Some internal theodicies and the objection from alternative goods*

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1. Internal and external theodicies

Philosophers are familiar with the difference between problems of the following kinds:

(1) Can p be defended from the objection that q?
(2) p is true; but how can p be true in the face of the fact that q?

For example, a sceptic may deny that we have any common-sense or scientific knowledge of the material world, on the ground that it cannot be inferred from our fleeting sensory inputs. Some philosophers set themselves the task of refuting the sceptic. One strategy is to argue that our knowledge of the material world can be justified by non-circular inference from some wider set of premises – say sensory inputs plus memories of sensory inputs plus various a priori truths. Other philosophers have no interest at all in refuting the sceptic. They assume that we have knowledge of the material world. They agree that it cannot be inferred merely from sensory inputs, but set themselves to explain, using the resources of our common-sense and scientific knowledge of the material world, how nevertheless that knowledge is obtained and why it deserves the name 'knowledge'. The result is naturalised epistemology.

Lots of people think that answering questions of kind (2) is much less philosophically important than answering questions of kind (1). If we are sceptics about the material world, or non-sceptics seeking a defence against scepticism, naturalised epistemology is little direct help; so what it offers us is likely to be a disappointment and a trial to our patience. Even so, naturalised epistemology may turn out to have an important indirect

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bearing on our assessment of scepticism. Moreover it specifies and addresses its own serious philosophical problems, and in making progress on them may shed light on human knowledge which is missed in the narrow debate over scepticism.

The foregoing distinction arises also within theodicy. Some theodicies are directed to the problem

(3) Can theism be defended from the objection that the world contains a vast amount of evil?

They may offer an account of what good reasons God has, or might have, for allowing so much evil. If they do, then a large part of the point of the account is its role in the rebuttal of arguments from evil against the existence of God.

Other theodicies are directed rather to the problem

(4) God exists; but given this how can it also be true that the world contains a vast amount of evil?

Any account they give of God's reason for allowing great evil is not composed with a view to its role in defending theism in debate with atheists. This enables them to employ theological premises whose use would otherwise be question-begging. Such theological premises are both a resource for the construction of a theodicy and also a constraint on acceptable theodicies. For example, any account which entails that God lacked the power to create a world which was free of evil is unlikely to be regarded as a contribution to the defence of Christianity.

I shall call theodicies of the former kind external theodicies, and those of the latter kind internal theodicies. Theologians have been more likely to offer internal theodicies than external ones; with philosophers it has been the other way around. However there are signs of change in this respect. For example Marilyn McCord Adams has recently urged Christian philosophers to give up their focus on external theodicy, in favour of internal theodicy.1

Atheists and agnostics have so far paid little or no attention to the distinction between internal and external theodicy. However they have good reason to regard internal theodicy seriously. This is because internal questions are relevant to external assessment. It will be a grave theoretical defect in theism, and more specifically in Christianity, if they cannot be supplied with a sound internal theodicy. This consideration should broaden the interest of this paper.