

# *Belief in God and the Problem of Suffering*

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One of the greatest problems facing a believer in a good all powerful God is the existence of evil and apparent undeserved suffering in the world. The problem has been presented, by many different writers, in the form of a dilemma:

Either God wishes to remove evil but is unable and therefore cannot be all - powerful, or he is able to remove evil but is unwilling and therefore cannot be wholly good.

The dilemma could be resolved by modifying or denying one of the premises. For instance one could deny that evil exists or maintain that it is only apparent and not real. Alternatively one could deny that God is all-powerful or that he is all good. The former defence is more popular than the latter. In some religions there are two equal and opposite forces, one good and one evil, who are in conflict and the outcome is as yet undecided. For others God is in the process of becoming all powerful and is not, as yet, in total control. Perhaps the simplest defence is to say that God's **omnipotence** (being all-powerful) is restricted either by his creating genuine free rational beings or because in creating any world God would have to limit his power. The theist usually does not want to take any of these courses and thus has to show that the existence of evil is compatible with a good, omnipotent God. Any attempt to do this is called a **theodicy**. The word theodicy come from two Greek words; **Theos** (god) and **Dike** (justification) and thus 'justification of God'.

## **The Problem of Evil**

It has been the tradition to divide evils into two kinds, **natural** and **moral**. The former are those arising from natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanoes over which humans seem to have little control. The latter are the evils, which lead to suffering, which arise from the deliberate choice of individuals to use their freedom to cause pain and suffering to others. Natural evils are more difficult to justify than moral evils, because they seem to be directly traceable to God. The notable example, or **paradigm**, that used to be employed in theodicies was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which destroyed tens of thousands of people. This is an example of a natural evil. The paradigm most frequently employed now is the Holocaust (the murder of six million Jews and others by the Nazis in World War 2), which is an example of moral evil.

## **A Protest Theodicy**

In order to clarify the issues involved in the problem it might be best to start with the theodicy of John Roth, a Protestant professor, whose thinking has been largely shaped by the Jewish response to the Holocaust. In one sense his approach, as he acknowledges, is not a theodicy but an anti-theodicy.

The theology of protest puts God on trial. Roth quotes at length from the work of Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, who, like Moses, acknowledges God's sovereignty but argues against him for the sake of his people. Hegel, the German philosopher, called history “

the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtues of individuals have been sacrificed." Roth points out that if this is so then God cannot be wholly good and asks how cost effective are God's decisions.

Roth challenges the usual defences. God is not limited. He is omnipotent and can intervene at any moment in human history and he chooses not to and thus is guilty of crimes ranging from gross negligence to murder. God gives us freedom but this freedom is either too little or too much. It is too little because there are natural evils, like cancer, that kill millions, and with a little more knowledge we could have a cure. It is too much because it unleashes the power of moral evil, so deeply entrenched in humanity, that the Holocaust could occur without it being possible to halt it before millions were killed. The response of protest theodicy is to acknowledge and yearn for the love of God while at the same time continue to interrogate him and not allow him to get away with the waste he has caused. The past cannot be redeemed because God cannot give back what has been lost.

Protest theodicy is reminiscent of the most famous and effective onslaught on God by the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Ivan discusses the problem of suffering with his brother, the novice priest Alyosha. He cites many examples of atrocities against children, including soldiers shooting babies for fun in front of their parents and the case of the little boy who was torn to pieces by hounds for accidentally harming one of his dogs. Ivan says, "And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of suffering which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth was not worth such a price...Besides too high a price is being asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it."

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazo*. (ET Heinemann London 1912) Pt.2. Bk5. ch4.)

The novel is fiction and the examples were taken by the author from newspapers of the time. Unfortunately we do not have to rely on examples from the nineteenth century. The Nazis also used babies for target practice in front of their parents and we are only too well aware of the widespread physical and sexual abuse of children in our society.

