

# No Confusion in My Solution

## Reply to Sebastian Rehnman

Atle Søvik

Professor i systematisk teologi, Det teologiske menighetsfakultet, Oslo  
*atle.o.sovik@mf.no*

I am grateful to Sebastian Rehnman for the opportunity to clarify some aspects of my thoughts on the problem of evil. In his article "The Problem of Evil: A New Confusion", he argues that I confuse two meanings of the concept of "God", because "Søvik aims to solve a purported problem for the traditional use of 'God' but replies with a modern use of 'God'".<sup>1</sup> He says that I clearly adhere to a modern understanding of God,<sup>2</sup> and that is - roughly speaking - correct.<sup>3</sup> What I cannot understand is why he thinks that I try to solve a problem for the *traditional* understanding of God, when the case is that I try to solve a problem for the *modern* understanding of God. As Rehnman himself says, a modern understanding of God includes the belief that God can will and do good to a maximal degree,<sup>4</sup> and thus we wonder why there is evil in the world. But if I try to solve a problem for the modern understanding of God with a solution for the modern understanding of God, then there is no confusion in my solution.

I am well aware that my discussion of the problem of evil is a discussion of a modern concept of God, as opposed to the immutable God Rehnman describes as the classic God. In my book on the problem of evil, I show how all the four scholars I discuss, reject the idea of an immutable God since they find that such a God cannot be a loving God who acts in the world.<sup>5</sup> I too reject the idea of an immu-

table God. If we maintain a rough distinction between a traditional understanding of God and a modern understanding of God, I do not see why Rehnman think that I confuse these different concepts of God, and see no argument that he gives to back up this main claim of his article.

I have so far used the term "rough distinction" between a traditional and a modern understanding of God, because in reality there are many different concepts of God, some of which will fit better into one or the other category. While I find my concept of God to fit best into the category of a modern understanding of God, there are aspects of my concept of God which are typically found in the traditional understanding. That does not mean that I confuse two understandings of God – it just means that I try to make a coherent concept of God with resources from the many different conceptions of God through history. Only if Rehnman can show a problem with the coherence of my concept of God, will I see any reason to revise it – but I have seen no such reason.

Rehnman offers a further critique based on a quotation from me, where I see that it is possible to misunderstand what I say, although the interpretation is far from benevolent. I write that God gives humans and the world room to develop on their own and that he gives us space to become independent, but specify

first that I do think that God keeps us into being from moment to moment. Rehnman interprets "room" and "space" here geometrically and not metaphorically, and says that in my conception God and humans compete for space. But it is not very reasonable to assume that I think that God has given us a certain volume of geometrical space in order to become independent when I start by specifying that God keeps us into being at every moment, thus being near us with his omnipresent power. In any case, what I mean is that God is not obviously present controlling what happens in the world, but has given us "room"/"space" (metaphorically speaking) to be in charge instead.

Rehnman says that such talk about the traditional concept of God is senseless, and I agree when it comes to the traditional concept of God. But on the traditional concept of God, I think that God cannot coherently be described as loving, as acting or as having free will, and thus my preference is with a modern understanding of God.

In addition to my main alleged confusion, Rehnman points out five subordinate confusions, mostly having to do with common distinctions like logical/evidential problem of evil, defence/theodicy, and natural/moral evil. These distinctions are not as clear cut as they seem when one digs into the literature, and so I have chosen some special approaches. Since I have written a short article focusing on what is new since I wrote my book on the problem of evil, I have treated other topics briefly, and thus I see how they can be interpreted as confusions. They are not confused in my book, and I use the opportunity here to explain how I think about the questions Rehnman raises.

