

**CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF****THE PROBLEM OF  
EVIL & SUFFERING****QUICK OVERVIEW**

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- The problem of evil and suffering is considered to be one of the most powerful arguments against the existence of God.
- If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then why is there evil and suffering?
- Some believe that God allows evil and suffering to happen as tests in humanity's growth.
- Others say it is the result of humanity's disobedience of God.
- Some believe that God has given humanity free will in order to choose right from wrong.

# WHAT IS THE PROBLEM ?

*'Either God cannot abolish evil or he will not: if he cannot then He is not all-powerful, if he will not, then he is not all good'* St. Augustine

There are two types of evil – **natural evil** which stems from the natural world, for example, diseases, earthquakes, and famines, and **moral evil**, which is the result of human actions, such as murder, war and serious harm. The problem of evil challenges those who believe in an all-loving, all-powerful God.

## THE DILEMMA IS:

- If God is **omnipotent** (all-powerful), then he can do anything. This means he could create a world that is free from evil and suffering and he could stop all evil and suffering.
- If God is **omniscient** and knows everything in the universe, then he must know how to stop evil and suffering.
- If God is **omnibenevolent** (all-loving), then he would wish to end all evil and suffering. No all-loving God would wish his creation to suffer for no reason..
- Yet evil and suffering do exist, so either God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent or he does not exist.

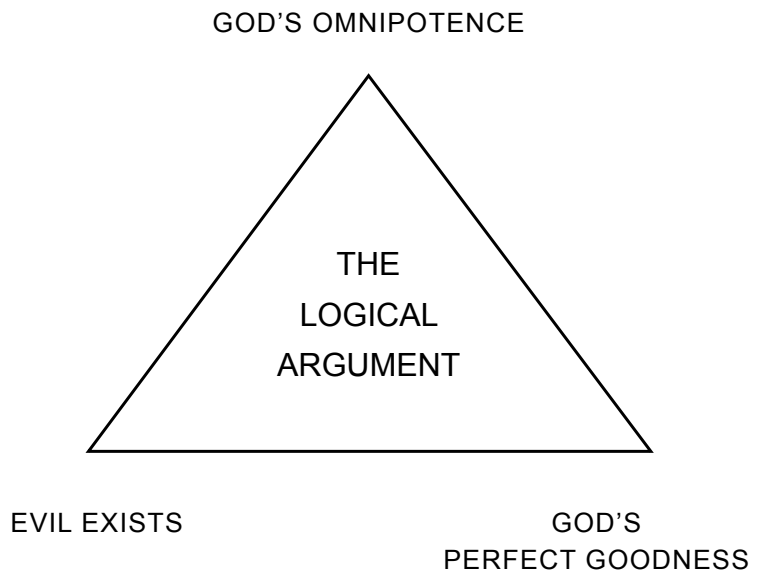
## FOR DISCUSSION:

**Are these views completely right or can you think of other possibilities?**

# THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL AND PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

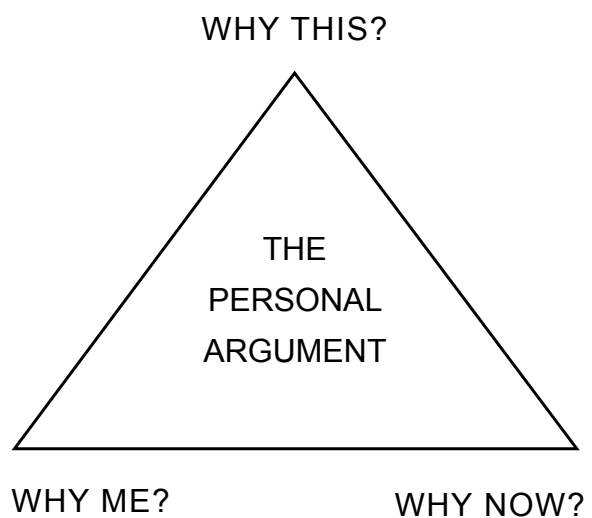
## THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

