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### God-talk in the Book of Job

Keulen, Emke Jelmer

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Keulen, E. J. (2007). *God-talk in the Book of Job: A biblical theological and systematic theological study into the Book of Job and its relevance for the Issue of Theodicy*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. s.n.

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## **Part 2**



## Chapter 8

# Systematic Theological Reflections on the Issue of Theodicy by Means of the Book of Job

### 8.1 Introduction

This study intends to explore the contribution the book of Job could make to the systematic theological issue of theodicy. It tries to realize this goal in two different steps.<sup>1</sup> First of all, it maps out from a biblical theological point of view how the different characters in the book of Job speak of God and human beings in relation to the existence of evil.<sup>2</sup> This has been elaborated upon in Part 1 of this study (Ch.2-7). The second step consists of a systematic theological reflection on the issue of theodicy by means of this biblical material in order to examine what the book of Job has to offer and to ask systematic theology with regard to this issue. This eighth chapter (Part 2) deals with the second step. It considers the value of the book of Job for systematic theological thinking about God's relation to the existence of evil.

The evaluation of the value of the book of Job for contemporary theological discussions with respect to the issue of theodicy consists of an interaction between the biblical material and systematic theological insights. On the one hand, systematic theology is confronted by topics which the book of Job gives rise to. For example, the issue of knowledge is an important topic in the book; it becomes clear that the extent of one's insight into God's actions depends on the position which one adopts. While the all-knowing narrator informs the reader about the encounters between God and the satan in heaven, Job and his friends do not know what has taken place in the divine realms. God points out this difference to Job. Job lacks the capacity to adopt a position from which he is able to observe God's actions in relation to the Creation (40,9-14). Therefore, Job has not comprehended the expanses of the earth (38,18) nor does he know the laws of heaven (38,33). The possibilities and limits of having insight into God's motives and acting play an

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<sup>1</sup> See §1.3.

<sup>2</sup> I take the all-knowing narrator to be one of the characters.

important role when one reflects on the issue of theodicy. This issue deals with the question of how God's involvement in the existence of evil should be understood. A theodicy offers an answer to this question and tries to justify God's choice to create a world that includes evil and clarify his intentions. Now, the biblical material from the book of Job confronts this systematic theological debate on the issue of theodicy with an epistemological question. It asks whether the position of a systematic theologian is equal to Job's or the all-knowing narrator's position. What does this imply ways of speaking about God in relation to evil?

On the other hand, the biblical material is challenged by systematic theological questions. This is necessary in order to evaluate to what extent specific views from the book of Job are applicable in current theological thinking. The implication of this approach is that it is possible that the biblical material can be confronted with an issue that would not have been raised at the time(s) the text came into being. For instance, I contrast the concept of retribution with the free will of human beings. Then I wonder to what extent belief in God is still a free choice, if worshipping God is affected by the threat of a miserable fate when one fails to worship. Don't human beings more or less become puppets or robots in such a theology? One could argue that notions such as 'puppet' or 'robot' are unfamiliar concepts in the Ancient Near East. Or that such a theological question overreaches the scope of the biblical text. It is justifiable, nevertheless, to ask such a question because it is necessary for the evaluation of the relevance of the biblical material for systematic theological thinking.<sup>3</sup>

The epistemological issue, which the book of Job gives rise to, acts as a guidance for the structure of this eighth chapter. The chapter examines three epistemological perspectives from which a systematic theologian can theologize. They are theological realism (8.2), theological idealism (8.3), and theological relationism (8.4). Special attention is paid to how God's role with regard to evil is understood within the context of these perspectives. On the one hand, I consider what implications the insights about knowledge from the book of Job have for these three epistemological perspectives. On the other hand, I look at whether the book of Job offers clues which support specific systematic theological views on the relation between God and evil. The conclusion is that theological relationism meets the insights of the book of Job more closely than theological realism or theological idealism. Subsequently, I propose to approach the biblical material from this perspective (8.5). The book of Job can then be taken as a debate about how the relation between God and human beings can be understood when evil occurs. This debate concentrates on the different roles God fulfils in relation to the sufferer in times of innocent suffering.

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<sup>3</sup> See §1.2.2.

## 8.2 Theological Realism

### 8.2.1 Theological Realism

The perspective of *theological realism* pretends to describe the reality, when it deals with God and God's relation to the world of human beings. Theological realism supposes that its models are reliable copies of the structure of the reality between God and the world.<sup>4</sup> An example of a form of theological realism is the work of Pannenberg who sees 'the reality of God' as the central topic of a systematic theological exposition.<sup>5</sup> According to him, knowledge of this reality can be acquired because God reveals himself in this world by his historical actions.<sup>6</sup> For Pannenberg, these historical actions by God are self-evident and do not require additional (inspired) explanation.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Pannenberg assumes that the divine reality is knowable independently of the frame of reference with which human beings perceive the reality around them. It is objectively clear that a certain event is an action by God according to him. However, this is problematic. For, events can be interpreted with and without God's interference.<sup>8</sup> That a specific event is an intervention of God can only be established objectively if someone is able to adopt a neutral position external to God and the world. For, only from such an external position, can one observe God's actions in the Creation as an object from which s/he is not part of her/himself. This can be illustrated by means of the book of Job. While the all-knowing narrator watches the deliberations in heaven as well as their consequences on earth and knows the true cause of Job's misfortune, Job and his friends are not familiar with these things. There remains the question of which position a systematic theologian adopts; that of the all-knowing narrator or of Job and his friends.

Pannenberg's approach is reminiscent of the way in which Job and his friends perceive God's actions in actual historical events. The friends and Job both interpret misfortune as punishment from God and prosperity as his blessing. For them, these events are self-evident actions by God. God reveals himself with such deeds in history.<sup>9</sup> Thus, God's actions are traceable and calculable. Job's misfortune must therefore be a punishment for sins he committed.<sup>10</sup> However, a problem arises here; the suffering Job considers himself to be blameless. Job draws

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<sup>4</sup> See also L.J. van den Brom, *Creatieve Twijfel. Een studie in de wijsgerige theologie*, Kampen 1990, 31.

<sup>5</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, Göttingen 1988, 69-72.

<sup>6</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, 266. Pannenberg thinks that it is closer to the spirit of the biblical traditions if theology seeks to reconstruct God's historical actions in the sequence of events which the bible records (254).

<sup>7</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, 272-273

<sup>8</sup> Van den Brom, *Creatieve Twijfel*, 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> Elihu also stresses the warning and correcting nature of misfortune (§3.5.2).

<sup>10</sup> See the conclusion of Eliphaz in 22,5-9 (§3.2.2).

the conclusion that God acts unjustly in his case because he suffers innocently.<sup>11</sup> What happens is that Job's 'theological' frame of interpretation –the concept of retribution– determines how Job (and also his friends) associates a historical event to God's dealings in the world. But God criticizes Job's way of reasoning and calls this frame of interpretation 'frustration of God's justice'.<sup>12</sup> Job lacks understanding of God's comings and goings because he does not adopt a similar position to God (40,9-14). While Job interpreted his misfortune as an illegitimate punishment by God, God calls this opinion a flawed explanation of what has befallen Job. This illustrates that God's actions in history are not self-evident. The problem is that Job does not have a God's eye view from which he can objectively observe how God acts in the world.<sup>13</sup> Job is not familiar with everything that the narrator has observed from his point of view, a view which is external to God and the world. God's answer makes it clear that Job's understanding of God's dealings which is based on Job's specific 'theological' frame of interpretation does not fully correspond with the divine reality. This entails that events are not as self-evident as Pannenberg thinks.

Job's knowledge of God's actions in the world differs from the narrator's insight into it due to the different positions which they adopt in relation to God and the world. The narrator, who surveys everything, notices the true reason for Job's misfortune from a position external to God and the world. This is the position that theological realism supposes in its theologizing. Job, on the contrary, does not have such a view into heaven. He can only try to understand his miserable fate by means of his frame of interpretation while being unfamiliar with what happened in heaven. If this difference in position is applied to the perspective from which systematic theologians theologize, the question is which position do they adopt when they speak of God and human beings in relation to God? Do they adopt the position of the all-knowing narrator who watches heaven and earth from an external point of view? Or are they situated in Job's position, which is that of a relationship to God in which he tries to understand his suffering by means of the interpretative tools at his disposal, without losing his belief in God? In my view, the second option adheres to the position of systematic theologians most closely because human beings are unable to step outside themselves and the world in

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<sup>11</sup> This impression is strengthened by Job's observation that there are wicked people who live prosperous lives.

<sup>12</sup> 40,8. That Job's impression of God's actions does not correspond with the reality becomes clear in two ways. Firstly, the reader has become aware from the prologue that a battle of prestige between God and the satan is the source of Job's misfortune and not previous wicked behaviour. Secondly, God demonstrates in his answer by means of a counter picture that his actions differ to what Job thought.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. God's question of whether Job observed God's creation of the world (38,4).

which they live in order to observe heaven and earth from a position external it and God.<sup>14</sup>

This conclusion has considerable implications for the way systematic theologians can portray God and human beings in relation to God. Job becomes aware of the fact that he is not able to describe the reality of God because this goes beyond his abilities of observation (42,3). If systematic theologians adopt a similar position to Job, then they are unable to observe God's reality from a point of view external to God and the world. This implies that the goal of theological realism to describe the reality of God can not be achieved; it is impossible to watch the reality of God. God's answer demonstrates the limits of human observation and knowledge. This insight asks for modesty with regard to the status of theological claims. Systematic theological descriptions can not be more than attempts to perceive God's reality.<sup>15</sup>

A specific form of theological realism is theism. Theism thinks that there is one personal God who is eternal and omnipresent, almighty, omniscient, perfectly autonomous, perfectly good, and transcendent and who is the Creator of the universe.<sup>16</sup> One can label theism as a form of realism because it supposes that its sound construction represents a reality which also exists independently from the theologian. However, the presence of evil in the world has given rise to a huge debate about the viability of theism. On the one hand, atheists argue that the presence of evil is incompatible with the existence of a theistic God. On the other, theodicists defend theism and try to explain why the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of a perfectly good God. Both atheism and theodicy deal with a form of theological realism. In this section, I have highlighted some problems in theological realism and illustrated them by means of the book of Job. I now examine further what implications the story of Job has for the ideas and arguments of atheists and theodicists. First, I deal with some arguments for atheism (8.2.2) and consider several defences of theism (8.2.3). Later, I make some remarks about the fact that these opposing parties both treat God as a member of our moral community (8.2.4).

### **8.2.2 Evil as Argument for Atheism**

The existence of evil has functioned as an important argument against the conviction that a theistic God exists. Atheists value evil as logically or evidentially

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<sup>14</sup> L.J. van den Brom, "Theologie als verbeelding over grenzen heen", *NTT* 58 (2004) 282; *Theoloog als jongleur*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> One could argue that critical realism takes this restriction into account. Pannenberg e.g. ascribes the status of 'hypothesis' to his descriptions (Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, 66). However, this does not change the methodological objection that human beings are unable to take an external position in order to observe and describe the divine reality.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy) (rev. ed.), Oxford 1993 [1977], 99-238.



incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God. Belief in the existence of such a God is therefore irrational according to them. An example of the logical argument can be found in a classic article of Mackie.<sup>17</sup> Mackie formulates some additional premises, which connect the terms ‘good’, ‘evil’, and ‘omnipotent’, in order to demonstrate the contradiction between the existence of a theistic God and the presence of evil in this world. These additional principles are that ‘good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can’ and that ‘there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do’. Mackie is of the opinion that, from these premises, it follows that a good omnipotent being eliminates evil completely and therefore that the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.<sup>18</sup> This is proof that religious belief is positively irrational according to Mackie.<sup>19</sup>

However, these two additional premises have been subject to debate. The issue is whether they are as cogent as Mackie thinks.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, one can say that Mackie’s premises suggest that there is a kind of balance between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. In his reasoning, good and evil are related to each other and this gives rise to the impression that this relation can be influenced in a causal way. It appears that evil can be removed or compensated for by good. However, even a lot of good can not remove the pain and damage which evil causes. Therefore, the tenability of Mackie’s additional premises becomes questionable. Secondly, the question arises of how human beings can establish the validity of these premises with certainty. Howard-Snyder points out that the two additional premises and the proposition that ‘God is omnipotent and God is wholly good’ rule out the possibility that ‘evil exists’ only if the additional premises are necessary truths. However, he doubts whether the premise that ‘good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can’ is a necessary truth. For, it is possible to formulate the proposition that ‘there is a morally justifying reason for God to permit evil He could prevent, a reason we could not know of, and He permits evil for that reason, and evil results’, according to Howard-Snyder.<sup>21</sup> This observation

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<sup>17</sup> J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, in: M.M. Adams-R.M. Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (ORPh), Oxford 1990, 25-37 [=J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, *Mind* 64 (1955), 200-212].

<sup>18</sup> Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 26. In his article, Mackie disputes several attempts that try to justify why God created or permitted evil in the world.

<sup>19</sup> Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 25.

<sup>20</sup> This subsection mainly concentrates on the first premise. There has also been a considerable debate about the question of how God’s omnipotence should be understood. Does it e.g. go beyond the rules of logic or can an omnipotent being limit its omnipotence so that its power is restricted?

<sup>21</sup> D. Howard-Snyder, “Introduction: The Evidential Argument of Evil”, in: D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument of Evil*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1996, xiii. For a more extensive treatment of the issue of morally sufficient reason, see e.g. N. Pike, “Hume

reveals a crucial problem. Human beings can never exclude the fact that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil. They can only exclude the fact that God could have a morally sufficient reason, if someone has insight into the motives underlying God's behaviour. This requires the ability to adopt a position external to God and the world as the all-knowing narrator in the book of Job does. As long as human beings are unable to adopt such an external position, they can not claim to have examined all of the possibilities.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to maintain that 'good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can' is a necessary truth. Hence, Mackie's conclusion on the basis of logical arguments is not cogent. Human beings lack the overview to determine this with certainty.

This objection is partly met by the evidential argument derived from evil. The evidential argument distinguishes itself from the logical argument by its awareness that it can not be *proved* that God permits some suffering which is pointless. Therefore, it considers whether an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good being does have *reasonable grounds* for failing to prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering. This would be the case if, for instance, there is some greater good that is obtainable by the wholly good being, only if the wholly good being permits an instance of intense human or animal suffering.<sup>23</sup> Rowe cites the example of a fawn that is trapped in a forest fire, is horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. Even though Rowe is unable to find any greater good which would have been lost if the fawn's suffering had been prevented, he makes it clear that we are not in a *position* to prove that this is true. According to him, we can only have rational grounds for believing that this is true.<sup>24</sup> So, the evidential argument displays some modesty with regard to what can be said of God. It realizes that human beings are unable to adopt position from which they can observe God's actions as well as the coherence of everything that happens in the world –as God's answer has made clear.