### **Does Suffering and Evil really exist or is it all in the Mind?**

What is the nature of evil? Is it real in the way that objects are real or is it a spiritual force or just something 'in the mind' which seems real to us? The latter view is apparently that adopted by Christian Science, which was founded by Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. She maintained that evil is an illusion with no real basis and that, "... the only reality of sin, sickness and death is the awful fact that unrealities seem real to human, erring belief." As an example she claimed that a boil "... simply manifests, through inflammation and swelling, a belief in pain and this belief is called a boil."

(Mary Baker Eddy. *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. (Christian Science Publishers. Boston 1934) 480)

It has been known for a long time that there is a real connection between mental events and physical illness so that, for instance, a person can suffer from ulcers because of stress or a skin condition as a result of deep-seated guilt feelings. But this is not the same as saying that ulcers are not objectively real.

Augustine adopted the distinction, made by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, that everything has its opposite, so that darkness is the absence of light, poverty is the absence of wealth and evil is the absence of good. Whereas goodness is completion (Latin *habitus*) evil is a lack (*privatio*) and, as such, is “no substance, but the perversion of the will, turned aside from God.” As a result, “There can be no evil where there is no good ... Nothing evil exists in itself, but only as an evil aspect of some actual entity.” From this he comes close to the view of Mrs Eddy. He asks, “What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of the good (*privatio boni*)? In animal bodies, for instance, sickness and wounds are nothing but the privation of health. When the cure is effected, the evils that were present (sickness and wounds) do not retreat and go elsewhere. Rather they simply do not exist any more.” (Augustine. *Enchiridion*. 3.11)

In fact he is not denying the reality of evil but saying that it is a defect. Thus blindness is a defect, the absence of sight, but this absence is real enough. What this account of evil does is to clear God of blame for evil. God is actively involved in good acts but not in evil acts, because in the latter he is withholding his goodness, whereas in the former he is performing it.

### **The Augustinian Theodicy.**

The Augustinian model is based on the traditional interpretation of the Bible. God created a ‘very good’ world in which he placed the first human beings, who were made in the ‘image of God’. This is usually understood to mean that they had a spiritual as well as a physical nature. Adam and Eve were in harmony with God, the animal creation and one another. They were given freewill, which they used to disobey God and, as a result, the three harmonious relationships were broken. Although Augustine believed in the literal truth of the story its meaning is not affected if it is regarded as a parable about every man and every woman. It rightly reflects the common experience that human beings are responsible for a great deal of suffering in the world because they choose to do wrong. It also correctly observes that this, in turn, leads to disharmony within the human race and towards the animal world as well as damage to the environment. What it fails to explain is natural calamities and animal suffering, which most people believe existed long before man came into existence. Actually Augustine could explain this on the basis of a prior fall of angels, led by Lucifer (the Devil), who were given charge of the world and have deliberately distorted nature in an attempt to hit back at God. Their rebellion consisted of causing animals to prey upon one another as well as upsetting the stability of the earth’s crust thus causing earthquakes and volcanoes.

The view can be criticised on several counts. There is the problem, first raised by Friedrich Schleiermacher of why the first creatures, angels or humans, whose natures contained no flaw and who lacked nothing, would have sinned, even if they were formally free to do so, when they were in the presence of God and enjoying his happiness. The Bible does not say that man was originally in the full presence of God. In a sense the first beings did not have everything, for they were limited in power. It only required the desire for something that cannot be obtained, like having total power to become like God, for sin to occur.

The existence of the Devil is questioned by many, but for the argument to work, as Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, one does not have to prove the Devil’s existence. It is only necessary for the belief to be probably true. The Bible represents the world as under the control of evil powers. Jesus was tempted by Satan and continually fought against evil and suffering, defeating it in his crucifixion and resurrection.

By placing the responsibility for evil on the Devil and human agencies it might be thought that God is absolved from blame. It is not clear that this is so. If God is all-powerful, then both the Devil and human beings are ultimately under his control and God must therefore accept the final responsibility. Alternatively, if God has limited his omnipotence by giving angels and mankind genuine freewill, then there is no guarantee that good will ultimately triumph over evil.

