. Whatever the response, one must deal with the topic of God's omnipotence.

Jonas outrightly rejects the idea of an omnipotent God. He considers omnipotence to be a Hellenistic concept that does not accord with the witness of Scripture (Jonas 1987). God is not a 'sorcerer' whose mode of caring determines the outcomes of things. He leaves something for other agents to do. In doing so, he takes a risk. He is an 'endangered God'

(Jonas 1987). Jonas describes the idea of absolute and omnipotent power as a 'contradictory, self-destructive and indeed senseless concept' that hinders viable theology (Jonas 1987). Absolute power could exist only if it stands alone and if there is no object 'on which to act'. In such a case, it would regardless be empty of content, because power has meaning only within a relational setting where counterforce plays a part (Jonas 1987). On the one hand, it cannot exist alone, but on the other, it is limited as soon as other agents appear on the scene (Jonas 1987). Thus, simply by permitting creaturely freedom at creation, God already effaced himself from absolute power (Jonas 1987). It seems as if Jonas is working with a strict physical notion of power, that is, power consists in overcoming the strength of something else. However, Claveur (2011) rightly notes that we can also understand power in a metaphysical sense to be the creative ability to create any 'logically contingent state of affairs'. According to Jonas's definition, creating *ipso facto* entails a 'loss of creative power' (Claveur 2011).

Jonas not only regards omnipotence as an implausible philosophical concept, but also as a highly problematic theological one. Any confession made about an omnipotent God who, at the same time, embodies absolute goodness would be unpalatable (Jonas 1987). An absolutely powerful and good being would not allow any suffering or pain. In fact, after Auschwitz, we can state with even 'greater force' that an omnipotent God would either not be good or would be totally inscrutable (Jonas 1987). God's goodness is only compatible with evil if he has no absolute power (Jonas 1987).

In the end, Jonas opts to turn to the Lurianic kabbalah's divine self-limitation doctrine of *Tzimtzum* to resolve the tension between God's omnipotence and goodness. *Tzimtzum* doctrine holds that God created by contracting his omnipresent being to allow space for something outside of himself. According to Jonas's version of the doctrine, God inversion meant that the empty space that was left, could 'expand' outside of his being to include creatures and agents. God's self-limitation allows for 'separate being' and it safeguards the autonomy of finite beings (Jonas 1987). Vogel (1996), however, notes that Jonas gives the *Tzimtzum* doctrine a twist by maintaining that God's self-limitation is absolute as far as physical power is concerned. Why not simply argue that God has decided to temporarily restrain his own power?

Jonas holds that the traditional kenotic argument of God restraining his power to safeguard the autonomy of human beings would not suffice in explaining his absence at Auschwitz. One would expect such a God to break his restraint in cases where unbearable and atrocious acts are committed against the innocent. This did not happen at Auschwitz. God stayed silent (Jonas 1987). Jonas argues that God did not intervene, not because he did not want to, but because he could not. Taking *Tzimtzum* theory further than the kabbalah (Vogel 1996), Jonas maintains that God's

act of contraction is also his final act when it comes to creaturely reality. Having contracted, God had given all he could give. Now it was time for creatures to give back to God (Jonas 1987). For Jonas this explains Auschwitz. God did not intervene because he could not. What happened at Auschwitz was purely due to human evil. God is not to be blamed. Humans must take responsibility. The only consolation we can draw from Auschwitz is that God co-suffered with the victims and that he took the suffering of the victims of Auschwitz into his own being and memory.

According to this argument, the hope for an eschatological solution to the theodicy question falls outside the realms of possibility. Death always has the final say, for life is not possible without death and rebirth. Life cannot 'match the durability of inorganic bodies' (Jonas 1987). The human being's immortality lies not in any afterlife, but in the 'impact of his deeds on God' (Jonas 1962). We are not created in the image of God, but 'for the image of God' (Jonas 1962). Human history has a direct bearing on the well-being of God who takes up human history in his memory (Vogel 1996). Note that Jonas does not merely state that the history of humanity affects God. No, humanity has the power to 'thwart the purpose of creation' and derail it to such a degree that the deity 'must become anxious about His own cause' (Jonas 1996).