However, it is questionable whether Rowe draws the obvious conclusion from the awareness which he puts into words. For, he finally concludes that we do have rational support for atheism. Rowe concludes that "it seems quite unlikely that *all* the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of a greater good or the prevention of evils at least as bad".<sup>25</sup> Whereas Rowe's inductive way of reasoning shows some modesty with regard to the human capacity of observation, he

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on Evil", in: Adams-Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 38-52 [=N. Pike, "Hume on Evil", *PhRev* 72 (1963), 180-197].

<sup>22</sup> See Pike, "Hume on Evil", 41-42.

<sup>23</sup> For an elaboration of this argument see e.g. W.L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism", in: Howard-Snyder, *Evidential Argument*, 2-5 [originally appeared in *APQ* 16 (1979)].

<sup>24</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil", 4-5. Rowe states that it would require something like omniscience on our part before we could lay claim to knowing that this is true.

<sup>25</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil", 5.

subsequently violates his own restrictions. Rowe first states that human beings do not adopt a position external to God and the world but he subsequently adopts such a position when he generalizes some particular observations of apparently pointless suffering and comes to the general conclusion that it seems unlikely that all instances of suffering result in a greater good. Wykstra formulates his criticism of the evidential argument by means of the application of what he calls 'the Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access'. He summarizes this as follows: 'we can argue from "we see no x" to "there is no x" only when x has reasonable seeability'.<sup>26</sup> According to Wykstra, Rowe's argument does not pass this test because it is likely that for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is a prevailing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this.<sup>27</sup> It is exactly this point of epistemic access that is also made in the book of Job. God's answer demonstrates that human beings are unable to know the details of God's counsel. Therefore, the transition from a logical to an evidential argument is insufficient in order to give in to the objection that we are unable to survey God and the world from an external point of view. The evidential argument still assumes the perspective of the all-knowing narrator in the book of Job.

The logical and the evidential argument both contend that belief in the existence of a theistic God is irrational because the existence of evil is incompatible with it. It is striking that the figure of Job follows a rather similar course as these arguments but draws a different conclusion. All three cases see a conflict in the concept of God which concentrates on God's goodness. Goodness here refers to morally correct actions.<sup>28</sup> They value a particular instance of

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<sup>26</sup> S.J. Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil", in: Howard-Snyder, *Evidential Argument*, 126.

<sup>27</sup> This argument is elaborated upon in S.J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'", in: Adams-Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 138-160 (especially 151-157) [originally appeared in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984) 73-93] and Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments", 126-150. It is striking that Rowe and Wykstra both mention in their arguments that human beings lack the ability to survey God's actions and purposes. This is reminiscent of the debate between Job and God where both use the fact that God is unfathomable against each other. On the one hand, Job refers to God's inscrutability and concludes that God abuses this position by letting him suffer unjustly (Job 9). On the other hand, God points out Job's lack of insight into God's counsel because Job does not adopt a similar position to God. Therefore, Job lacks knowledge of God's actions (Job 38-41). Plantinga also points to the lack of insight into God's thoughts in Plantinga's criticism of the evidential argument. He mentions the story of Job. According to Plantinga, there may be much that God takes into account which is entirely beyond our ken and our cognitive powers are too feeble to understand all the reasons God might have. In order to illustrate this, Plantinga refers to the book of Job: "The point here is that the reason for Job's suffering is something entirely beyond his ken, so that the fact he can't see what sort of reason God might have for permitting his suffering doesn't at all tend to show that God has no reason" (A. Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil", in: Howard-Snyder, *Evidential Argument*, 70-76 [originally appeared in *AF* 56 (1988)]).

<sup>28</sup> In Job's case, these are actions according to the concept of retribution.

suffering which is incompatible with God's omnipotence and utter goodness. However, for Job, these conflicting elements do not lead to the inference that God does not exist.<sup>29</sup> Job holds to his belief in God and trusts that God will come to his assistance despite his feeling that God harms him unjustly.<sup>30</sup> This remaining trust in God raises the question of whether belief in the existence of God can be denied on the basis of exclusively rational arguments. The logical and evidential arguments suppose that the proposition 'God exists' is of the same epistemological nature as 'this chair in this room exists'. However, there is a considerable difference. If there is disagreement about the issue of whether or not the chair exists, the opponents can both enter into the room and observe the chair from a position external to the chair. However, this does not apply to the existence of God. It would require the independent position of the all-knowing narrator with his viewpoint external to God and the world in order to determine whether or not God exists. Human beings are unable to adopt such a position. The issue whether or not God exists can therefore not be decided on the basis of logical or evidential arguments. This is of a different epistemological order than knowledge of the existence of the chair. One could characterize belief in the existence of God as awareness and a conviction that a divine being is present in this reality.<sup>31</sup> Someone experiences God as being a part of his or her world. Rational arguments stemming from innocent suffering or inexplicable evil do not directly apply to this conviction because belief in God is of a different epistemological order. The confrontation with evil may undermine a person's belief in God in an individual case<sup>32</sup> but it can also initiate a process of examining how the relation between evil and God can be understood without saying farewell to God. In this way, the existence of evil as such is not a cogent argument for atheism.

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<sup>29</sup> E.g. Ps.14,1 and Ps.53,1 demonstrate that the conclusion that God does not exist was an option at that time, although it is true that this is not a theoretical but a practical atheism (cf. H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen 1* (BKAT XV/I) (5<sup>th</sup>), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 248).

<sup>30</sup> These apparently conflicting impressions of God are best demonstrated by Job's call for God to plead on behalf of Job against God (16,21).

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Plantinga is of the opinion that belief in God can also be warranted by non-propositional evidence: "Perhaps belief in God resembles certain perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, certain a priori beliefs and others in being *properly basic* in the right circumstances" (Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability", 89). Nevertheless, the existence of God remains a propositional claim for Plantinga.

<sup>32</sup> Compare e.g. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God*, Minneapolis 2004, 118: "If the questions go far enough in a certain direction, they will lead, not to changes within the relationship with God but to the end of that relationship". I further refer to this book by means of the short title *Evil & God*.

### 8.2.3 Defending Theism by Means of a Theodicy

#### 8.2.3.1 *General*

The suggestion that the existence of a theistic God is incompatible with the presence of evil in the world has been answered with several proposals that try to explain how these two can be reconciled. They are the so called theodicies. These proposals defend God's justice in spite of the existence of evil in God's creation. Some see a greater good which justifies the fact that God permits the existence of evil. Important representatives of this type of theodicy are the free will defence and pedagogical views. They regard evil as an inevitable by-product of a greater good or as a means to accomplish it. A somewhat different approach is offered by eschatological theodicies. This type of theodicy is of the opinion that God can not be blamed for permitting the existence of evil because there will be a future compensation for current unjustifiable harm. On the one hand, one could see clues in the book of Job for all three forms of theodicy. The free will defence can be recognized in the concept of retribution to a certain extent because this concept also maintains the starting point that the free choice of human beings has positive or negative consequences as a result. Job's final deeper relationship with God (42,5) could be seen as an illustration of the idea that evil is necessary for personal growth. This would support a pedagogical view on evil.<sup>33</sup> Job's ultimate restoration (42,7-17) seems to confirm the eschatological view that innocent suffering will finally be compensated for. However, on the other hand one could also wonder to what extent each theodicy assumes a general overview of God's actions and the coherence of all that happens in the world which is criticized by God's answer. The confrontation of these three forms of theodicy and the book of Job is now further examined in this section.

#### 8.2.3.2 *The Free Will Defence*

The free will defence justifies the existence of evil by pointing out the value of a world in which human beings are free to choose to perform morally wrong or good actions. Plantinga depicts the free will defence in a well-known description as follows; the free will defence considers a world containing creatures who are significantly free as more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. It supposes that God can only create such a world if creatures are capable of moral good as well as moral evil because creatures are not significantly free if God prevents them from performing wrong actions. The free will defence claims that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good without creating one that also contained moral evil.

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<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Elihu also suggests a pedagogical function of evil when he suggests that setbacks can be a warning from God.

Therefore, God had to permit moral evil as a result of wrong actions.<sup>34</sup> Thus far only moral evil has been mentioned. An additional step is required in order to give natural evil a place. Therefore, Plantinga adds to his argument the possibility that natural evil is a result of the actions of significantly free but non human entities.<sup>35</sup> He also suggests that some natural evils and some persons might be related in such a way that the person would produce less moral good if the evils had been absent. Then the existence of natural evil serves to accomplish more moral good.<sup>36</sup> Plantinga distinguishes his *defence* emphatically from a free will *theodicy*. According to him, a theodicy claims to state what God's reason for permitting evil *really is*, while a defence does *not* claim to know or even believe that its proposition is true but at most wants to show what God's reason *might possibly be*. Hence, Plantinga's only aim is to show that the premise that 'God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good' can be consistent with the premise that 'God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so'.<sup>37</sup>

The heart of this free will defence is the assumption that a world containing human beings who are significantly free is more valuable than a world without free human beings. However, there is the question of how to judge that our current world is more valuable than another one. There are two problems, namely. Firstly, the comparison between two possible worlds is problematic. It requires that someone can adopt an independent position in relation to the two objects of comparison in order to be able to judge which alternative is more valuable. This would be the position of God or the all-knowing narrator in the book of Job. However, God's answer makes it clear that human beings do not occupy such a divine position. Job does not have primordial knowledge, nor did he fix the measurements of the earth (38,4-5). Human beings are unable to step out of their form of life in order to objectively compare their situation to an alternative. Therefore, they can not establish that our world, including significantly free creatures, is more valuable than another one. Secondly, the question arises of what precisely one would compare, if such a comparison were possible. Since free will is an essential characteristic of human beings, an alternative world in the

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<sup>34</sup> A.C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Grand Rapids 1977, 29-31 [reprinted ed. of New York 1974]. For Plantinga, being free with respect to an action means that a person is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it (29). Pannenberg also supposes that creating free human beings involved the risk that human beings would abuse this freedom. He is of the opinion that only the eschatological completion of the world can definitively prove God's justice but he concludes that the Creator had to put up with the transitory nature and suffering of creatures, and also the possibility of evil as a result of their striving for autonomy, if he wanted a world of finite creatures and their interdependence (W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie II*, Göttingen 1991, 193-194.200-201).

<sup>35</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 57-59.

<sup>36</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 57-58.

<sup>37</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 27-29.

comparison would contain creatures that are not human beings. The claim of the free will defence would then be that a world in which we are human beings is more valuable than a world in which we are not human beings. When the free will defence claims that we would lose some greater good, it thinks in relation to us. However, the problem is that we are not us anymore in the alternative. Therefore, the choice between the two alternatives can not be made.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the free will defence fails to offer a possible *justification* for the existence of evil. It can ‘only’ be taken as a description of how a considerable part of evil comes into being. Regularly, people fall victim to the consequences of morally wrong actions by fellow human beings. However, we can take this situation only as a fact. Assessing whether this situation is a greater good is beyond our capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

This chapter deals with the interaction between the biblical material from the book of Job and systematic theological views on the issue of theodicy. While insights from the book of Job have in particular questioned some systematic theological views until now, the biblical material itself can also be questioned for its systematic theological implications.<sup>40</sup> A comparison between the free will defence and the concept of retribution then reveals an important shortcoming in the case of the latter. Both views have in common the fact that they take the free will of human beings as a starting point. Human choices affect the cause of events in the world. The free will defence understands a person’s suffering as the result of another’s morally wrong actions. These are the actions of fellow human beings or other significantly free entities but not actions by God. On the contrary, the concept of retribution sees suffering as a consequence of one’s own actions. As Job’s friends argue; Job’s suffering can only be God’s punishment for earlier wrongdoing (22,5-9). Here, God also causes suffering. The confrontation between the free will defence and this biblical view reveals a weakness in the scheme of the relation between a person’s actions and what befalls them. This scheme lacks any consideration of the fact that someone may suffer as a victim of the morally wrong actions of fellow human beings. Job’s innocent suffering denounces this shortcoming. Job does not see any sin that could justify his misfortune that has been caused by, among others, the surprise attacks of the Chaldeans and Sabaeans. The concept of retribution is blind to the effects of such actions by individual agents in interaction with each other. It is true that the book of Job does not fully exclude the possibility of being a victim. The friends, for instance, charge Job with

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Phillips, *Evil & God*, 54-55.96.

<sup>39</sup> One could wonder whether Plantinga’s modesty with regard to his ambitions –he only formulates a possibility and does not claim that it is true– meets the criticism of God’s answer. However, this is not the case because the methodological problem remains in Plantinga’s argument. It assumes an external point of view which a human being is unable to adopt.

<sup>40</sup> §1.2.2 and §8.1.

stealing and failing to support the weak.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the focus is on a person's own guilt with regard to suffering instead of the awareness that someone can be the victim of another's deeds.<sup>42</sup> However, Job's case indicates the limits of this retributive logic and demonstrates that wrong behaviour is not necessarily the cause of misfortune.

The distinction between the self-centred bias of the concept of retribution and the free will defence's eye for the effects for the environment may affect the intentions of one's actions. While self-wellbeing is the focus in the first case, awareness that one's actions also affect others gets more attention in the second case. The satan's question of whether Job fears God for nothing (1,9) touches on this matter. This question deals with the motive for Job's devotion to God. If a theology is particularly concerned with a person's own welfare, self-interest threatens to be a more important reason for worshipping God and leading a righteous life than awe because of God's greatness. The good treatment of fellow human beings is then inspired by self-interest rather than altruism. The downside of the concept of retribution is the threat that the main motive for worshipping God and looking after fellow human beings is the compensation with prosperity which is on the horizon.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, one could wonder to what extent belief in God is still a free choice, if it is rewarded according to a relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. The fear for a miserable fate if one is not faithful may dictate a person's worship to God instead of devotion.<sup>44</sup> Human beings would then somehow be like puppets or robots that are faced with the prospect of reward or punishment. They seem less free to choose whether or not they want to serve God in this case.<sup>45</sup> Hence, human beings are greater partners before God, if their choice to serve God and look after fellow creatures is not inspired by a reward or compensation that is on the horizon.