These three viewpoints lead to an **inconsistent triad** – that is, if you accept two you must reject the third. A good omnipotent being would eliminate evil completely. Therefore, the proposition that a good omnipotent being exists, and that evil exists are incompatible'



## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

These three viewpoints focus on the experience of the evil. It raises different questions because of the experience of suffering. Whereas the logical argument attempts to show that the existence of God is inconsistent with the existence of evil and so leads to atheism, the personal argument involving the experience of suffering focuses on the moral issue. Assuming God exists can such a God be trusted?



### FOR DISCUSSION:

**Are these views completely right or can you think of other possibilities?**

# MODERN DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

## J L MACKIE – EVIL AND OMNIPOTENCE

Mackie focussed on the logical problem of evil. The logical problem arises because theists maintain that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do. However, Mackie claims that the only solution to the logical problem is to deny this and that all so called 'solutions' or 'theodicies' actually limit God's power but misleadingly keep the term 'omnipotence'. He argues that in the various theodicies:

- God is bound by logical necessities. Hence not omnipotent since he cannot do what is logically impossible
- God is subject to causal laws which he made. Hence not omnipotent because he has to introduce evil as a means to good.
- God makes things that he cannot control. Hence not omnipotent because he has created human wills that he cannot control.

Therefore, Mackie argues that the theodicies do not give a solution to the problem of evil since they have changed the premise (i.e. that God is omnipotent).

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## ROWE – INTENSITY OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL SUFFERING

William Rowe in his work: '*The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism*' (1979) argued that, whilst it seemed reasonable for God to allow some limited suffering to enable humans to grow and develop, he could not accept God allowing what he called 'intense' suffering. Animal suffering also seemed pointless. Rowe used the example of a fawn caught in a forest fire as an example of pointless animal suffering. He argues:

- An omnipotent and omniscient being would know when intense suffering was about to take place.
- Such a being could prevent the suffering from happening.
- An all-loving being would probably prevent all evil and suffering that had no purpose and was pointless and avoidable.
- Such evil and suffering does happen.
- Therefore, probably God does not exist.

## **GREGORY S PAUL – PREMATURE DEATHS**

Gregory Paul argues that the death of so many innocent children challenges the existence of God. He estimates that over 50 billion children have died naturally and some 300 billion human beings have died naturally but prenatally. He argues:

- Millions of innocent children suffer and die every year, from both natural and evil causes.
- These children are too young to be able to make choices about God – they have no freewill.
- No all-loving, all-powerful being would permit such suffering.
- Therefore God does not exist.

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## **RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM**

God's goodness is a very different concept from human goodness and many religious believers say that God allows evil to exist as part of his greater plan of love. Such an approach has led to the development of theodicies to justify the existence of a loving God in the face of evil.

### **THE AUGUSTINIAN THEODICY**

- Augustine (354-430 CE) argued that the Bible shows that God is wholly good and that, according to Genesis 1, created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) a world perfectly good and free from defect, evil, and suffering: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'. (Genesis 1:31).
- Evil itself is not a physical thing and therefore God did not create it. Evil is really the going wrong of something that is good (evil as a privation).
- Augustine said that evil came not from God, but from those entities which had free will – angels and human beings who turned their backs on God.
- So, the state of perfection was ruined by human sin.
- Natural evil came about through the loss of order in nature
- Moral evil came from the knowledge of good and evil which human beings had discovered through their disobedience

God is right not to put a stop to suffering, since the punishment is justice for human sin and God is a just God.

However, Augustine notes that God, in his infinite love and grace, sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die so that those who believed and accepted him could be saved. The emphasis of the theodicy is soul-deciding. Our response to evil and God's rescue plan of salvation determines what happens to us when we die.