Is this explanation palatable? Why would God make his being so radically dependent on an autonomous universe, and why would he expose himself to the possibility of failure? And does his theory offer an alternative to the nihilism of atheism? Even if Jonas' theodicy succeeds in absolving God from guilt, and even if it secures God's goodness, it seems to offer little consolation to a creation crying out for an end to senseless suffering. An impotent God who merely co-suffers with a finite creation provides little therapeutic value. Vogel (1996) rightly notes that:

Jonas has forged such a wide divide between the Creator and His creation that he inadvertently presents a version of the very Gnostic dualism he so vehemently opposes. God, the source of all goodness, remains isolated from our appeals for His help, and so creation seems to have been delivered over to the forces of darkness. (pp. 34–35)

Moltmann follows, broadly speaking, a similar vein of thought in his attempt to resolve the tension between God's omnipotence and goodness. Like Jonas, he questions the concept of omnipotence. Like Jonas, he resorts to *Tzimtzum* doctrine and, again like Jonas, he thinks of suffering as part of God's self-constitution. Unlike Jonas, Moltmann combines the *Tzimtzum* concept with his theology of *Shekinah* (Johnson 2003). He believes that God's self-contraction and self-limitation of his own power is temporary in nature. Through his *Shekinah*, God will re-occupy the space he had conceded through his self-withdrawal. His co-suffering indwelling in creation through the Spirit will eventually negate all creaturely suffering, and all things will eventually become part of his

fullness at the eschaton. We must unpack this rather complicated argument in more detail.

According to Moltmann (1974), an omnipotent being would be incomplete, because such a being can neither experience helplessness and powerlessness nor love and suffering. Turning to kenoticism to mitigate the tension between God's omnipotence and goodness, Moltmann was initially satisfied to explain God's space-creating withdrawal by relying on Phillipians (2:5–7). These verses pertain to the Son's incarnation and suggest that the Son, in becoming human, relinquished some degree of his divine majesty. However, constructing a kenotic theology based purely on these few verses left Moltmann vulnerable, as they do not directly apply to God's inner being or creative intentions.

Thus, Moltmann turned to the Lurianic Kaballah. Whereas Jonas utilised *Tzimtzum* doctrine to argue for a God that permanently contracts himself into himself to make space for creation, never to intervene in this space, Moltmann claims that God's inversion was temporary. God will re-occupy this space in his free-flowing ecstatic love. Through the Son, God redeems and reconciles his creation; through the power of the Spirit, he energises, vivifies, and eventually transfigures created reality, drawing it into his future through his Spirit, taking it up in full participation with his being at the eschaton (Moltmann 1993). Creation thus becomes part of the triune God's perichoresis (Farrow 1998).

We may ask: If so, why would God not take up creation into his being from the start? Why empty space just to re-occupy it? Moltmann answers that God must empty himself to allow for something that is not divine to exist (Moltmann 1993). God creates not simply by calling forth but by letting be. Creation in the beginning is part of a process towards the new creation where God will be overall. For Moltmann, there is no such thing as a ready-made perfect world. Creation must evolve before God can inhabit it in his fullness (Moltmann 1993). But here comes a strange twist in Moltmann's argument. When God turned into himself, nothingness, a 'literally godforsaken space', emerged (Moltmann 1993). Nothingness is the anti-thesis created by God's withdrawal: it is hell, it is non-being, and it finds expression in sin and death. Creation stands under the constant threat of this primordial nothingness. Moltmann thus locates suffering, sin, and death in a primordial ktsiological problem.