There is also a tendency in the book of Job that limits the free will of human beings. The concept of retribution implies a free choice for doing good or bad. However, Job's friends see a restriction with regard to the human capacity to be righteous. They introduce the motif of human imperfection which denies that a

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<sup>41</sup> 22,6-9. See also Job's declaration of innocence (Job 31) where morally correct action is directly related to dealings with fellow human beings.

<sup>42</sup> A consequent application of the concept of retribution would mean that victims of a person's morally wrong actions must have acted in a morally wrong way themselves. For, otherwise the misfortune is not justified. It seems clear to me that such a consequent application demonstrates the limits of a retributive scheme.

<sup>43</sup> The nature of the relation between God and human beings is further elaborated upon in §8.5.4.

<sup>44</sup> Job's friends give extensive catalogues of the misfortunes of the wicked. This enumeration also suggests that self-benefit is a particular motivation for devotion.

<sup>45</sup> This touches on the second implication of the satan's question in 1,9; does God not actually procure devotion by rewarding human beings for their faithfulness? See §6.2.2.



human being can be fully righteous before God.<sup>46</sup> In their speeches this view serves to take the edge off Job's argument that he is blameless.<sup>47</sup> However, the implication of this motif is that the free will of human beings is restricted to some extent. For, human nature determines that human beings are unable to be completely righteous in their actions. This would mean that human beings are partly prescribed because they can not evade doing some wrong.<sup>48</sup> If this is true, one could wonder whether God is morally reprehensible because he has created human beings in such a way that they always commit some sins. Some argue that God is blameless because he created people imperfectly in order that they can be released.<sup>49</sup> However, God would then be like a doctor who feeds someone with bad food in order to be able to treat them for food poisoning afterwards. Then human beings would be more like a toy in God's hands than full partners within a covenant because their free will is limited.<sup>50</sup> God would indirectly cause wrong actions by human beings in this case.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the motif of human imperfection is not satisfactory if it makes an essential statement about human beings. Moreover, it would require a position external to God and the world in order to be able to establish that all creatures are not fully righteous before God. The awareness of failing in relation to God can only be observed within the context of one's personal relationship with God. Only individuals themselves can establish that they do not come up to the mark before God.

### 8.2.3.3 *Pedagogical Views on Evil*

Representatives of a pedagogical view are not satisfied with the free will defence as justification for the existence of evil.<sup>52</sup> They value Plantinga's view that it is possible that natural evil is due to the actions of significantly free but non-human

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<sup>46</sup> 4,17-21; 15,14-16; 25,4-6. See §3.4.

<sup>47</sup> See §3.4.

<sup>48</sup> The doctrine of original sin has a comparable pessimistic anthropology. However, it attributes the imperfect nature of a human being to transgressions of the first human beings. In this way, it safeguards God for having brought about evil by creating people imperfectly.

<sup>49</sup> Barth e.g. states that the Creation makes it possible and creates room for the foundation and history of the covenant to take place (K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/1. Die Lehre von der Schöpfung*, Zürich 1945, 107). The content of this covenant is Jesus Christ according to Barth. God wanted the Creation in order to make the history of redemption possible; because *servatio*, therefore *creatio*... (K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/3. Die Lehre von der Schöpfung*, Zürich 1950, 90-91).

<sup>50</sup> In 10,12-14, Job utters a similar suspicion. He suggests that God created human beings for the hidden purpose of spying on them in order to punish them if they sin instead caring for them.

<sup>51</sup> Compare e.g. Job's charge in 9,24.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. R. Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", in: S.C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, London 1977, 85.

entities as unsatisfactory.<sup>53</sup> Pedagogical views, therefore, formulate additional reasons for why God has created a world containing the existence of evil. They argue that evil is necessary for bringing about some greater good which would not come into being without it.<sup>54</sup> The starting point of pedagogical views is that human beings are created 'immaturely' with the potential to grow. The goal is to develop a good character and become a more perfect human being.<sup>55</sup> Hick describes this as becoming children of God which includes conscious fellowship with God.<sup>56</sup> According to pedagogical views, the existence of evil is necessary in order to accomplish this development. It serves to provide people with insight into the distinction between morally right and wrong action and evokes responsibility and compassion for each other.<sup>57</sup> Swinburne argues that creatures would lack any very strong responsibility for each other if they did not have the power to hurt each other.<sup>58</sup> According to Hick, unmerited suffering is needed to evoke compassion and self-giving for others because we do not acknowledge a moral call if someone receives his just punishment.<sup>59</sup> In this way, evil is a necessary ingredient of this world in order to enable creatures to become more perfect human beings in the eyes of a pedagogical view.

Pedagogical views justify God by means of a parent-child analogy. According to Hick, for instance, parents are willing to allow their children miss out on a certain amount of pleasure in favour of the growth of these children in greater values such as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, et cetera. Hick is of the opinion that, if God's purpose for his human creatures is rather similar to that of parents for their children, then the ultimate end for which the world exists is not the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain but being a place of soul-making.<sup>60</sup> Since it is richer and more valuable that one attains to goodness by meeting and mastering temptations and by rightly making choices than if one would be if created in a state either of innocence or of virtue from the beginning, the existence

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<sup>53</sup> E.g. R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* [rev. ed.], Oxford 1991, 202. Swinburne elsewhere claims that not all evil actions are actions of agents with free will (Swinburne, "Major Strands", 41). Furthermore, the free will defence has not given grounds for supposing that the existence of evil consequences of moral evils is compatible with the existence of God according to Swinburne (Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 86).

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 82. Swinburne mentions various goods in Swinburne, "Major Strands", 30-48.

<sup>55</sup> Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 88-89 (see also 94-95); Hick, *Evil and God*, 291-295. Hick calls this 'soul-making' (295).

<sup>56</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 291.

<sup>57</sup> Swinburne further argues that natural evil is necessary in order to provide people with knowledge of evil (Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 200-214).

<sup>58</sup> Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 88.

<sup>59</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 370.

<sup>60</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 294-295.

of evil is justified according to Hick.<sup>61</sup> A consequence of pedagogical views is the possibility that a person's innocent suffering only brings some good for somebody else. Swinburne values this as legitimate by referring to his right as a parent to let the younger son suffer *somewhat* for the good of his and his brother's soul.<sup>62</sup> Hence, the good of free development of human beings justifies that God has allowed the existence of evil. It is necessary in order to enable human beings to grow in the right direction.

A problem arises when it is not clearly visible which greater good a specific evil brings about. At this point, the two important representatives of a pedagogical view –Hick and Swinburne– seem to take different courses. Hick displays some modesty and realizes that some excessive suffering reaches far beyond the constructive function of character building.<sup>63</sup> Swinburne, on the other hand, refers to our restricted overview and maintains the connection between evil and good. He argues that God sees the results of particular evils more clearly than we do and, therefore, may know the good that comes about thanks to a particular evil and which would not come about otherwise.<sup>64</sup> Each evil or possible evil removed takes away one more actual good, according to Swinburne.<sup>65</sup> However, the strict application of such a connection in actual situations leads to rather far-reaching statements. Swinburne, for example, says that the suffering of Jews in concentration camps made heroic choices possible for people normally too timid or too hardhearted to make them.<sup>66</sup>

The criticism of God's answer to Job's attempt to adopt a God's eye view touches pedagogical theodicies in two ways. The first point is reminiscent of the objection against the free will defence. It concerns the claim that this world is more valuable than another one. In a similar way, the defenders of pedagogical views value the current world, in which one attains to goodness by meeting and mastering temptations and by rightly making choices, as richer and more valuable than an alternative one. However, such a judgement would require the ability to position oneself independently from this world and one's own human existence. Otherwise a comparison with other possible worlds can not be made. Since this is impossible,

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<sup>61</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 291. Hick thinks that a world in which suffering exists to least a moderate degree may well be a better environment for the development of moral personalities than would be a sphere that was void of all changes (369). According to Swinburne, "...the price of possible passive evils for other creatures is a price worth paying for agents to have great responsibilities for each other" (Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 88).

<sup>62</sup> Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 92; *Existence of God*, 217.

<sup>63</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 366.

<sup>64</sup> Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 92: "God may know that the suffering that A will cause B is not nearly as great as B's screams might suggest to us and will provide (unknown to us) an opportunity to C to help B recover and will thus give C a deep responsibility which he would not otherwise have".

<sup>65</sup> Swinburne, "Major Strands", 44.

<sup>66</sup> Swinburne, "Major Strands", 44.

the current world can not be valued as 'richer and more valuable'.<sup>67</sup> Secondly, pedagogical views themselves also suppose an impossible God's eye view. Their basic premise is that evil in a particular context brings about some greater good if it is considered from a broader perspective. However, there is the question of how one notices that there is such a relation between a specific evil and some greater good. Swinburne admits that human beings might sometimes not observe the connection to a greater good.<sup>68</sup> It obviously demands a point of view external to this world in order to be able to survey the coherence between all that happens and to observe that a specific evil finally brings forward some greater good. Only God adopts such a position. But Swinburne does not take the implications of his own observation into account. For, how does he know that some good stems from each evil, if human beings lack insight into the broader effects of a specific deed? It is impossible to establish objectively that each evil ultimately has some good as result or by-product. Moreover, the examples of good, which defenders of pedagogical views mention, can often be refuted by counter examples.<sup>69</sup> Swinburne, for instance, states that the holocaust made heroic deeds possible. But, at the same time, this tragedy incited some to betrayal and dreadful practices in order to survive.<sup>70</sup> In this way, a pedagogical justification of the existence of evil fails. It supposes an overall view which human beings do not have.

Furthermore, Swinburne's statement that each evil or possible evil removed takes away one more actual good raises the question of what kind of concept of God such a view supposes. If the connection between evils and the good they cause is so strict, then each intervention would break this connection. However, this would imply that God does not have any room to act freely anymore. The result, then, is that God would not be theistic any longer. Swinburne's statement implies that God has only set things in motion but God does not intervene because removing some evil would take away some good. Such a concept of God is compatible with the deist position.

Nevertheless one could argue that the book of Job contains several clues which do support a pedagogical view of evil. On the one hand, Job's development in the course of the book could be understood as a soul making process. His miserable fate ultimately appears to stimulate the intensification of his relationship with God.

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<sup>67</sup> See also §7.2.3.2.

<sup>68</sup> Swinburne, "Problem of Evil", 92.

<sup>69</sup> See also D.Z. Phillips, "Problem of Evil", in: S.C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, London 1977, 112-114; *Evil & God*, 63. Hick, though, admits that the problem of evil remains in its full force and that the soul-making process does in fact fail in our world at least as often as it succeeds (Hick, *Evil and God*, 369-372; see also 375).

<sup>70</sup> The story of Job also illustrates how evil sometimes brings forward more bad than good. The epilogue makes it clear that the friends have failed to take their responsibility rightly. They have spoken wrongly of God (42,7). So, it appears that evil also brought forward some more evil.

Even though Job's struggle leads at first to serious charges against God, he finally feels that he knows God better than before. While Job earlier only heard of God, his eye has now seen him (42,5). The evil, which God permits as a test and which affects Job, apparently results in the good of the growth of Job's relationship with God in the longer run. On the other hand, the coming of Job's friends and their attempts to comfort Job could be taken as an illustration of how innocent suffering evokes compassion and offers the opportunity to show responsibility. This implies that Job's blameless suffering enables the friends to develop their characters by being morally virtuous. In this way, the book of Job seems to offer an illustration of a soul making process as well as an example of how innocent suffering gives someone else the opportunity to display compassion and responsibility.

However, several objections can be raised against this pedagogical understanding of the book of Job. Firstly, it is questionable whether one can connect Job's eventually deepened relationship with God to his suffering with any certainty. This is namely an external explanation of Job's frame of mind. An outsider estimates Job's inner considerations and subsequently designates Job's intensified relationship with God as the fruit of the evil that has been inflicted upon him. But how can this observation be made so surely? A lot of people lose their belief in God after suffering evil. They are disappointed in God because God did not manifest his presence and assistance in the way they had expected at that the time of their suffering. Perhaps Job's relationship with God grew despite his suffering instead of thanks to it. The point is that such an assessment can not be made from an external position. Human beings simply can not look into the mind of another person. Only suffering individuals themselves can clarify whether their struggle with grief, which they met at a certain moment, has deepened or, on the contrary, harmed their relationship with God in the longer run.

The second objection concerns the pedagogical view's basic premise that some evil is justified because of the greater good it ultimately has as a result. So, Job's suffering would be warranted because of the greater good, namely that it gives the friends the opportunity to show their compassion and moral responsibility. It would enable the friends to develop their characters. The focal point of this thinking is the greater good, which stems from the evils that happen and which justifies it. The evils serve as an instrument in order to bring about the greater good. However, this instrumentalization of evil causes difficulties. It ignores the harm which these evils cause. The supposed good of a responsible reaction by the friends does not compensate the loss of property that Job has suffered nor pay damages for the unique value of the personal relation to each of the children, who are irreplaceable and whom Job now misses. In the same way, heroic deeds do not compensate the suffering of millions during the holocaust.<sup>71</sup> It would be a trivialization of the pain

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<sup>71</sup> See also Phillips, "Problem of Evil", 110-111. Phillips here cites W. Somerset Maugham.

people suffer, if evil is justified by the good it provides. Pain can not be balanced by good on the basis of calculations of gain and loss.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the source of the entire debate on theodicy –innocent suffering– would not be taken seriously anymore, if it was justified as being the instrument for some greater good. The pain, the grief, or the despair as such which evil may cause can not be relieved, eliminated, ignored, or justified by the greater good that it seems to bring forward.

One could argue that this second objection can (partly) be met by the argument that God does not let people suffer without limit. This would remove the impression that God is not concerned with the pain of those who suffer at all. In this way Swinburne, for example, argues that a good God certainly stops too much suffering. Human physiology puts limits on how much human beings can suffer at any given time, according to Swinburne.<sup>73</sup> This would imply that it is not immoral to let Job suffer his immense losses because God does not let Job suffer more than he can bear. Swinburne assumes that this general explanation is applicable to each actual individual case. However, this is problematic. Phillips values the transition in Swinburne’s argument from talk of the world to talk about human beings and from conceivable limits to actual limits as unwarrantable. He argues that what constitutes a limit or going too far for one person may not apply to another. Therefore, we need to refer to actual limits instead of conceivable limits, according to Phillips.<sup>74</sup> Actual examples show that Phillips’ observation is correct. People sometimes succumb to their miserable fate. It makes no sense to argue that such suffering remains within limits when people themselves experience it differently. Limits have simply been crossed in these individual cases. Only in actual cases can it be judged whether or not an individual’s suffering has gone beyond the limits. The book of Job illustrates the risks of applying general concepts to individual cases. The theodicy of the friends that trouble can be explained by the concept of retribution becomes stuck in Job’s case. It leads to flawed accusations against Job.<sup>75</sup> In a similar way, the general claim that God has limited human suffering to a bearable amount does not tone down the fact that the harm done by suffering is trivialised, if it is justified by a greater good which it serves. People sometimes suffer more than they can bear in individual cases.