### **The Irenaean Theodicy.**

This alternative theodicy, championed by Professor John Hick, is based on the work of the Church Father Irenaeus. It starts from a different perspective and fits in better with the modern evolutionary theory. Man was not originally living in perfect harmony with himself, nature and God but was evolving from animal existence into a stage where he would be capable of being aware of God. God wanted mankind to come into a relationship with himself, which mankind freely chose. In order for this to happen God's existence could not be obvious and man must be free to choose or to reject God. There must be an **epistemic** distance between God and man. Peter Vardy explains what these means by using the illustration of a king who wants to win the love of a peasant girl. He did not want to command her obedience or to intimidate her, but wanted her to love him for himself. He must therefore disguise himself. God does the same. He sets a distance between himself and us. God could have created us with all the virtues instead of making it necessary for us to gain them through a long struggle. Irenaeus believed that only in an environment where there was danger and challenge, and also the possibility of evil, would it be possible for humans to develop into mature intellectual, spiritual and moral beings. In such a world, calamities must strike indiscriminately otherwise if every evil act were punished and every virtue rewarded a truly moral act, done not for reward, but for its own sake would be difficult, if not impossible.

The basic problem with this theodicy is both the amount and the intensity of evil that exists in the world. Evil is only tolerable if a greater good can come out of it (**the greater good argument**). Hick disagrees with Ivan that too high a price is being asked for harmony. In the case of the peasant boy torn to pieces by the hounds, Dostoyevsky imagines a scene in heaven when the mother may possibly forgive the murderer but he adds, " But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him." Hick thinks the author is thinking of the meeting taking place when the general is still the same cruel, and possibly insane, person. His theodicy envisages a period of perfecting when the general, " ... will remember how he treated the serf boy, and will feel ashamed and sorry and in desperate need of forgiveness. But in another sense he will no longer be the same person; for he will have changed in character into someone who is now morally incapable of behaving in such a way. " (John Hick. *Death and Eternal Life*. (Collins/Fount 1979) 165)

At such a time forgiveness must be right. Hick argues that the theodicy will only work if everybody is ultimately perfected and goes to heaven. The belief that all will be saved (**universalism**) is problematic. Although it might seem that, if anyone is not changed, then God's purpose is frustrated, it would also be the case that, unless God can secure universal salvation without taking away the human choice to disobey God, then one of the central tenets of the theodicy is removed.

The Irenaean theodicy envisages a long evolutionary process with the death of billions of living creatures. Why, it is often asked, is it necessary to postulate such a long process when

God, if he is all-powerful, could have created free intelligent beings in the 'twinkling of an eye' ? Is this world really a training ground in the way Hick describes when it looks so unlike one to so many people? The millions of children that die young hardly have a chance to start of God's racetrack. Why are virtues only valuable if they are freely learned? Would they not be equally valuable if they were built in to human nature?

### **The Freewill Defence.**

Both of the traditional theodicies claim that human beings were created with freewill and that it is through the exercise of this freewill that many of the evils, and the suffering that evil brings with it, occurs. The freewill defence expounds more clearly what is involved in this. It argues that the present world contains the logically necessary environment in which persons can freely respond to God's love and freely accept God. For this to occur there must be a genuinely open future and God must not totally determine all human responses. A necessary condition for this is the existence of randomness which, in turn, means that suffering cannot be avoided. Also it is maintained that the development of certain higher moral virtues, like compassion, can only occur when there is undeserved suffering. Compassion for the sick and starving occurs precisely because they do not deserve their fate.

A 'freewill defence' has been developed by Professor Swinburne. He points out that a genuinely free person, who is limited in both power and knowledge, can either resist temptation or give into it. If he gives into it, he can perform actions that bring harm to himself and/or others. God could then either intervene to stop him or let him learn from the consequences of his actions. The latter is more in keeping with the exercise of moral freedom and more conducive to the development of moral autonomy. He likens God's action in this respect with that of a good parent, who with small children will use or threaten punishment, but with older children he will intervene less often knowing that too much interference will inhibit moral development.