Despite ascribing suffering to creaturely limits, Moltmann holds that theology should not attempt to explain it. He contends that Christ's incarnation and the events at the cross are in essence protests directed against suffering. Moltmann views the cross as God's response to the theodicy trial. The cross and the death of God in God are the pathways by which he takes nothingness into his own being (Moltmann 1974). The crucifixion is an event that

causes suffering within the triune being of God. The Son suffers dying and abandonment by the Father, and the Father suffers the grief of his Son's death (Moltmann 1974). At the cross, God exposes himself to nothingness to overcome nothingness. He enters the nothingness, 'which he himself conceded through his act of self-limitation' and confronts the powers of sin and death (Moltmann 1993).

How exactly does suffering within the being of God negate nothingness? Moltmann (1974) explains it as follows:

All human history, however much it may be determined by death and guilt, is taken up into the history of God, i.e into the trinity, and integrated into the future of God. There is no suffering which in this history of God is not God's suffering. (p. 246)

This remark must be seen against the background of participatory theology. Through the event of the cross, human history is incorporated into divine history. On the one hand, God is a fellow sufferer, a companion in suffering: he makes human history his own. On the other hand, human history is taken up into the 'trinitarian process of God's history' through the cross and resurrection (Moltmann 1974). The justification brought about by the cross is, for Moltmann, not so much centred on God's pardoning of sinners for their wrongdoing, but on his affirmation of the new creation and negation of suffering. Christ's representative suffering brings righteousness to the reality of suffering and dying (see Conradie 2008). Jesus Christ is the 'anticipator of the future of God' (Moltmann 1974). Just as we participate in the suffering of God, we will participate in the joy of God at the eschaton, when he will be overall (Moltmann 1974). The final judgement of the theodicy trial will thus be given at the eschaton when God will respond to all suffering by bestowing his eternal joy and rest on creation.

The main problem with Moltmann's theodicy is that he makes God the indirect cause of suffering, sin, and death. It is, nevertheless, God's self-withdrawal that makes possible a primordial space where nothingness can enter. Moltmann concedes as much by describing the cross as a necessity that comes with creation. Considering this we may ask: Is God's co-suffering a kind of penance for causing the suffering that comes with creation? (see Farrow 1998).

Some critical questions from a Reformed perspective

The answers provided by Jonas and Moltmann are not without merit and certainly provide something to consider. Yet, we must ask: Do these authors reflect critically enough on the possible human motives lying behind the theodicy question? Berkouwer (1971:130–148) rightly pointed out that attempts to explain the existence of evil are usually designed to recuse the human being. We must not lose sight of the fact that the Holocaust was brought about by human beings. This is where reformed theology provides an important input. The starting point of reformed theology's

approach to evil is not to question God's goodness or to enter discussions about God's omnipotence, but to highlight the incomprehensibility of human beings turning against God (see Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 7). In classic reformed theology, sin is regarded as rebellion against God (see Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:299). As a result, the anthropodicy question and not the theodicy question, is considered as the real elephant in the room.

The anthropodicy question can be formulated as follows: How does it happen that a self-conscious being possessing innate moral capacities, such as moral emotions and intersubjective capabilities, engage in atrocious acts? Neuro-biological evidence suggests that humans are neurologically hardwired to observe the emotions of others, to experience the same emotions vicariously, and to engage in intersubjectivity (Iacoboni 2009). Unlike animals, humans have integral capacity to experience moral emotions such as love, shame, guilt, and empathy. In theological terms, we might say God created humans with an innate sense of right and wrong, that is, with the basic building blocks of morality, namely a capacity for empathy, intersubjectivity, and conscience. Why then does it happen that human beings consciously decide to suppress these capabilities and opt to engage collectively in intolerably atrocious acts?