A third objection regards the nature of the responsibility that one’s suffering has to evoke. A pedagogical view would label Job’s suffering as an opportunity for the friends to show their responsibility and to develop their character. Here,

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<sup>72</sup> Phillips, “Problem of Evil”, 71. In Dostoyevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan argues that innocent suffering (the suffering of a child) is outweighed by the idea that such misery is necessary for learning the difference between good and evil (Fifth Book, chapter 4).

<sup>73</sup> Swinburne, “Problem of Evil”, 89-90; “Major Strands”, 43. The parent-child analogy then justifies this limited suffering.

<sup>74</sup> Phillips, “Problem of Evil”, 112.

<sup>75</sup> 22,5-9. In 42,7, this is seen as wrong by God. At the same time, the narrator has already made the reader familiar with Job’s innocence in the prologue.

responsibility is depicted as something that one chooses to take on in a particular case or not. Each new case of suffering then requires a new consideration about whether one will accept or refuse the opportunity. However, it is questionable whether responsibility works in such a way. Firstly, an act of responsibility or compassion is not preceded each time by the choice of whether one will display these virtues or not. There is not always a temporal gap between willing and doing. Showing responsibility or compassion can be an expression of a person's character without considering the alternatives beforehand.<sup>76</sup> Secondly, the kind of responsibility which pedagogical views present is particularly concerned with the benefit for the individual who takes advantage of this opportunity and shows responsibility. Phillips calls this pseudo-responsibility. According to him, "if we remind someone of his responsibilities, we are directing his attention to concerns other than himself. Swinburne's analysis makes these concerns the servants of that self".<sup>77</sup> So, if self-interest is the motive for having concern for another, one can not speak of responsibility or compassion anymore.<sup>78</sup> It would be as if availing themselves of the opportunity to develop their characters was the motive for the coming of Job's friends. That seems unlikely. It seems that concern for Job is a more likely reason for the friends setting out from their homes in order to sympathize with Job and to comfort him rather than self-interest.

#### 8.2.3.4 *Eschatological Theodicies*

An eschatological theodicy justifies current suffering by referring to a future compensation for the harm which has been done. This compensation will normally take place in an afterlife. An eschatological theodicy can also function as an *additional* explanation or promise alongside another theodicy. Hick, for example, admits that evil does not always result in a phase in the fulfilment of God's purpose. According to him, a Christian theodicy must therefore point forward to a final blessedness and claim that this infinite future good will render worthwhile all the pain, travail and wickedness that has occurred on the way.<sup>79</sup> In this way, the eschatological theodicy supposes a certain kind of relation between what human beings do and what happens to them. For, that which is considered as innocent suffering can apparently only be explained if it is compensated by a similar or greater amount of good. This is the case if future compensation is strictly related to an individual's earthly travails and if the existence of suffering as such is balanced

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<sup>76</sup> See Phillips, *Evil & God*, 28-32.

<sup>77</sup> Phillips, "Problem of Evil", 110. See also Phillips, *Evil & God*, 56-58.

<sup>78</sup> This reminds of the satan's question of whether Job fears God for nothing (1,9). Here, it can be applied to relations between human beings. Is self-interest or compassion the motive for concern for the other?

<sup>79</sup> Hick, *Evil and God*, 375-377.

by a future infinite good or fulfilment of God's good purpose.<sup>80</sup> God's actions would be immoral without such a balance in the eyes of those who hold to an eschatological view.<sup>81</sup> The prospect that God will somehow accomplish a future (eschatological) good –as compensation– makes the existence of evil in our current world less problematic according to the eschatological theodicy.

The epilogue in the book of Job could be understood as a warrant for an eschatological theodicy. The fairy-tale end of the book tells how Job is restored with more than he had before his misfortune. Job is rewarded for his blameless way of life. It is true that Job himself was not quite sure that his miserable fate would change, even though he expressed his trust in divine intervention on his behalf. He did not struggle along because of the prospect of a future compensation. What's more, Job's protest would not have been necessary if he had had such a prospect. For then he could have borne his innocent suffering while just awaiting the coming of better times. Nevertheless readers could argue that the restoration of Job at the end of the book justifies the harm which God had permitted before, when they look back over the course of Job's life. They could take from it an assurance that God compensates or restores earlier (innocent) suffering.<sup>82</sup>

However, the main question with regard to eschatological theodicies is the way in which the prospect of future compensation justifies or explains current suffering. The prospect of God putting right or compensating suffered harm at a later time does not explain the sense of the existence of evil in the world now. God would be like a dentist who breaks somebody's tooth but promises to repair it afterwards. It seems immoral on God's part to let someone suffer in such a way for no clear reason or only for self-interest.<sup>83</sup> Neither can the future compensation be reparation of some imperfection or small fault which God earlier made when he created the earth. For then God's omnipotence would be under discussion. Moreover, compensation as such can often not pay damages for the harm or the losses that someone has suffered. For instance, nothing can make up for the loss of a child even if it is heavenly compensation.<sup>84</sup> For, that would imply that there is a kind of balance within which evil can be exchanged for good. However, the pain of suffering and the damage it causes is trivialised if it is justified by the

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<sup>80</sup> Hick distinguishes his position from the view that the promised joys of heaven are to be related to man's earthly travails as compensation or reward. According to him, the 'good eschaton' will not be a reward or a compensation proportioned to each individual's trials but an infinite good that would render worth while any finite suffering endured in the course of attaining to it (Hick, *Evil and God*, 376-377).

<sup>81</sup> Compare Job's accusation that God is acting unjustly because God does not reward him with prosperity even though he is blameless (Job 9).

<sup>82</sup> This idea is strengthened by the fact that the book of Job does not reject the concept of retribution in the end. God's answer makes it clear that the wicked are punished.

<sup>83</sup> It reminds of Job's suggestion that God's hidden purpose for creating human beings was to be able to punish them when they sin (10,12-14).

<sup>84</sup> Phillips, *Evil & God*, 85-86.



compensation that will later follow.<sup>85</sup> Scars can not be removed by subsequent compensation. Nevertheless, it is true that believers often draw hope and strength from the prospect that their misery or pain will be removed, compensated for, or restored. The expectation of an afterlife or a definitive establishment of the Kingdom of God can inspire them now to bear their misfortune. However, then the future good is no longer a justification of the existence of evil but a *promise* that God will heal what is broken in our current world.<sup>86</sup> Human beings are in a similar position to Job. He did not know what his life would be like but he maintained trust in his witness and redeemer. Equally, God's promise that there will be no evil anymore in a future world can provide those who are suffering with comfort, motivation to remain faithful to God and strength to bear current misery<sup>87</sup> but that does not justify their suffering.

#### 8.2.4 God as Fellow Moral Agent

The debate on the issue of theodicy concentrates in particular on God's perfect goodness. The main point is whether or not God can be blamed for morally wrong actions by permitting the existence of evil in this world and Job believes that God can be blamed. He comes to the conclusion that God perverts justice because God has inflicted him with misfortune despite his innocence. This conclusion is based on the concept of retribution. Job believes that God acts in this rather mechanical way. He judges by means of this standard whether God's actions are right or wrong.<sup>88</sup> But what Job considers as God's standard of what is good is unmasked by God's answer as a standard that does not fully correspond with God's reality. God calls it frustration of his justice (40,8). Job learns that it is God who has fixed the measurements of the earth, not Job (38,5). God makes it clear that it goes beyond Job's ability to have insight into God's counsel (38,2). It surpasses the limit of God's transcendence if God's actions are understood through human frames of

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<sup>85</sup> Compare §8.2.3.3. In Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan is of the opinion that subsequent compensation (eternal harmony) is not worth the price of innocent suffering (the suffering of children) now. According to him, eternal harmony is worthless if innocent suffering is not avenged. Ivan would return the ticket for entering heaven because the price of the harmony is too high (Fifth Book, chapter 4).

<sup>86</sup> A separate issue is the role which Christology plays in the realization of this promise. Is the suffering of Christ, for example, a sign of God's compassion for those who suffer or does it play a role in overcoming evil? This is a huge topic which is not discussed further in this study.

<sup>87</sup> The book of Job does not reject the concept of retribution. One could apply this logic rather strictly to the promise of future compensation and argue that there will be reward as well as punishment according to how human beings have lived their lives. Whether the eschaton should be taken in this way or in a different way is another debate. This is not discussed in this study.

<sup>88</sup> Job's friends use the same standard. However, they assume that God is 'perfectly good' (e.g. 8,3) and therefore conclude that Job must have sinned given his misfortune.

reference. God demonstrates that Job measured God's righteousness according to a standard external to God. However, God would lose his divinity if it could be conceived that there is something next to and greater than God. Job can only trust and take for granted that what God does is good by definition.<sup>89</sup> This can not be judged on the basis of human (moral) standards.<sup>90</sup>

When theodacists and atheists deal with the issue of theodicy they follow a similar policy to Job. Namely, they judge God's actions according to a norm external to God. Atheists consider it as morally wrong to let someone suffer harm. Because of the existence of evil, they draw the conclusion that God violates this norm. Theodacists, on the other hand, suppose that it is morally wrong to let someone suffer without sufficient reason. Therefore, they argue that God keeps this moral rule and explain why it is justified that God has permitted the presence of this seemingly unjustifiable evil. So, both parties apply a norm from our human moral community to God. They treat God as a member of our moral community and evaluate whether God acts in accordance with the moral standards of this community. However, God points out his transcendent position in his answer and makes it clear that his actions can not be measured according to human standards. He can not be treated as if he is a member of our moral community.<sup>91</sup> This is where the debate among theodacists and atheists on the relation between God and the existence of evil fails. Both deal with God as if he were a fellow moral agent among human agents. But this ignores the implications of God's transcendence. There is a fundamental difference between God and human beings.<sup>92</sup>

Job himself is rather ambivalent on this point. On the one hand, he realizes that it is impossible to enter into a lawsuit with God because God is not a human being like Job.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, Job's desire to have a case with God remains.<sup>94</sup> Job proves his innocence with an extensive declaration and challenges God to disclose the reasons for his suffering.<sup>95</sup> God's answer has frequently puzzled readers because they have the impression that God ignores what Job has argued. However, could it be that God wants to show with his indirect way of reply that he can not be called to account as if he is a member of our moral community who has to justify his actions? Moreover, it would give the impression that God can be manipulated by human behaviour or rebellion, if he replied to everything Job put before him. God takes up a transcendent position and is not a fellow moral agent. Therefore, it

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<sup>89</sup> This is the Euthyphro-dilemma: are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?

<sup>90</sup> See also Miskotte, *Antwoord*, 93.167.179; Van Wolde, *Meneer en mevrouw Job*, 107.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips, *Evil & God*, 34-44.148-151.

<sup>92</sup> See among others: 9,32-33; 33,12; 36,22-23; God's answer (particularly 38,4.18; 40,9-14).

<sup>93</sup> 9,32-33. See also 23,3.8-9.

<sup>94</sup> 13,3; 23,4.

<sup>95</sup> Job 31.

seems that he does not go into Job's charges and challenges in a straight forward way. Nevertheless, God does answer Job, even though the nature of God's response is different than one might expect. This reveals some of the character of the God whom Job worships. Whereas the Almighty can not be manipulated by human beings or summoned to court as if he was part of our moral community, he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted. Job becomes aware that God has taken notice of his miserable situation.<sup>96</sup> God does take notice of the misery of human beings, their call for assistance, and their requests in despair but on his own terms.

The nature of the relationship between God and human beings depends on whether or not God is thought of as part of our moral community. If God is taken as fellow moral agent, the covenant between God and human beings is a kind of contract on the basis of which both parties can be judged.<sup>97</sup> It seems part of this contract is that God provides human beings with the best of things and, therefore, that he does not let people suffer unnecessarily. Mutual interest would be the basis for maintaining the relationship with the other party. Devotion would be inspired by what God offers in return. Now the subject for debate among theodiscists and atheists is whether or not God has broken this contract by permitting the existence of evil. It is this contractual thinking that is denounced in particular by the satan in the prologue. The satan suggests that Job's piety is inspired by God's reward with prosperity for upright behaviour. If this were the case, it would mean that Job understands his relationship with God as a contract according to which God rewards the righteous with prosperity and punishes the wicked with misfortune. In such a view, God is treated as a fellow moral agent who can be called to account and honour the contract. However, the book of Job rejects contractual thinking as the basis of a person's relationship with God. God permits Job's test in order to prove that Job's devotion is not motivated by contractual thinking. If someone acknowledges that God is not a fellow moral agent among human agents, the nature of one's relationship with God differs from that based upon contractual thinking. Then awe for the Most High is the basis for maintaining a relationship with God.<sup>98</sup> Evil may evoke doubt about God's righteousness in this case but a person's belief does not then fully depend upon whether they justly find good or evil in their life.

### 8.3 Theological Idealism

Since the story of Job points out several problems of theological realism, one could wonder whether it propagates a *theological idealism* as alternative. Theological

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<sup>96</sup> Firstly, God answers Job, whereas Job thought that God would remain silent (30,20 vs. 38,1). Secondly, God takes notice of Job's questions and accusations by presenting a counter picture (see §5.4).

<sup>97</sup> See Phillips, *Evil & God*, 147-151.