## **CRITICISM**

- Either the world was not perfect to start with, or God made it go wrong. If so, then it is God, and not humanity, who is to blame.
- Augustine's view that the world was made perfect and damaged by human beings is contrary to the theory of evolution, which asserts that the universe began as chaos and has been developing continually.
- If God created perfect human beings who sinned, then they must have been created with a flaw.
- Suffering is essential to survival – things must die in order that others might eat and live – God must bear the responsibility for this.
- The existence of Hell as a place of eternal punishment seems a contradiction for an all-loving God.
- If Hell was part of the design of the universe, then did God know that the world would go wrong anyway, and still allowed it to happen?

## (I) IRENAEAN TYPE THEODICY

Irenaeus (130-202CE) wrote about the idea that human beings are developing towards perfection:

- Irenaeus made a distinction between the 'image' and the 'likeness' of God (Genesis 1:26).
- Adam had the form of God but not the content of God.
- Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden because they were immature and needed to develop into the likeness (content) of God
- Goodness and perfection had to be developed by human beings themselves, through willing co-operation with God.
- God had to give them free will and such freedom requires the possibility of choosing evil instead of good.
- Our world of mingled good and evil is a divinely appointed environment for the development of human beings towards perfection

More recently, John Hick took these ideas and developed them into a full theodicy:

- If God had made humanity perfectly, then they would have had the goodness of robots, which would automatically love God without thought or question.
- Such love would be valueless.
- God wanted human beings to be genuinely loving
- To achieve this, God had to create human beings at an epistemic distance from him - a distance in dimension or knowledge, by which God is not so close that humans would be overwhelmed by him and so have no choice but to believe and obey. By keeping a distance, God allows human beings to freely choose.
- If there was no evil and suffering, then human beings would not be free to choose, since there would only be good.
- Without the existence of evil and suffering, human beings would not be able to develop the positive qualities of love, honour, courage and so on, and would lose the opportunity to develop into God's likeness.
- Hick is suggesting that the world is a place of soul making, that is, a place where human beings have to meet challenges in order to gain perfection
- This process is justified because of the eventual outcome. If the process is not completed in this life, then Hick argued we go to another life in another realm until the process is complete. The emphasis in the theodicy is soul-making.

## CRITICISM

### IRENÆAN TYPE THEODICY HAS MANY CRITICISMS:

- Hick suggested that everyone goes to heaven. This does not seem fair and just; it contradicts religious texts of many faiths and suggests that there is ultimately no reason to be good.
- The challenges of the world do not always result in genuine human development, and often seem to produce nothing but great misery and suffering.
- D.Z. Phillips argued that love could never be expressed by allowing suffering to happen: What are we to say of the child dying from cancer? If this has been done to anyone that is bad enough, but to be done for a purpose planned from eternity – that is the deepest evil. If God is this kind of agent, He cannot justify His actions and His evil nature is revealed.
- As a Christian theodicy, the death of Jesus and forgiveness seem irrelevant
- There is no evidence for other lives after death
- How can the end be guaranteed? Surely people could choose evil for eternity and so never reach perfection.

The main difference between Augustine and Irenaeus is that the former believed that humanity was created perfectly and turned against God, leading to evil and suffering coming into the world. Irenaeus, on the other hand, believed that humanity was deliberately created imperfectly so that, though suffering, humanity could develop into goodness.



## THE IDEA OF FREE WILL

THE IDEA OF FREEWILL IS IMPLICIT IN BOTH OF THE MAIN THEODICIES:

- In the Augustinian type theodicy, evil in the world is due to humanity's misuse of the gift of freewill. God created a world in which human beings could decide freely to love and obey God
- In Hick's theodicy, people have freedom to come to God since God deliberately creates a world in which it is not overwhelmingly evident that there is a God. Human goodness occurs through making free and responsible moral choices, in situations of difficulty and temptation.
- God cannot intervene because to do so would compromise human freedom and take away the need for humans to be responsible, thus preventing human development; 'The less he allows men to bring about large scale horrors, the less freedom and responsibility he gives them' (Richard Swinburne).