I start with subordinate confusion number two, since it is then easier to explain

confusion number one. Rehnman writes:

Søvik claims to present a "theodicy" (p. 18) namely "a coherent theory of God" (p. 20). However, there is a widely accepted distinction between a "defence", whereby an argument seeks to establish the consistency or coherence of theism in the face of evil, and a "theodicy", whereby an argument aims to establish the probability or truth of theism in the face of evil. According to this distinction, Søvik is offering a defence and not a theodicy, but he gives no reason for blurring the usual distinction.<sup>6</sup>

In my book and in my dissertation, I write about how these terms are used very differently in different theodicies. When Plantinga introduced the distinction between defence and theodicy, he defined a defence as showing a possible reason God might have for allowing evil, but it did not have to be plausible – it could even be implausible. A theodicy on the other hand, he defined as an attempt to show God's actual reason for allowing evil to occur. Scholars like Swinburne, Ward and Griffin want to offer responses to the problem of evil lying between these definitions, which should be plausible and not just possible, but still not meant to be God's actual reasons, but they differ as to whether they call it a theodicy or a defence.<sup>7</sup> To these three different definitions, Peter van Inwagen has complicated matters further by offering a fourth version, namely that a defence is a response to the problem of evil which is "true for all anyone knows".<sup>8</sup>

Like Swinburne, Ward and Griffin I want a response to the problem of evil which is plausible, and I call it a theodicy even though Ward calls it a defence. But it is even more complicated, since it is not the theodicy itself which makes belief in God plausible - rather, it is different argu-

ments for the existence of God that make belief in God plausible. But the theodicy must fit into the larger understanding of God such that it is plausible as a whole. To manage all these different concerns I write in my book that "When I say that a theodicy is plausible I mean that it must be a coherent part of a larger theoretical framework that can well be argued to be at least as coherent as the best alternative theories."<sup>9</sup> This is what I mean when I write in my article that I want a coherent theory of God, and as seen this can be called both a defence and a theodicy, so what is important is just to define what you are after. I did that in the article, but did not find it important to spell out the defence/theodicy-distinction since I did not think anyone would bother with it.

I now move over to subordinate confusion number one. According to Rehnman, "Søvik reduces "the problem of evil" to its logical version – "contradiction" – as opposed to its empirical version (pp 18, 19, 25). No argument is given for denying the widely accepted distinction between logical and empirical versions."<sup>10</sup>

This refers to a common distinction between the logical version of the problem of evil (which says that it is logically self-contradictory to believe in a good and omnipotent God when there is evil in the world) and what is most often called the evidential version of the problem of evil (which says that it is implausible to believe in a good and omnipotent God when there is so much and cruel evil in the world). Again, the distinction comes in different versions and under different names, where emphasis can be either on contradiction versus implausibility or between evil at all and the amount of evil. As seen above concerning the many definitions of defence and theodicy, there are many different understandings of what a

solution to the problem of evil should do and correspondingly many different understandings of what the problem is.

I have chosen an unusual approach in stating plausibility as a goal, and still I have defined the problem in terms of contradiction instead of implausibility. The reason is simply that I wanted to say that I offer a solution to the problem of evil, but still be a bit modest when it comes to what a solution is. I write that a solution is to show that belief in God is not contradictory,<sup>11</sup> which is less demanding than showing that belief in God is not implausible. So, while I am well aware of the distinction, this was my reason for choosing to formulate the problem in terms of the apparent contradiction.

Subordinate confusion number three seems to be understood as a double confusion:

The problem of evil is "defined" as "there seems to be a contradiction between on the one hand believing in a good and omnipotent God, and on the other hand believing that there is genuine evil in the world." (p. 18) Although this is rather a description than a definition, it is noticeable that the standard inclusion of omniscience is excluded from this formulation.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to definition versus description I do not know why my definition should be a description rather than a definition. A definition has a definiendum (that which is to be defined) and a definiens (that which defines) and a connective, and I give all three parts. The definiendum is "The problem of evil", the connective is "here I shall define it as", and the definiens is "the theoretical problem that there seems to be a contradiction between on the one hand believing in a good and omnipotent God, and on the other hand believing that there is genuine evil in

the world.”

When it comes to my exclusion of omniscience, the problem of evil is more often defined in terms of goodness and power only, excluding omniscience. The reason why I and many others exclude it is because the omniscience is implied by the omnipotence - if God can do everything, he can also know everything.