<sup>98</sup> The nature of the relation between God and human beings is more extensively dealt with in §8.5.4.

idealism takes theologies as constructions of our thoughts with which a theologian tries to grasp a certain order in the reality of God and human beings. This kind of theology does not pretend that its theories are true like theological realism does. It offers constructions that do not describe the reality but are useful for giving direction to a person's life in this reality. The ideas are the focus.<sup>99</sup> The theology of Tillich could be labelled as an example of theological idealism. Tillich says that knowledge of God is symbolic because revelation is the manifestation of the mystery of being and therefore does not increase our knowledge about the structures of nature, history, and human beings.<sup>100</sup> According to him, nothing can be said about God as God which is not symbolic except the non-symbolic statement that God is being-itself.<sup>101</sup> This view draws a strict distinction between the reality of God and the concepts with which God is spoken of. Human concepts do not touch the divine reality. Now there is the question of whether God's answer in the book of Job offers support for such theological idealism. God points out Job's lack of insight into God's counsel (38,2). Therefore, Job has spoken of God without knowledge. Job is unable to adopt a divine position in order to survey the coherence of the world and the starting points of God's actions. In his response, Job also acknowledges that he has spoken about things that are too wonderful to understand (42,3) and resolves to be silent in the future (40,4-5). If systematic theologians are in a similar position to Job, does this mean that their speaking of God is only a human construction which lacks any accordance with the divine?

Some idealistic tendencies can be found in the interpretation of God's answer by Miskotte<sup>102</sup> who draws a strict distinction between God, who is hidden, and the word of God (God's answer in the book of Job), which comes to human beings and in which God reveals himself. According to him, God is not manifest as such in our reality but in the word of God.<sup>103</sup> So, God himself is distinguished from his word in Miskotte's view. The word is recognizable and not God himself. God remains hidden. However, there is the question of whether or not God's words can be separated from God himself so strictly. When Job experiences God's answer, he does not make a distinction between God and his word. Job's eye has seen God (42,5). Hearing God's answer is an encounter with God in Job's perception. Therefore, God's answer can not be labelled as a kind of representation of God

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<sup>99</sup> See also Van den Brom, *Creatieve Twijfel*, 31-32.

<sup>100</sup> P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, Chicago 1951, 129-131.

<sup>101</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 238-239.

<sup>102</sup> However, Miskotte does not fully comply with the definition of theological idealism because he explicitly regards God's word as stemming from God. For Miskotte, this is not a human construction. The idealistic tendency in his thinking is concerned with the strict separation between God himself and his word.

<sup>103</sup> Miskotte, *Antwoord*, 182-184.199 (see also 122). According to Miskotte, this mystery of God which Job finds and confesses remains the last word in opposition to streams of senseless pain and harm that are found in this creation (267).

while God himself remains behind the horizon. The concept 'revelation' would be empty if we assumed a void between God and his revelation.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, it requires a position external to God and this world in order to be able to observe that God stands apart from the word with which he manifests himself in the world. The book of Job demonstrates that human beings can not adopt such an external point of view.<sup>105</sup> It is true that God points out that his actions go beyond human observation but he does not remain hidden from Job. God presents several elements of his counsel and answers Job's impression of God's actions by means of a counter picture. Hence Job not only sees indirect signs of God but he experiences how God reveals himself to him.

The story of Job demonstrates that some experience of the divine itself is the basis of a person's relationship with God. Theological idealism ignores this relation with the divine. The implication of a very strict form of theological idealism could even be that the existence of God is of less or no relevance.<sup>106</sup> The main issue then is whether or not some idea of the divine is useful for daily life. However, since belief in God supposes some relationship with God, systematic theology is not only concerned with constructions that function independently from the divine. Its theologizing can not ignore that there is a relation with God. Therefore, systematic theological thinking also somehow deals with the divine. Either way, this relationship is not denied in God's answer. However, the divine words want to show that human concepts that try to describe this reality do not completely correspond to this reality as if it offers a copy of it. God's answer asks for modesty with regard to what can be said of the divine. This modesty is connected to the position that human beings adopt in relation to God. Since human beings are not in a similar position as the all-knowing narrator in the book of Job, they do not survey God's actions and being from a perspective external to God and the world. People can only speak of God while they live in a relationship with God. Since theological idealism ignores this relationship with the divine, it can not be an adequate alternative for theological realism.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> V. Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God. An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, Cambridge 1992,42.

<sup>105</sup> So, theological idealism has the same problem as theological realism (see §7.2.1). Both suppose a viewpoint external to God and the world (Van den Brom, *Theoloog als jongleur*, 39).

<sup>106</sup> See also Van den Brom, *Theoloog als jongleur*, 39.

<sup>107</sup> Job's decision to remain silent (40,4-5) could be understood as the acknowledgement that human speaking of God is incapable of approaching the divine reality. If this were the case, it would support theological idealism. However, Job makes this statement within the context of the image of the lawsuit. Therefore, it does not mean that Job will never speak of and to God again but implies the acknowledgement that God has a stronger case at this moment (see §5.3). Moreover, God's remark that Job has spoken rightly (42,7) encourages the view that what is meant by 'God' should be debated, if one uses this word.

## 8.4 Theological Relationism

### 8.4.1 Theological Relationism

If one accepts that a systematic theologian adopts a position equal to Job, then theological realism and idealism appear to be inadequate perspectives in order to theologize from. Both approaches assume the viewpoint of the narrator, who observes God and the Creation from a position external to them. But God's answer demonstrates that human beings do not have such a God's eye view.<sup>108</sup> This implies that we can only speak of God from an internal point of view. If God is mentioned, a relationship between God and human beings is presupposed.<sup>109</sup> For believers this relationship with the divine is part of the reality in which they live. They can not step outside this relationship and adopt an independent position towards it in order to observe both parties in this relationship as objects from an external position. For example, Job struggles with his misfortune while he is in a relationship with God. He is criticized for the point where his argument assumes the position of the narrator in the book. For, his conclusion that God perverts justice supposes insight into God's actions and motives from an external point of view. Job becomes aware that he does not have such knowledge of God. If systematic theologians accept that they are in a position equal to Job and realize that they are unable to adopt a position external to God and the world like the narrator in the book of Job, it only remains possible for them to theologize from an internal perspective.

Theological relationism has such an internal perspective as its starting point. It takes the relation between God, human beings, and the Creation as its basis.<sup>110</sup> Theological relationism provides language in order to make the interaction between God and human beings debatable. A relational theology does not describe God *in se* or offer a hypothesis that tries to explain everything (pace theological realism) but it does take notice of the existential dimension of Christian belief in God, who is transcendent. Therefore, theological relationism speaks of the meaning of God

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<sup>108</sup> This is e.g. made clear by the question of whether or not Job was present when God created the world (38,4), by the doubt about whether or not Job surveys the expanses of the earth (38,18), and by the challenge to adopt a divine position and perform divine tasks (40,9-14). The prologue underlines Job's lack of insight into God's motives. For, it confirms that Job does not know the real reason for his suffering.

<sup>109</sup> This counts for an insider's (systematic theology) as well as an outsider's (philosophy of religion) perspective. When religion is described from an outsider's perspective, it is still the case that one observes the divine from the relationship that human beings have with the divine. For, an observer is also unable to adopt a position external to God and the world.

<sup>110</sup> This description of theological relationism is based on Van den Brom, *Creatieve Twijfel*, 32-34; *Theoloog als jongleur*, 37.40-41; "Theologie als verbeelding", 273-291; L.J. van den Brom, "Theïsme voorbij. Een relationeel alternatief", in: T. Boer (ed.), *Schepper naast God? Theologie, bio-ethiek en pluralisme. Essays aangeboden aan Egbert Schrotten*, Assen 2004, 39-40.50-52.

*pro nobis*. The relation between God and human beings is not only a construction in the mind of believers which ends when they die (pace theological idealism). Theological relationism regards God as present in our midst. As Job articulates; his eye has seen God (42,5). A relational view is therefore concerned with the divine and supposes that the relation between God and human beings continues after death. Thus, it makes 'ontological' claims. That is to say, theological relationism attempts to approach the divine by describing its relations with human beings and this world. These claims refer to the relations between God, human beings, and the world instead of a description of God's essence independently from these relations. However, the relation with God can not be described in the same way as relations with visible objects. God's transcendence places a limit on our theological language. The help of relations between familiar elements is needed in order to explicate relations between God, human beings, and the world.

The implications of a relational view and its difference to theological realism can best be clarified by an example. In 16,19-21, Job states that his witness is in heaven. He calls on God to plead as his witness with God. Here, God fulfils the role of witness and plaintiff at the same time. Theological realism would take these two functions as descriptions of God's essence. It would argue that these functions of God exist independently from his relation with human beings. A realistic view takes up an external perspective. Therefore, it considers itself capable of surveying the coherence between the different attributes and characteristics within God. Theological realism sees it as its task to make a harmonious synthesis of them because there can not be internal conflict within God by definition. However, this is where the problem lies. Job's call in 16,19-21 is puzzling if 'witness' and 'plaintiff' are taken as descriptions of God's essence. An incoherent concept of God threatens because God fulfils two opposing roles. Some exegetes are of the opinion that 'witness' (16,19) should not be understood as God. Habel, for instance, says that Job is not contemplating the good side of a schizophrenic deity.<sup>111</sup> The characterization 'schizophrenic deity' appears to reveal the underlying assumption that it would give a conflicting concept of God if Job incited God to plead on behalf of him with God. Could it be that a realistic frame of reference has affected the scholar's interpretation of 'witness'?<sup>112</sup>

Theological relationism, on the contrary, understands 'witness' and 'plaintiff' as indications of the relation between Job and God. 'Witness' and 'plaintiff' then characterize two different roles which God fulfils in relation to Job. On the one hand, Job interprets his misfortune as God's charge against him. In this miserable

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<sup>111</sup> Habel, *Job*, 275.

<sup>112</sup> The same counts for the 'redeemer' in 19,25. See also Müller's remark that the contents of Job's complaint lead to anti-theism if they are misunderstood as 'konstative Äußerungen'. Müller refers to 16,9 in this context (H.P. Müller, *Das Hiobproblem. Seine Stellung und Entstehung im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (EdF 84), 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed., Darmstadt 1995, 135).

fate, God manifests himself as Job's plaintiff and opponent according to Job. On the other hand, Job puts his trust in God. He makes an appeal to God's role as helper of those who are in distress and who have no alternative aid. Thus, both terms identify two different, simultaneously fulfilled roles in the interaction between God and human beings and make these roles debatable. Harm can give rise to the feeling that God has turned against one; then God can become the target of question and protest because he has permitted the existence of evil. On the other hand, though, people can call for God's help when evil afflicts them. They then appeal to God as the one who provides strength and hope. Human beings can not say more than that God sometimes fulfils these seemingly conflicting roles in relation to them at the same time that they live in a relationship with God. This is the implication of a monotheistic concept of God. How these different roles are related within God is beyond human observation because this requires an external point of view. We can only deal with how God reveals himself to us.<sup>113</sup> A relational view tries to provide language for making debatable the different ways in which God reveals himself to us. Since a relational view deals with how God manifests himself to us instead of God's essence, the implication is that God can only be spoken of in a fragmentary way.

Theological relationism takes the relation between God and human beings as a starting point. Calling God his 'witness' and 'plaintiff' therefore also places Job in a relationship with God. Job experiences God as his opponent on the one hand but he declares his dependence upon divine intervention for a change in his miserable fate on the other. In this way, 'witness' and 'plaintiff' can not be understood independently from the form of life in which they function. They give words to different aspects of Job's relationship with God during the time of his suffering.

#### **8.4.2 A Relational View on Evil**

The existence of evil has mostly been treated as a theoretical problem. While atheists are of the opinion that it causes a logical or evidential problem for the existence of a theistic God, theodicians offer theoretical explanations in order to justify God's decision to permit evil in this world. However, both camps lose sight of the fact that in first instance the existence of evil is an existential problem instead of a theoretical one. The idea that evil serves to accomplish a greater good illustrates this observation rather well. Here, the pain and distress of sufferers risks being trivialised. However, the confrontation with an evil event can hit human beings in the heart of their existence. It evokes confusion, raises questions about a sense of evil, and brings God's role in relation to evil under discussion. A relational

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<sup>113</sup> See also Brümmer's remark that we experience God only as he has revealed himself to us and not as he actually is in himself (Brümmer, *Personal God*, 40). This implies that God's revelation also determines the limits of what we can know and say of God, according to him (42-43).



approach to evil wants to take notice of this existential aspect. It therefore takes the relation between grief and the human being suffering it as a starting point when it defines 'evil'. Evil is then harm which is caused to sentient beings without justification.<sup>114</sup> This means that evil is not an entity that exists independently. For, it would require a position external to God and the world in order to observe objectively that a particular event is evil. Whether something is evil is established in relation to the one who suffers the event.<sup>115</sup> The issue at stake is now not whether or not God can be justified for permitting the existence of evil. As I have argued, this is beyond our ability of observation. The starting point of theological relationism is human beings who experience evil while they live in a relationship with God. God is part of their form of life. The issue then is how the interaction between God and human beings can be made debatable during a period of innocent suffering. Which role(s) does God fulfil with regard to the existence of evil and in relation to an individual who suffers unjustified harm? In this way, theological relationism takes the perspective of believers, who stand in a relationship to God and experience evil in their life.

Thus, a relational approach results in modesty with regard to justifications of God or claims about the sense of evil. Understanding God's motives for permitting the presence of evil in this world is a topic that is too wonderful to be fathomed by human beings.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, human beings can do no more than confess that God created this world and trust that this world is good as it is.<sup>117</sup> This outcome is reminiscent of Job's reaction to his misfortune in the prologue. There, Job states that the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. He blesses God's name without questioning his fate (1,21). There is a considerable difference between Job's worldview and ours nowadays. While Job supposes that his misfortune is a direct intervention of God, we regularly leave more room for inner worldly dynamics and the laws of nature. Nevertheless, it appears that the basic thought of Job's statement in the prologue still counts. Human beings can only observe that God has placed them in a world where a confrontation with an evil event belongs to the possibilities. In this sense, the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away.

Miskotte calls Job's reaction in the prologue Job's highest and best moment of flourishing belief that he later loses in the dialogue.<sup>118</sup> Earlier I questioned this

<sup>114</sup> This definition includes natural, moral, and metaphysical evil because it leaves the cause of a specific evil open.

<sup>115</sup> So, the question is not whether evil is something substantial or something which does not really exist (e.g. Augustine: 'privatio bonum' or Barth: 'das Nichtige'). A relational view takes individual persons who experience an event as unjustified harm as a starting point. For them, this event is problematic and labelled evil. God created a world in which the occurrence of this evil event is possible. Therefore, God is also responsible and his actions come under discussion.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. 42,3.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Gen.1.