### CRITICISM

- The idea of freewill fails to answer the criticism that divine love cannot be expressed through suffering.
- J.L. Mackie observed: "God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always choose right'.
- Freewill means that God is not omnipotent since God cannot control the choices that human beings make
- God could have chosen to create a world without free creatures
- There is no justification for natural evil.

# CONCLUSION

## THE PROBLEM CHALLENGES THE POWER OF GOD

Can he prevent evil?

Can he intervene and work miracles?

There are no easy answers and the issue is well summed up by Swinburne:

*'A generous God will seek to give us great responsibility for ourselves, each other, and the world, and thus a share in his own creative activity of determining what sort of world it is to be. And he will seek to make our lives valuable, of great use to ourselves and to each other. The problem is that God cannot give us these goods in full measure without allowing much evil on the way'.*

# KEYWORDS

NATURAL EVIL	events caused by nature that cause suffering but over which human beings have little or no control e.g. earthquakes.
MORAL EVIL	events in which responsible actions by human beings cause suffering or harm e.g. war.
THEODICY	a justification of the righteousness of God given the existence of evil.
OMNIPOTENCE	the characteristic of being all-powerful. Some philosophers exclude the power to do the logically impossible.
FREE WILL	the ability to make choices that are not determined by prior causes or by divine intervention.
OMNISCIENCE	the characteristic of being all-knowing of all things actual and possible.
EX NIHILO	a Latin phrase meaning 'out of nothing'. Refers to the belief that God did not use any previously existing material when he created.
SOUL-DECIDING	the Augustinian-type theodicy in which people's response to evil and God's rescue plan decides their destiny.
SOUL-MAKING	the Irenaean-type theodicy in which the presence of evil is deliberate and helps people to grow and develop.
EPISTEMIC DISTANCE	a distance of knowledge of God. God is hidden and so allows human beings to choose freely.
SECOND-ORDER GOODS	moral goods that result from a response to evil.
CLASSICAL THEISM	the belief in a personal deity, creator of everything that exists, who is distinct from that creation and is sustainer and preserver of the universe.
PRIVATION	the absence or lack of something that ought to be there. In relation to evil as a privation, then evil is seen as an absence of good.
ESCHATOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION	evil and suffering are justified because of the eventual outcome.

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

## QUESTIONS

1	<p>Explain the difference between:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. moral evil and natural evil</li><li>II. omnipotent and omnibenevolent</li><li>III. first order goods and second order goods.</li></ol>
2	<p>What is the difference between the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil?</p>
3	<p>Why is the Augustinian type theodicy referred to as “soul-deciding”? Omnipotence –the characteristic of being all-powerful. Some philosophers exclude the power to do the logically impossible.</p>
4	<p>Why is the Irenaean type theodicy referred to as “soul-making”?</p>
5	<p>Explain Mackie’s criticism that applies to all of the theodicies.</p>
6	<p>What response could be made to the following criticisms of the Augustinian type theodicy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. The Fall depicted in Genesis contradicts evolutionary development.</li><li>II. The existence of hell is not consistent with a loving God.</li><li>III. If God created perfect human beings who sinned, then they must have been created with a flaw.</li></ol>
7	<p>What response could be made to the following criticisms of the Irenaean type theodicy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. The death of Jesus seems irrelevant.</li><li>II. Evil tends to destroy people rather than making them perfect.</li><li>III. There is no evidence that people have a series of lives until they reach perfection</li></ol>