When it comes to subordinate confusion number four, Rehnman quotes me saying that I use evil in a wide sense to include suffering caused by human and other causes, before he writes:

This conflates however the distinction between natural and moral evil that has been widely accepted since antiquity (at least). Søvik moreover appeals to this distinction in his conclusion (p. 25), but it requires separate arguments for natural evils and moral evils as opposed to Søvik’s single kind of argument.<sup>13</sup>

This distinction between natural and moral evils (which according to Rehnman was probably widely accepted even before antiquity) is often criticized and for several reasons. First of all, scholars make the distinction very differently, and I show in my book how all the theodicians I discuss define it differently and use different terms.<sup>14</sup> The critique mainly has to do with how different kinds of evils are made into natural evils even if humans are to be blamed. For example, there are hurricanes caused by human activity even if it not intentionally caused by any individual humans, or there are systemic evils of oppression again not caused by any individual humans.

Even if there are blurry borders between moral and natural evils, this does not make the distinction useless, for there are clear cases of each type, and so I define in my book moral evils as bad states of

affairs partly caused by immoral human acts and natural evils as bad states of affairs not partly caused by immoral human acts.<sup>15</sup> But the term ”evil” in itself, not specified as moral or natural evil, must be wide enough to include both types, and thus I gave it a wide definition.

Rehnman writes that separate arguments are required for each kind of evil. But the theodicy I offer has as its central claim that God wanted to create an independent world, and this is meant to explain both kinds of evil. God must introduce indeterminism in order to achieve independence, and the indeterminism makes possible independent free will which can be misused (moral evils), but it also makes natural evils possible. Because God wants the world to be independent, he does not prevent more evils.

When it comes to subordinate confusion number five, Rehnman writes:

Fifth, by ”genuine evil” is meant ”that it does not serve a higher good which in a wider perspective would make the evil good.” (p. 18) This may seem first to be merely a statement of non-consequentialism, but consequentialism(s) does neither contend that things are good or bad, nor that a bad thing can change into a good one, but that states of affairs consequent on actions make the latter good or bad. However, consequentialism is later affirmed: ”an extremely great good clearly outweighs a much smaller evil” (p. 23), and ”the evil they suffer will be compensated if they accept the offer of salvation.” (p. 25)

I have not written about consequentialism and non-consequentialism at all, so I am not sure what to make of the claim that I confuse them. I write about whether God is justified in allowing the possibility of evil because of goods that out-

weighs the risk God takes. Rehnman then interprets different sentences in light of consequentialism and non-consequentialism and argue that I confuse them. Unless he can show confusion in the claims I actually make, I cannot see that there is

any confusion here on my side.

To sum it all up: I cannot see that Sebastian Rehnman has showed that there is any confusion in my solution to the problem of evil.

## Notes

1. Sebastian Rehnman, "The Problem of Evil: A New Confusion", *Theofilos* vol. 6, no. 1 (2014), 33.
2. *Ibid.*, 34.
3. In this article I use "the traditional understanding of God" and "the modern understanding of God" the way that Rehnman defines them (*ibid.*, 33-34.). More on this below.
4. *Ibid.*, 34. At least I think that he tries to say so, when he writes "Human minds have knowledge, can will and do good, and thus the divine mind has maximal knowledge, will and goodness" (*ibid.*). I do not know what "maximal will" means, so it would have made more sense to me if he had written "maximal knowledge, power and goodness", which is how the modern concept of God is often described.
5. Atle Ottesen Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God. Studies in Systematic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 129-34.
6. Rehnman, "The Problem of Evil: A New Confusion," 35.
7. Atle Ottesen Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God: On the Coherence and Authenticity of Some Christian Theodicies with Different Understandings of God's Power* (Oslo: MF Norwegian School of Theology: Unipub, 2009), chapter 4.6.2.
8. *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, 11.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rehnman, "The Problem of Evil: A New Confusion," 35.
11. Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, 12.
12. Rehnman, "The Problem of Evil: A New Confusion," 35.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, 116-19.; more detailed in *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, 136-42.
15. *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, 119.