<sup>118</sup> Miskotte, *Antwoord*, 93-94.

view and wondered whether Job's reaction also displays a person's paralysis after a disaster instead of just intense faith.<sup>119</sup> Do the preceding insights imply that Miskotte is right, nevertheless? Miskotte indeed mentions an important insight but I propose a modification. This modification concerns the order in which things are said. Suffering evil can cause victims to wrestle with their fate. The story of Job shows how evil can be puzzling. It can cause a conflict in one's concept of God. The grief that evil causes often conflicts too much with our impression of what a good life should be so that it could be accepted without question, feelings of rebellion, or disappointment. Therefore, it can be valued as a sign of belief and taking the relationship with God seriously rather than as a moment of unbelief, if someone struggles with a miserable fate.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, God is of the opinion that in the dialogue Job has spoken true things about God during the intense struggle with his fate and with the issue of God's involvement in it (42,7). Although God criticizes Job's speeches at several points, he acknowledges the legitimacy of Job's wrestling and rebellion in Job's miserable circumstances. So, struggling with one's misfortune and God's role in it is a legitimate element of the process of coming to terms with it. It seems to me that generally one must first pass through this phase of questioning and rebellion before one is able to draw a conclusion such that which Job stated in the prologue. Therefore, I propose a change in the order in which things are said. Often one first needs to struggle before one is able to accept that only little can be said about God's reasons for permitting evil. Hence it would have been more obvious if the statement 'The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' as an expression of ultimate trust in God's righteousness was mentioned in Job's final reply at the end of the book of Job.

## 8.5 God's Different Roles when Evil Occurs

### 8.5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine what the book of Job has to offer and to ask of systematic theology with regard to the issue of theodicy. Until now I have concentrated on the different perspectives from which it is possible to theologize in this chapter. Firstly, I tried to reveal some problems of theological realism by means of the book of Job.<sup>121</sup> Through this, different forms of theodicy came under discussion because they have theological realism as a starting point. Subsequently, it appears that theological idealism is not an adequate alternative.<sup>122</sup> In the previous section I have argued that, in my opinion, theological relationism most closely

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<sup>119</sup> §6.2.3.

<sup>120</sup> Miskotte praises believers who question and encourages them to do it. He even calls it a commandment to ask. Not asking is a sign of unfaithfulness according to him (Miskotte, *Antwoord*, 218-228).

<sup>121</sup> §8.2.

<sup>122</sup> §8.3.

matches the insights which the book of Job provides.<sup>123</sup> The question now is what the implications are if the book of Job is read from a relational perspective. If it is not useful for offering essential descriptions of God, how then can the views and images from the book be applied in systematic theological thinking? This section further elaborates upon this issue. It expounds how a relational view takes the various indications of God in the book as descriptions of relations between God and human beings. In this way, the book of Job offers language in order to put into words which roles God fulfils with regard to the sufferer in times of blameless suffering. Since different characters with different insights take the floor, the book of Job can be taken as a debate on how the interaction between God and human beings and God's involvement in the existence of evil could be understood when evil afflicts someone.<sup>124</sup> This debate demonstrates various views on God's involvement in miserable fates. It also offers language to discuss God in several stages in one's struggle with evil.

There is a considerable gap between our contemporary world view and Job's. Job considers each event of prosperity or setback as an accomplishment of God. According to Job, a person's behaviour determines what happens to them. Nowadays, events are generally not so strictly related to direct action by God.<sup>125</sup> The present world view leaves room for laws of nature and human free will; evil can be the result of natural processes or human actions. Therefore, one's fate is usually not directly related to one's former behaviour. This gap between both world views raises the question of whether elements from the book of Job can still be applied to contemporary discussion of God's involvement in the existence of evil. For, how can the book of Job supply contemporary believers with language for discussing God in their lives if God's actions in this world are considered differently? Nevertheless, various aspects of the struggle with the relation between God and the existence of evil in this world nowadays are recognised in the book of Job. Scholars and believers still find clues in the book of Job that could be valuable for current thinking about the issue of theodicy.<sup>126</sup> In my opinion, the case of Job demonstrates that suffering evil is an existential experience. It can lead to a struggle with God. The relation with God, which is constitutive for one's life, can be on trial due to blameless suffering. The book of Job provides tools in order to

<sup>123</sup> §8.4.

<sup>124</sup> In this way, I have some sympathy for the approach of Newsom, who reads the book of Job as a polyphonic work in which the different characters represent different moral imaginations while the author does not take sides (Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 21-31). However, my approach differs in the sense that I am of the opinion that the author does take sides (see note 3 in §5.1.2). Furthermore, it is possible that an individual character mentions different roles which seem opposed to each other: e.g. God as opponent and witness in the speeches of Job.

<sup>125</sup> The book of Job has already denounced this way of reasoning somewhat. For, it questions the possibility that one's previous behaviour can be derived from one's fate.

<sup>126</sup> See also §1.1.1.

discuss God in this situation. Firstly, it demonstrates how God's functioning can be subject to debate through the experience of evil. Secondly, it shows which different roles God fulfils or seems to fulfil in the eyes of the sufferer of evil in such circumstances.

### **8.5.2 Evil Denounces God's Functioning**

Suffering evil is often a drastic and confusing experience. It puts pressure on a person's relation with God. The reason for this confusion is the feeling that God acts differently than one might have expected in such a situation.<sup>127</sup> Victims of evil regularly experience their fate as incompatible with the existence of a perfectly good and powerful God. They expected that this God would prevent the existence of evil. As long as acceptable reasons which justify that God has permitted the existence of evil can not be formulated, the presence of evil in this world denounces God's functioning. In the eyes of victims of evil, God fails to be the one who is merciful and who accomplishes good for human beings. Evil might give the impression that God is not wholly good. It causes pain and disappointment about the lack of divine intervention. This can question God's functioning and put pressure on a relation that is significant for one's life. It seems to me that logical and evidential arguments against the existence of a theistic God are based on this existential experience. They transform the feeling that God acts wrongly and the disappointment about the failure of divine intervention into formal arguments. God is not a reliable partner anymore for many who suffer innocently because he failed to prevent their misery. Because of this, God's functioning becomes subject to debate when evil happens.

The book of Job illustrates these feelings. It offers believers language to express them. In Job's eyes, God is the absent one during the struggle with his fate. Job calls for help but God does not answer him (30,20). At the same time, Job also doubts God's righteousness. He has the impression that God treats him unjustly.<sup>128</sup> This impression is based on Job's idea of how God should act. Understanding God's actions according to a retributive theology, Job observes that God simply acts to the contrary. He, the blameless one, suffers and the wicked are doing well. So, God becomes unfathomable for Job. Job waited for good but evil came (30,26) so God does not meet Job's original expectations. Because of this, God can become an unreliable partner and end up in the role of opponent for blamelessly suffering human beings. In their eyes, God has turned against them. Job illustrates this impression of God's opposing and hostile attitude towards him by means of, for example, the images of God as archer or warrior on the battlefield.<sup>129</sup> This feeling might raise the question of whether or not God is still worth worshipping now that,

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<sup>127</sup> See 30,26.

<sup>128</sup> 9,21-24.

<sup>129</sup> §4.2.1.

according to a person's observation, he has turned out to be less reliable than expected. Even if a particular misfortune has not directly been caused by God but is the result of natural processes or actions by fellow human beings, the question remains of why God has created a world in which this is possible. Why did he give life to unfortunate and bitter human beings (3,20)? In this way, the existence of evil confronts human beings with a difficult and unruly side of God. One can not go beyond this because human beings lack a God's eye view in order to observe the rationale behind God's actions and the coherence of the world as it is. What remains is the acknowledgement that, particularly in times of suffering, God sometimes seems to operate in the role of opponent and unreliable partner rather than a tower of strength.

Attempts have been made to soften, explain, or justify this difficult aspect of God. Some have proposed some of God's attributes be modified. In this way, Job, for instance, wonders whether perhaps God is not omniscient or has a limited ability of observation with which he does not notice that Job has lived a blameless life (10,4). In a similar way, it has been proposed that God's power is limited and because of this he is unable to prevent evil.<sup>130</sup> God is cleared of morally reproachable actions because he lacks the capacity to intervene and prevent the existence of evil. However, such modifications are unacceptable because God would lose his divinity if he did not survey everything or if there was something external to him that is greater than he is. Others argue that evil is the result of wrong actions by free human beings. But even then God is still responsible for the way in which this world has been created. Actually, each form of theodicy tries to take away the impression that God fails to fulfil his obligations towards the suffering innocent by permitting the existence of evil. However, none of these 'solutions' is able to safeguard God against the suspicion that he is to a certain extent not loyal to his creatures.<sup>131</sup> It does not change the fact that those who suffer innocently sometimes have the impression that God remains silent or has even turned against them. Recommending God as help or refuge does not remove this unruly side of God. This observation that God does not only 'give' –operates as support and redeemer– but also 'takes away' –permits the existence of evil–<sup>132</sup> causes confusion about the nature of God's functioning in relation to human beings in times of innocent suffering.

This difficult and confusing side of God is not everything that can be said about God's involvement in the existence of evil. In the book of Job, God reacts to this impression in two different ways. Firstly, God disputes the claim that he is unrighteous or disloyal. He argues that these suspicions stem from Job's

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<sup>130</sup> E.g. Kushner, *Als 't Kwaad*, 44-47; D.R. Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*, Philadelphia 1976, 251-274.

<sup>131</sup> §8.2

<sup>132</sup> Cf. 1,21.

incomplete insight into God's counsel. God presents a counter picture by means of which he demonstrates that he functions differently than Job thought. He reveals himself in his role as Creator and preserver. As the Creator of the earth, only God has complete insight into its coherence and workings. At the same time, God takes care of the cycles of the days, the seasons, and the gestation of animals, he provides animals with prey, and he provides opportunities to live in places where life seems unthinkable. God also refutes the reproach that wicked prosper by explicitly pointing out that the wicked are shaken off from the edges of the earth. In this way, God shows himself as loyal and righteous. He responds to the call of those in despair and guarantees the preconditions, which make life on earth possible. This means that God's answer resists a deistic concept of God. It displays language that describes God getting involved in earthly affairs. God's answer does not offer an explanation or justification for the existence of evil. On the contrary, it emphasizes the distinction in knowledge and power between Job and God. Human beings are unable to grasp God's involvement in sound concepts or explanations. However, at the same time, God wants to demonstrate that he is reliable. In order to achieve this, God's answer uses a form of natural theology. It invites those who live in relation to him to read his loyalty in the coherence and beauty of the Creation and the continuous cycles of seasons and life. At this, the passages on the Behemoth and the Leviathan support the fact that the powers of chaos are under God's control. In this way, God's answer assures that the Creation is not a project that got out of hand and grew beyond God's influence. To the suspicion of playing dubious roles in times of suffering, God presents a counter picture in which God shows himself as a reliable partner, who answers the cry of human beings and is continuously involved in the continuity of life. With this, God's answer offers an opposite view of God's functioning in relation to human beings at the moment one is the victim of evil.

Secondly, God's reaction contains a second aspect. Besides displaying a different view in comparison with Job and the friends, God also confirms the legitimacy of Job's impression of God during his miserable situation. Even though Job was not right, God states that his confusion about God's role with regard to his fate *from Job's perspective* is correct (42,7). Suffering evil confronts human beings with an unruly side of God because it is hard to relate this to a God who is said to be good and reliable. With the acknowledgement that Job has spoken right of God, God confirms that the existence of evil is to a certain extent problematic for human beings. God does not reject the rebelliousness that stems from such feelings. So, the book of Job leaves room for the confusion and struggle that an experience of evil might bring forward. It offers language in order to express these feelings. At the same time, this is not the final thing that can be said about God's role in relation to the existence of evil. God refutes that he would be unreliable, unjust, or hostile towards human beings. However, the implication of God's statement that

Job has spoken right things of God is that the divine answer (Job 38-41) does not simply overrule Job's protest. The rebellion against God and the struggle with the concept of God is a legitimate phase in times of trouble and setbacks. In this way, the debate about how God's involvement in the existence of evil should be understood goes further than reaching a final conclusion, which rejects former opinions and leaves no room for different feelings. Even though God's answer puts Job's former representation of God's actions remaining under criticism, Job's original incomplete impression is not brushed aside just like that. Difficulty with and confidence in God's functioning during hard times are both given a voice in the book of Job.

### 8.5.3 The Image of the Lawsuit

Job's story shows the dilemma a victim of evil faces. On the one hand, Job considers God as his opponent. Job has the impression that a hostile God attacks him.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, Job can only appeal to this same God for assistance. His hope for an outcome can only be placed in God's hands even though God is both opponent and helper. The image of the lawsuit expresses this dilemma most clearly. Job understands his misery as God's legal charge against him.<sup>134</sup> God manifests himself as plaintiff and judge in Job's eyes. However, Job also wants to call God to account in a legal case because he has the impression that God treats him unjustly. He challenges God to explain the reasons for his fate.<sup>135</sup> So, God also becomes the accused. It even becomes more complicated because Job appeals to God to plead as his witness before God (16,21).<sup>136</sup> Hence, God fulfils different roles, when evil occurs. He can function as plaintiff, judge, opponent, accused, and witness at the same time. Now there is the question of the way in which these different and sometimes opposite roles are related to each other. How can they be placed in systematic theological thinking?

If theology takes these opposite functions as essential characteristics of God and tries to grasp them in one harmonious model, it gets into difficulty. Then there would seem to be a contradiction within God. This can be prevented if the different

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<sup>133</sup> See §4.2.1.

<sup>134</sup> 9,3 (see §2.2.2.1).

<sup>135</sup> See §4.3.1.

<sup>136</sup> According to Miskotte, this is about constantly changing references to God, about what we call God and what we should call God. Miskotte opposes the God of the revelation, the totally different one, to the God of the experience (Miskotte, *Antwoord*, 150-152). However, my view differs from Miskotte's. In Miskotte's view, there is a difference between good and wrong speaking as well as good and wrong understanding of God. With this, he introduces an external criterion into the book of Job on basis of which he differentiates between parts of the text. However, I do not draw this difference between good and wrong speaking about God here but maintain the order of the text. In my opinion, the different roles of God each describe a relation that God can take in relation to human beings.

functions are taken as descriptions of the relations between God and Job.<sup>137</sup> Then God is not, for instance, plaintiff or judge *a se* but fulfils this role in relation to Job. So, one can say that God fulfils the critical function of plaintiff and judge –God sets the standard for Job’s actions– as well as that of helper in distress, redeemer from trouble and unfathomable opponent, whose actions sometimes appear dubious because of the occurrence of evil in this world. It is possible that God fulfils these different roles in relation to someone all at the same time. In reverse, these descriptions also determine Job’s relation to God. Job acknowledges God as the norm and directive for his actions, experiences God as his opponent but also considers God as his helper in distress. How these different roles are related to each other within God is beyond our range of vision.