Pointing fingers to God would not do, because he did not create us to be killing machines. In my view, the Holocaust and other atrocities are *contra naturam* events, moments of insurrection against the Creator God, where humans betray their own created nature and suppress their moral instincts. The social-cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura has rightly pointed out that the Nazi-regime was a product of conscious moral disengagement in service of an evil ideology, rather than a breakdown in moral understanding or moral energy (Bandura 1997). Thus, the anthropodicy question must be answered. How does it happen that humans who are created with moral capacity, consciously suppress moral emotions and moral judgement to engage in vile acts? Of course, we might argue that God erred when he created humans with the capacity to revolt against him. But this argument is not a rational one; it is a form of blame shifting. God cannot be blamed for humans not owning up to their responsibilities. By creating an open cosmic system rich with possibilities by allowing for human freedom, autonomy, adventure and responsibility, God created the best possible world. The only alternative would be a closed cosmos without freedom where creatures would have limited intellectual capabilities and act robotically according to fixed sets of laws. Such a world would have been intolerable and without genuine relationships. Jonas's emphasis on the need for humans to take responsibility is vitally important here. God gives opportunities and we have the responsibility to make the most of them. Blaming God for what we do wrong is a form of self-recusal, a cynical attempt at blame shifting, a tacit endeavour of moral disengagement.

We are still left with the question posed by Jonas as to why God did not intervene in a miraculous way at Auschwitz. Surely, the Holocaust was so horrifying that no loving God with creative power would allow it. Jonas answers that God is impotent. Moltmann holds that God responded on the cross by taking the suffering of human history into divine history. In the end, only God can answer the question. But let me venture to say that Jonas is right in holding that the Old Testament does not depict God as a sorcerer. This is also true of the New Testament. When God entrusted humans with dominion over his creation, as narrated in Genesis 1:26–28, he brought into existence the reality of human responsibility. Responsibility allows us freedom to act, but it also forces us to account for our actions. Throughout biblical history, we see God upholding the principle of human responsibility. He gives his commands to Israel, he constantly reminds his people of their duties, he warns, attempts to persuade, even threatens with punishment but, in the end, he never takes away Israel's responsibility to act. Israel must act, it must take responsibility, and it must live with its choices. The same is true in the New Testament. Jesus performs miracles, but these are never depicted as obliterating human responsibility. He keeps demanding from his followers an authentic response based on faith. Even the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost does not abolish human agency or responsibility. Humans are still in a position where they can 'grieve' the Spirit of God by going against his commands (Eph 4:30). As for the rest, we can only speculate about answers. But it seems as if God, in his great wisdom, has set a boundary to the exercise of his power – a boundary that he does not breach. Crossing this boundary would suspend the creational mandate of dominion that God has given to humanity. Yet, human responsibility also goes hand in hand with human accountability. Responsibility implies duty, and duty implies accountability to the one who has handed out responsibility. Responsibility demands an answer of yes or no to God and fellow creatures, and strings of consequence are always attached to our decisions. Perhaps this is what ultimately lacks in the theodicies of Jonas and Moltmann. They do not seem to take seriously the central and all-pervasive biblical notion of divine judgement. In Jonas's thought, divine judgement is not part of the equation whatsoever, while Moltmann resorts to a doctrine of universal reconciliation that absolves all sinners (see Moltmann 2007). But universal reconciliation is not an appropriate response to the cries of the sufferers at Auschwitz. The pervasive biblical theme of the *Yom Yahweh* indicates that God's final word on the Holocaust and all human induced suffering has not yet been spoken.

Perhaps the book of Job's practical response to the theodicy question remains the most salient. The theodicy question in its modern form was constructed within the rationalist climate of the Enlightenment – a climate that extolled the rational virtues of humanity and the importance of providing objective, neutral, and empirically grounded

answers to life questions. It is within this climate of thought that God is put onto trial. But we must ask whether human beings have any right to put God on trial. The book of Job dismisses the theodicy question: 'Do you want to strive with the Almighty? Do you want to reproach God?' Instead of putting God on trial, I would say, we, as human beings, must do introspection. It is after all we who commit violent atrocities. We hate, maim, torture, and kill each other. And then we have the audacity to ask: God what is wrong with the world you created!

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