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

## ANSWERS

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Moral evils are events in which responsible actions cause suffering whilst natural evils are events in nature which cause suffering but human beings have little or no control.</li> <li>II. Omnipotent means all powerful whilst omnibenevolent means all good</li> <li>III. First order goods are goods achieved directly from an action whilst second order goods are goods that result from a response to evil</li> </ul>
2	<p>The logical problem of evil identifies an apparent contradiction in logic between the existence of God and the existence of evil. The problem of suffering is about the experience of suffering and whether God can be trusted given the occurrence of suffering.</p>
3	<p>Called soul-deciding because the response to evil ultimately decides peoples destiny.</p>
4	<p>Called soul-making as the presence of evil helps people to grow and develop.</p>
5	<p>Mackie argues that all theodicies in some way or another limit the power of God. Hence no theodicy really accepts a God that is all powerful.</p>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. The Fall in the Bible is not to be taken literally but represents each person's rebellion against God. OR The fall is correct and evolution is in error.</li> <li>II. People must be free to choose and their choices have consequences OR there is annihilation rather than hell OR hell is an empty threat and in fact all are saved.</li> <li>III. It is not possible to create free beings and make them always to choose right.</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Jesus' death is an inspiring example</li> <li>II. But ultimately all will achieve the goal of perfection</li> <li>III. There is evidence –eg remembered lives, spiritualism</li> </ul>

# THE SKILL OF EVALUATION

IRENAEAN TYPE THEODICIES HAVE NEVER BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL.

## EVALUATE THIS REVIEW

The basis of the Irenaean type theodicy is that human beings are developing towards perfection. The emphasis is to understand the world as a “vale of soul-making”. God deliberately created a world in which it is not immediately and overwhelmingly evident that there is a God. This allows human beings to have freedom to come to God and to make free and responsible moral choices. Evil and suffering are justified since they are the means by which all human beings will eventually succeed in becoming morally perfect. Indeed, some moral goods are responses to evils and hence cannot exist without them – for example, compassion.

In the 21st century this approach to the problem of evil has some attractions. It is compatible with a scientific view of evolution and therefore is more successful than the Augustinian type theodicy. However, if the Biblical accounts are regarded as depicting historical events then the Irenaean type theodicy would not be persuasive. Indeed, for a Christian theodicy, it would seem to be wanting as the atoning work of Christ and his redemptive power of salvation through death on the Cross seems to be irrelevant. There seems no place for the forgiveness of sins. Also, surely an all powerful benevolent God could find a more compassionate mechanism for his creation to grow and develop towards God? Indeed, evil often ruins and destroys people rather than making them perfect.

*(continued)*

However, such criticisms may not be sufficient to reject the theodicy. It does have strengths that may outweigh its apparent weaknesses. For instance, it seems reasonable that some goods do require the existence of evil (eg compassion) and the end does justify the means since all ultimately experience the ultimate joy and that joy lasts eternally. There is clearly purpose in the experience of evil. The theodicy also involves genuine human responsibility and so respects genuine human free will.

Furthermore, it is true that it removes the problem of hell since all achieve perfection, ie the end result is guaranteed since that is the justification for the existence of evil – it achieves its end. But if the end result of perfection is guaranteed then what is the point of going through all the pain and suffering? In addition surely we could use our free will to rebel eternally and so never reach perfection?

The arguments show that it can offer a solution to the problem of evil but not without some serious difficulties remaining. However, it could be argued that the alternative theodicies raise even greater problems and so many may feel that the Irenaean type theodicy is not totally unsuccessful. After all it does provide a solution but the extent it is persuasive will be up to the individual to weigh up and decide. In particular, the problem of the lack of the need for the death of Jesus may be for many, a deciding factor in rejecting the theodicy.

# **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

## **QUESTION 1**

Discuss in a group to what extent you think this answer has fully addressed the question set

## **QUESTION 2**

Identify effective aspects of the answer in terms of its style.

## **QUESTION 3**

How does this answer differ from the style of evaluative answer that lists arguments in favour and then lists arguments against?

## **QUESTION 4**

Discuss any ways that the answer could have been improved upon?

## **COMMENTARY 4**

Look back at the comments to question 1 and think ways in which you could incorporate those into the answer.

## **QUESTION 5**

Underline any words in the answer that show it is evaluative

## **QUESTION 6**

Now attempt to write your own answer to the question set.