How can these juridical images play a role in systematic theology? What can they contribute? Firstly, the image of the lawsuit offers language in order to put the struggle with evil into words. In the eyes of human beings, the existence of evil places God in the dock. Victims of evil confront God with questions and accusations. God has to explain why human beings suffer innocently. A theodicy is also about this justification of God’s actions with regard to evil. At the same time, the complexity in this situation comes to light. Whereas God is experienced as opponent, one can only appeal to this same God for assistance as one’s witness in a legal case. The fact that God considers Job’s desire to call God to account legitimate (42,7) leaves room for these feelings of despair and rebellion when evil occurs.

Secondly, God’s role as plaintiff and judge mentions a critical function of God in relation to human beings. Taking the relation with God as constitutive for one’s life means that God is also seen as the highest norm, which is directive for one’s actions. At the moment human beings do not meet this norm, God becomes their plaintiff and judge.<sup>138</sup> God has taken the risk that people act differently than he wants through giving them free will. Human beings are free to choose whether or not they want to live their lives as partners of God. Nevertheless, it would be an attitude of indifference if God were left untouched when his intentions for this world are harmed. Within the context of the image of the lawsuit, the function of judge and plaintiff are the expression of this involvement. It supports ethics. These ethics originated with God. Human beings living in relation to God accept these ethics as guiding for their lives. With this, they also make themselves subject to God’s criticism.

Thirdly, Van den Brom brings both aspects above together –the wish to have a legal case with God and God as critical function– when he speaks about designs for ‘the Last Judgement’. These designs regularly deal with God’s judgement of the question of whether human beings live according to God’s intentions. However,

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<sup>137</sup> See also §8.4.1.

<sup>138</sup> Job’s oath of innocence (Job 31) serves to demonstrate that Job has met God’s norm.



Van den Brom points out that God is liable if he bears responsibility for the existence of human beings. According to him, God will account for his deeds and his involvement in history before human beings if it comes to pass that there is a point at which God considers history and when all evil is designated as evil.<sup>139</sup> In this way, both dimensions of the image of the lawsuit –God as well as human beings are accused as well as plaintiff– come out in the image of an eschatological legal case. It would be respectful in relation to human beings with their questions and struggles in circumstances of blameless suffering, if God gave room for this questioning and responded. For, then human beings are not only instruments in God's experiment 'creation' but one could speak of a personal relationship between God and human beings. In a personal relationship, God takes the interests of human beings to heart.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, it is conceivable that God explains his actions to all those who have questions at the end. However, this representation does not offer a justification for God's actions with regard to evil. It only holds out the prospect of a heartfelt agreement on human life in the eschaton to human beings.

Lastly, one could wonder how the emphasis on the different functions of God in relation to each other is divided in systematic theological thinking and in the perception of believers. Job calls on God as his witness and redeemer.<sup>141</sup> With this, he mentions God's role as helper in times of distress. Apparently, God can not be called upon too often in this role because Job appeals to this function whereas God himself is the opponent. This call on God is based on Job's great confidence in God's assisting role in hard times on the one hand and in the awareness that there is no other way out on the other. The notion that God assists when all other help fails is an important notion in Christian belief. It is telling that the sentence 'I know that my redeemer lives' (19,25) is one of the most famous quotations from the book of Job and has its own history. While this 'redeeming' and 'assisting' aspect has received a lot of attention, the issue is to what extent this aspect is in balance with God's other roles within the concept of God. It seems to me that contemporary theology is often inclined to emphasize the aspect of God as the one who throws himself into the breach for human beings. God is the one to turn to for assistance in times of distress and provides the suffering with courage and strength. But are theologies sometimes not too one-sided at this point? Is there not insufficient light sometimes shed on other aspects such as opponent, plaintiff or judge? A theology would ignore the fact that evil also confronts human beings with a hard and confusing aspect of a monotheistic concept of God, if it only concentrates on God's

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<sup>139</sup> L.J. van den Brom, *Zin in de theologie*, Kampen 1995, 24-26. With this point, Van den Brom supposes that the relation between God and human beings is of a personal nature.

<sup>140</sup> See also Van den Brom, *Zin*, 24-26. The nature of the relation between God and human beings is further elaborated upon in §8.5.4.

<sup>141</sup> 16,19; 19,25.

role as helper and redeemer. The mysterious and unfathomable side of the concept of God has received considerable attention over the course of the time. Particularly after the atrocities of the World War II, God frequently ended up in the position of accused. This is appropriate in my view. For, the question of how these events can be related to the existence of a wholly good God is enormous. But to what extent does the critical role of God also (still) get a place in contemporary theology? A considerable part of the misery and innocent suffering in this world is the result of actions which deviate from how God wants people to act. Should this critical function of God and therefore ethics perhaps not deserve more attention in systematic theological thinking?

#### **8.5.4 The Nature of the Relation between God and Human Beings and Personal God-talk**

The relation between God and human beings is the starting point in a relational theology. However, what is the nature of the relation between both parties? Three fundamental kinds of relations can be distinguished: manipulative, contractual (agreements of rights and duties), and relations of mutual fellowship.<sup>142</sup> A manipulative relation is asymmetric; A acts as a person and B becomes an object of A's manipulative power. The two other relations are symmetric. Contractual relations are based on certain rights and duties which have to be fulfilled. In a relation of mutual fellowship, both partners identify themselves with the interests of the other by treating them as if they were their own interests, while both parties act independently. It is generally held that the relation between God and human beings can be taken as a relation of mutual fellowship. In this way, human beings are free partners who can choose whether or not they want to enter into this relationship with God. At the same time, their motivation for keeping up a relation with God is inspired by respect for God's greatness and identification with how God wants this world to be. The book of Job also supposes such a relation of mutual fellowship as the norm for the relationship between God and human beings. The testing of Job's motives for living a fully pious life assumes that a relation of mutual fellowship should be one's starting point for serving God. However, the presence of evil in the Creation raises the question of the extent to which a relation of mutual fellowship is the starting point of both God and human beings for maintaining a relationship with the other party. Is the existence of evil not proof for the fact that God did not have a relation of mutual fellowship in mind at all? Or does misery not motivate human beings to worship God for other or 'wrong' reasons? It is the satan who brings up this issue in the book of Job. His question of whether Job fears God for nothing (1,9) regards Job as well God on this topic.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. Brümmer, *Personal God*, 139-142.

<sup>143</sup> §6.2.2.

A contractual approach might be the motive of human beings for loyalty to God. In their eyes, God has the contractual obligation to provide them with good. The Satan suspects that Job's pious attitude towards God is contractually inspired. He proposes that Job would cease his righteous actions as soon as God ceased to fulfil his obligation to reward Job for this (1,9-11). The Satan suggests that Job does not identify with God's interests at all but only worships God in order to guarantee the continuation of his prosperity. With this, an important danger of the concept of retribution is revealed. The reason for entering into a relationship with God could be receiving prosperity as a reward for a righteous way of life rather than respect for God's greatness. So, the relation between God and human beings becomes contractual from a human perspective because God is bound by his contractual obligation to punish sinful behaviour with setbacks and reward piety with prosperity. One could wonder to what extent a similar mechanism can be observed in the contemporary debate about the issue of whether the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of a perfectly good God. The logical and evidential argument against the existence of a theistic God considers the fact that God permits evil as failing to fulfil the obligation of a wholly good God to accomplish good for human beings and prevent innocent suffering. To what extent is self-interest or self well-being an important component of the kind of belief that is supposed in this reasoning?<sup>144</sup>

The existence of evil also questions God's intentions for keeping up relations with human beings. For, evil can give the impression that God has lost sight of the interests of human beings or does not worry about it. This might also be one of the feelings lying behind the logical and evidential argument against the existence of a theistic God. Job puts these feelings into words. He wonders whether God perhaps created people in order to serve as playthings in God's hands. Does God spy on human beings in order to be able to punish them as soon as they have committed a sin?<sup>145</sup> If this were the case, the relation between God and human beings would be a manipulative one, within which human beings are subject to God's whims. Job argues at a certain moment that this is the case. In his view, God misuses his sovereign position and acts unjustly and arbitrarily as his case and the prosperity of the wicked show.<sup>146</sup> The fact that God does not intervene and a divine answer to

<sup>144</sup> Kuitert typifies Christianity in this way. According to him, it is a belief that is not able to create a world of 'meaning' anymore but is directed towards the well-being of the believer himself (H.M. Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, Baarn 2002, 107-109). However, it is true that a love-relation is not without self-interest. Human beings also enter into relations because these relationships can contribute to their own happiness. See M. Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Studies in Philosophical Theology), Kampen 1992, 86-87.

<sup>145</sup> 10.13-14. One could even argue that the prologue demonstrates that Job is right in this case. Job appears to be a 'plaything' within the battle of prestige between God and the Satan.

<sup>146</sup> See e.g. Job 9.

Job's request for an explanation of the reasons for his suffering appears to fail to occur in the course of the dialogue strengthens Job's suspicion that God is not concerned about Job's interests. However, God's answer refutes this impression by presenting a counter picture. The fact that God answers demonstrates that God has taken notice of Job's case. God's creating and sustaining actions in the world have the continuity of life in mind. However, the self-willed way of responding makes it clear that God can not be manipulated to create and sustain by human beings or to answer as a contractual obligation.<sup>147</sup> It is God's free initiative to reply Job. Thanks to God's answer, Job may be sure that God is a reliable partner in the relation of the mutual fellowship they maintain towards each other.

In the prologue, God seems to be convinced that self-interest is not the basis of Job's uprightness. He holds to his impression that Job maintains a relation of mutual fellowship towards God. It is interesting to analyse whether Job's speeches in the dialogue offer clues which prove that this assessment is true. Brümmer points out that a mixture of all three kinds of relations will be found in the practice of human relations.<sup>148</sup> This is also the case in the speeches of Job. For instance, Job's protest against the fact that a reward for his righteousness is not forthcoming could be taken as dissatisfaction with the fact that God does not fulfil his contractual obligation towards Job. But it could also be disappointment about the lack of reaction from God based on a relation of mutual fellowship because of which Job had expected that God would be concerned about his fate. There might even be seen an attempt at manipulation in Job's call for a justification of God's actions. For, Job tries to move God to make him do something that he is apparently not going to do. However, it could also be that Job calls God to account as partners in a relation of mutual fellowship sometimes question each other. Even though it appears that the nature of Job's attitude towards God is not univocal, a relation of mutual fellowship dominates. Job does not give up his relationship with God despite his suffering. He keeps on trusting that God will look after his interests as witness and redeemer and does not turn away from God, although he has the impression that God treats him unjustly and is not concerned about his unjust suffering. In a contractual relation, this would have been a plausible reason for giving up the relationship. Therefore, one could say that in this sense Job passes the test. He demonstrates that his piety is not inspired by self-interest.

If the relation between God and human beings is thought of as a relation of mutual fellowship, this implies that God is spoken about by means of personal language. For, only human beings are able to start relations of mutual fellowship. By 'personal', I mean that God operates independently and freely, has relations with other persons, and possesses his own intentions and his own identity. Job and his friends suppose that God acts according to the concept of retribution. Bildad

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<sup>147</sup> See also §5.3.4.6.

<sup>148</sup> Brümmer, *Personal God*, 139-140.

assures that God does not deviate from this scheme (8,3). However, one could wonder to what extent any room is left for personal talk of God in this theological view. This scheme restrains God's freedom by determining how God acts in each specific situation. In this way, God is thought rather mechanically. The benefit of such a concept of God is that God's actions are in a certain sense observable and calculable for human beings. It may give human beings something to hold on to. People would also be able to judge the righteousness of God's actions. But there would not be room in God-talk for God to consider human circumstances or personal initiatives if God was thought of so rigidly. Moreover, God's independence would be restricted because human behaviour would affect and regulate divine actions. Job actually examines the limits of this mechanical concept of God, when he wonders why God does not forgive sins that he may have committed (7,21). For, this request calls on God to break through mechanical patterns and show the personal character of his actions.<sup>149</sup> The personal character of the God-talk is neglected if God's actions are determined according to a strict application of the concept of retribution.

In a relation of mutual fellowship, partners can hurt each other. Is this also possible in the relation between God and human beings? In theology, this issue has been the subject of a considerable amount of discussion. In particular, theists hold as problematic the suggestion that God can be affected by human actions. This is the problem of God's (im)passibility.<sup>150</sup> God would be dependent on something external to himself if human behaviour affected him. For theists, this is problematic because something that exists necessarily can not depend on something that is contingent. God has his origin in himself and is thought to be perfectly *in se*. Therefore, God's existence and well-being can not depend on something external to him in this view. The dialogue of the book of Job contains traces of a similar opinion. Job's friends are convinced that God is not affected by human actions. According to them, righteous actions only benefit human beings and do not benefit God (22,2-3). It appears that Job is familiar with the same notion. He asks what he does to God, if he sins (7,20).<sup>151</sup> This opinion confirms the mechanical character of the God-talk that understands God's actions according to the concept of retribution. God's function is then a kind of automaton paying out reward and punishment

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<sup>149</sup> Job's friends also see some room within the strict thinking according to the concept of retribution. They suggest interpreting misery as a pedagogical instruction of God and they consider a change in one's fate due to a change of one's behaviour possible; although it is true that they see this within the context of retribution (see §3.5). Only Zophar really breaks through this relationship by suggesting that God has even forgiven some of Job's sins (11,6).

<sup>150</sup> See e.g. Sarot, *Passibility and Corporeality*. Sarot defines the term *impassibility* as "immutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life" (30).

<sup>151</sup> Job's argument seems to be that God would not need to punish him, if sinful behaviour did not touch on God at all (see §3.2.3).

according to one's deeds. In this way, nothing outside God is able to affect God. But if the relation between God and human beings is thought of as a relation of mutual fellowship and the God-talk has a personal character, this implies that God has chosen to adopt a vulnerable attitude in relation to human beings.<sup>152</sup> In a relation of mutual fellowship both parties operate towards each other independently and freely. By creating human beings who are free to decide whether or not they want to enter into a relationship with God, God has thus taken for granted that he runs the risk of being hurt. So, God has chosen to make himself dependent on someone external to himself. Therefore, God might also be hurt by human actions within the relation between God and human beings.

If God adopts a position that is to a certain extent dependent on something external to him, the question arises of whether this dependence has any limit. Are there forces that are able to affect God? In this way, Job, for example, wonders whether God regards him as a power of chaos that could be a serious danger.<sup>153</sup> Job struggles with the question of the extent to which God can be affected. On the one hand, Job wants to persuade God with his protest that God treats him unjustly. With this, he hopes to move God to turn his fate. On the other hand, Job considers this striving as unfeasible. He states that God does not allow himself to be influenced, his actions stopped or his decisions affected by any human action.<sup>154</sup> In this way, one could say that two sides of God's passibility come to light in the book of Job. On the one hand, God has taken notice of Job's call for explanations and answers Job from the whirlwind. With this, God reacts to human actions. This means that human actions can affect God's actions.<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, God emphasizes his independence. He does not let himself be declared guilty and responds to Job's questions and reproaches in his own way. Job's experience is that the transcendent one can not be manipulated but he is free with regard to his actions towards human beings. So, within the relation with human beings, one can say that God can be thought of as impassible in the sense that human beings can not enforce some specific divine action or intervention. Either way, Job points out the irreversibility of God's actions with regard to his anger towards the helpers of Rahab (9,13). Paradoxically, God's anger has a salutary effect here. God shows himself to be indestructible against the powers of chaos which threaten the Creation.<sup>156</sup> This immutable attitude in relation to powers of chaos makes God a reliable preserver of the Creation. In this way, God's passibility has limits. If God

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<sup>152</sup> Brümmer, *Personal God*, 143.

<sup>153</sup> 7,12. Job's question, 'What are human beings that God makes so much of them?', (7,17) has a similar background (see §4.2.3).

<sup>154</sup> 9,12-13; 23,13. See §4.2.4.

<sup>155</sup> See e.g. also the biblical notion of divine repentance (e.g. Gen.6,6) or God's reconsideration of an earlier decision (2 Kgs.20,1-11).

<sup>156</sup> In the descriptions of the Behemoth and the Leviathan, it is emphasized again that God is able to cope with the powers of chaos (40,15-41,26).

is discussed by means of personal language, this implies that one can say that God's love within the relationship with human beings can be damaged. God can be moved by a human cry for help. However, an impassible side of God can also be spoken of if impassibility is interpreted in the following way; God can neither be manipulated nor replaced by some other force. In this way God is reliable; he safeguards life on earth.

### **8.5.5 A Glimpse of Heaven: an Arbitrarily Acting or Testing God?**

The scene in heaven in the prologue presents a rather deviant image in comparison to the rest of the book of Job. The narrator, who surveys everything, lets the readers see heaven. Through this, the readers become aware of the rights and wrongs of Job's suffering. A battle of prestige between God and the satan is the reason for Job's misery. The misery is meant to test whether Job's devotion to God is indeed inspired by respect for God instead of self-interest. With this, the prologue presents a rather problematic concept of God. Firstly, it gives an impression of arbitrariness. Job's suggestion that human beings are only playthings in God's hands<sup>157</sup> appears to be confirmed by the fact that the battle of prestige between God and the satan is the cause of Job's misery.<sup>158</sup> Secondly, the question arises of whether the existence of evil can nevertheless be justified by a pedagogical explanation.<sup>159</sup> Has God permitted the existence of evil in order to test the faithfulness of human beings in their relation to God? This would mean that there is a certain asymmetry in the relation between God and human beings. For, human beings would, to a certain extent, be submitted to God's manipulative power with which he puts them to the test by letting them suffer innocently. If this were the case, it would not be a matter of a relation of mutual fellowship and the God-talk would not have a personal character anymore.

These two comments raise the question of whether or how the talk about God in the prologue should be discounted in systematic theology. Actually, the issue is what ultimately the status of the prologue is? Is it 'only' a (necessary) introduction to the debate between Job and his friends or does it also offer a realistic representation of what happens in heaven? If one bears in mind what has been argued in the preceding sections, the problem begins with the perspective that is taken up in the prologue. The narrator informs about the intrigues in heaven from a point of view external to both God and the world. The rest of the book of Job

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<sup>157</sup> See §4.2.3.

<sup>158</sup> For example, the reflections of Jung on the book of Job are inspired by his great difficulty with this representation of God in the prologue. Jung characterizes God's actions here as the amoral actions of someone without any consciousness reflection (Jung, *Antwort*, 13.39). According to him, God is an antinomy (18), which Job realizes (30), and God himself has darkened his counsel by placing a bet with the satan (32).

<sup>159</sup> In §8.2.3.3, I have listed several objections to a pedagogical theodicy.

illustrates that human beings are unable to adopt such an external position in order to observe God.<sup>160</sup> This means that the prologue presents a concept of God which, systematic theologically considered, goes beyond the human ability of observation. If systematic theologians adopt a similar position to Job, they are unable to notice the conversation between God and the satan in heaven and draw the conclusion that God has brought evil into this world in order to test human loyalty towards him. So, the systematic theological evaluation of the biblical material from the prologue of the book of Job results in the conclusion that the representation of the battle of prestige between the satan and God and the notion that God created evil as a test are not useful in this form for contemporary discussions about God.

However, Kierkegaard considers the ordeal as a key to explaining the position of Job. He describes this as follows; this ordeal places a person in a purely personal relationship of opposition to God, in a relationship such that a person can not allow himself to be satisfied with any second-hand explanation. It is an absolutely transcendent category that can not easily be observed. Job pleads on behalf of human beings in the great case between God and human beings. This trial results in the whole thing being an ordeal.<sup>161</sup> In this way, the ordeal includes the dialogue section of the book and Job's announced intent to take God to court.<sup>162</sup> Kierkegaard praises Job for the fact that he does not let his conviction that he is innocent be silenced or smothered by those who disagree with him.<sup>163</sup> According to him, Job's significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him.<sup>164</sup> Therefore, Job's complaints are in particular an expression of his fear of God.<sup>165</sup> Kierkegaard states that the fear of God is in Job's heart even when he brings complaints.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, according to Kierkegaard, Job maintains his blamelessness in such a way that in him are manifest the love and trust that are confident that God can explain everything if one can only speak to him.<sup>167</sup> So, life can be a permanent situation of ordeal in which opposition to God because of the existence of evil can be an expression of a person's fear of God and makes it clear that one understands that evil can not easily be explained.<sup>168</sup>

Kierkegaard reflects on Job's actions by means of the knowledge which the prologue has provided him. In this way, he observes Job and God from a similar

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<sup>160</sup> See §8.2.

<sup>161</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 209-210. This view is mentioned in one of the letters from the Young Man.

<sup>162</sup> T.H. Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard. Reading by the Rule of Faith*, Macon 1997, 177.

<sup>163</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 207.

<sup>164</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 210.

<sup>165</sup> See also Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 181.

<sup>166</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 198. He wonders whether perhaps we do not dare complain to God (197).

<sup>167</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 208.

<sup>168</sup> Kierkegaard warns that the ordeal should not be thought of as temporary (Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 210).



position as the narrator, who surveys all. Thanks to this position, Kierkegaard knows that Job's misery is meant as a test and is able to characterize Job's position as an ordeal. This implies that Kierkegaard describes and assesses Job's actions from an external perspective. Earlier it became clear that human beings are unable to observe God from such a position. However, at the same time Kierkegaard also seems to distance himself from such a form of realism. For, he emphasizes the transcendence of the ordeal and points out that God's relation to evil can not simply be understood by second-hand explanations. With this, God maintains an unruly side because of the confrontation with evil in the eyes of human beings who stand in a relation to God: "purely personal relationship of opposition to God"<sup>169</sup>. This tends towards a relational perspective because it is characterized here from the relation a believer has with God. In my opinion, the concept 'ordeal' becomes useful if it is consequently applied from a relational perspective. This entails that 'being tried' is not an essential characteristic of human existence. It can not be concluded that a person's setbacks are meant as an ordeal from an external position. Only believers themselves can establish that trouble in their lives has tested their relationship with God. People can only be or become aware themselves that living a life devoted to God can bear an element of being tested because they sometimes have to choose between God's interests and those of something or someone else. In this way, believers can experience certain choices or blameless suffering as testing their loyalty to God. Kierkegaard rightly states that human beings do not have to undergo this without protest if sense or reasonableness is, in their view, lacking. God makes room for these feelings by saying in the epilogue that Job has spoken right of God (42,7).

The scene in heaven also raises two other important theological topics. Firstly, it mentions an important problem of thinking according to the concept of retribution. This can result in a piety that is particularly inspired by self-interest instead of fear of God.<sup>170</sup> Secondly, the scene serves to determine that Job's trouble is not punishment for former sins. This is necessary in order to bring a second problem of the concept of retribution into the open. Namely, that it can not simply be deduced from a person's misery that one has sinned. With this, the author of the book of Job brings the complete concept of retribution under discussion. It is apparently possible to suffer innocently. The scene in heaven offers the required conditions in order to be able to make this point. It is necessary to get 'the case of Job' going. The author communicates a possible reason for trouble that deviates from the prevailing retributive thinking via the prologue. This is an important and different note compared to a theology which understands God's actions according to the concept of retribution. Whereas the book of Job does not fully reject this theology, it does break it open and reveals some problems in it. But the

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<sup>169</sup> Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 210.

<sup>170</sup> A contractual instead of a mutual love-relation (see §8.5.4).

representation of the prologue does not give a real –in the sense of a copy– glimpse of heaven.

## **8.6 Summary and Conclusions**

It is the aim of this study to investigate what the book of Job could contribute to systematic theology with regard to the debate on the issue of theodicy. This contribution consists of two parts. Firstly, the reading of the book of Job as presented in this study raises an epistemological issue. It demonstrates that theological realism and idealism are impossible perspectives from which to theologize. They both adopt an external position from which they consider God and the world and which corresponds to the position of God and the all-knowing narrator in the book of Job. However, God's answer makes it clear that Job does not hold a similar position to God. Because of this, Job lacks insight into God's counsel and is unable to see through the rationale behind God's actions. If systematic theologians acknowledge that they adopt a similar position to Job, they can only draw the conclusion that theological realism and idealism are inadequate perspectives. This has consequences for the way in which the concept of God can be represented. Theological realism and idealism portray the concept of God with harmonised aspects. However, if they are inadequate perspectives, this entails that God can not be discussed by means of coherent models. So, the present reading of the book of Job proposes systematic theology in order to avoid depicting the concept of God with harmonised aspects.

Various theodicies have theological realism as a starting point. Their attempts to justify God's actions with regard to the existence of evil fail because they suppose an impossible viewpoint external to God and the world. Moreover, theodicians as well as those who argue that the existence of a theistic God is logically or evidentially impossible, treat God as a member of our moral community. However, this is not possible because, if this were the case, there would be something outside God that is greater than God. God would then lose his divinity. On the other hand, theological idealism is not an appropriate alternative. It breaks the relationship between its own concepts and the divine. However, Job indicates in his reply to God that he has experienced a revelation of God (42,5). A perspective which does not deal with the divine at all is therefore insufficient.

The book of Job favours a theology that takes an internal perspective. Theological relationism has such an internal point of view as a starting point. By describing the relations between God, human beings, and the Creation, it holds to a relation with the divine but at the same time avoids considering God from an external viewpoint impossible for human beings. This has considerable implications for how the concept of God should be represented. In a relational view, the concept of God is not put into words with harmonised aspects but with

complementary aspects. These aspects are not complementary in the sense that they are additional and give a complete picture if they are taken together but in the sense that they exist simultaneously, the one next to the other, as the image of the lawsuit in the book of Job demonstrates. God can fulfil the role of plaintiff, judge, accused, and witness at the same time. In this way, the reading of the book of Job as presented in this study suggests the systematic theology to bring God up by means of complementary aspects. The implication is that God can only be spoken of in a fragmentary way.

Secondly, once one has accepted that a relational perspective is the appropriate one for theologizing, the book of Job can contribute to the systematic theological debate on the issue of theodicy in the following way. The book of Job can provide systematic theology with language in order to express the various relations God has with human beings and the Creation in times of innocent suffering. There is some dynamic. One could say that the book of Job contains a debate on how God's involvement in the existence of evil should be understood or that it describes different stages in one's coping with evil. For instance, whereas those who suffer sometimes experience God as their opponent, to this view a picture is opposed in which God answers the cry for assistance and responds with life giving actions. The complexity of the situation of a victim of evil becomes strikingly clear within the image of the lawsuit. God can fulfil the role of plaintiff, judge, accused, and witness simultaneously. While people can have the impression that a hostile God has turned against them, the only way out is an appeal to this same God. So, the book of Job can offer language in order to put different –complementary– aspects of the concept of God into words.

The book of Job takes note of the fact that experiencing evil can be a drastic event in one's life and put the relation with God under pressure. What is more, it values feelings of rebellion and one's struggle with God as legitimate stages in these situations. In this way, living in relation to God can be experienced as an ordeal. However, the book does not offer an explanation of the sense of the existence of evil, nor does it try to justify God. All that can be said is that God has created a world which includes the existence of evil. A believer can only trust that this is good. God might explain this action in the eschaton but for now no more can be said more than that 'the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away' (1,21).

The issue at stake in the battle of prestige between God and the satan is the question of what motivates Job and God to maintain a relation with the other. Is this a relation of mutual fellowship, a contractual, or perhaps even a manipulative one? This question reveals a problematic aspect of a theology that understands God's actions according to the concept of retribution. The nature of the relation between God and human beings in such a theology threatens to become a

contractual or even a manipulative one. For, Job's piety might be motivated by the interest to safeguard his prosperity. Or, God might manipulate human beings because he forces them to live a pious life by threatening them with punishment if they do not. Although the book of Job does not fully reject the retributive logic, it reveals its limits. The concept of retribution leaves no room for innocent suffering and easily evokes a piety that is inspired by self-interest. The systematic theological objection against this concept is that God becomes a mechanism that rewards and punishes like an automaton according to one's actions. The personal character of the God-talk fades away in this theology even though the challenging question by the satan of whether Job fears God for nothing (1,9) makes it clear that it is the basic supposition of the book of Job that the relation between God and human beings ought to be a personal one. Perhaps the whole struggle with the situation of innocent suffering in the book of Job can be characterized as a quest for finding how to speak of God in a personal way when evil occurs. For, the whole problem arose due to the fact that God was thought in the mechanical way of the concept of retribution.