Can we justify God allowing the use of free choice to bring about the death of one's victims? Swinburne argues that death is good in that it brings an end to suffering, for it would be intolerable for a powerful being to have unlimited power to do harm. Also actions matter more when there is a limited life. If a man were immortal he could do harm to others for hundreds of years knowing that he had eternity in which to make amends. Finally death makes possible the ultimate sacrifice. A world without death would make fortitude in the face of absolute disaster impossible because there would always be the possibility of rescue.

In reply to the criticism that God, if wholly good and all forgiving, would give us another chance when we do wrongs that bring about suffering and evil, he points out that it would be positively disastrous to give endless chances. " A situation of temptation with infinite chances is no situation of temptation at all. If there is always another chance there is no risk. There would not be overriding reasons not to do a bad act, if you are always preserved from its consequences ... If you cannot damn yourself however hard you go on trying, your salvation is inevitable ... a God who wishes that all men shall be saved is a good God. But a God who makes all men to be saved is a being of more dubious moral status." (Richard Swinburne. *The Existence of God*. 186-187)

The crux of the problem lies in the extent of the problem of evil and the suffering that it entails. How could God allow the Holocaust ? To this Swinburne replies, " The less he (God)

allows men to bring about large scale horrors, the less the freedom and responsibility he gives to them. (We are) ... asking that a God should make a toy-world, a world where things matter, but not very much; where we can choose and our choices can make a small difference but the real choices remains God's. For he simply would not allow us the choice of doing real harm, or through our negligence, allow real harm to occur. He would be like an over-protective parent who will not let his child out of his sight for a moment." (Swinburne 219-220)

### **Could not God prevent evil and still give freedom?**

The philosophers Professors Anthony Flew and John Mackie, have put forward the counter-argument that if God were omnipotent He could create a world where free human beings would always choose to do what is good. " If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility of his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with the choice between making innocent automata and 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 do right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good." (J.L.Mackie in Flew and McIntyre. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. 144)

Hick replies to this argument by using the example of hypnosis. A hypnotised woman might take a book out of the library. The action is free because it flowed from the character of an agent, but it is not totally free because it arose from the suggestion of the hypnotist and was determined by him. For God to ensure that beings always acted freely and did what was right, God would have to pre-select our responses to the environment, to one another and to Himself. By so doing, He would ensure that, although from our point of view the actions were free and spontaneous, from God's point of view they would not be free, but would be determined.

### **Process Theology - solving the problem by limiting God's Power.**

Process theology claims that God is limited in what He can do and inevitably natural evils will occur. Process Theology teaches that God is in the process of developing. He is not yet omnipotent or all good and is affected by the universe as well as affecting it. This corresponds with Plato's myth in which God creates the universe out of pre-existing matter over which he does not have total control and hence makes the best job he can out of the material at his disposal. David Griffin adopts this view, which he finds better fits the evolutionary model. If evolution occurred and God was responsible for it why did he use such a long, pain-filled method? Looking at the universe in terms of its components he argues that God cannot greatly influence sub-atomic particles because they change only slightly over vast periods of time and elements, inanimate objects and probably plants cannot be directly influenced by God. It is only humans, and possibly some higher animals, that God could directly influence and who have the power to deviate from God.

It is questionable whether this amounts to a theodicy at all. Griffin's God is not powerful enough to merit worship and, being limited, he presents no obstacle to the problem of evil, which exists independently of him. The God of Process Theology has been likened to a mad scientist who fashions a monster hoping it will behave, but which he finds he cannot control.

Even without adopting Process Theology we could argue that the quantity of evil found in the world could have been reduced by God choosing not to allow certain natural processes to occur. For instance, an enormous amount of suffering occurs as a result of genetic mutation leading to abnormalities. It is estimated that one percent of the population of this country have genetic deformities that cause concern. God could presumably have prevented the mutations from occurring, or if this was impossible he could have caused miscarriages to occur. The fact that up to half of babies conceived are miscarried makes this a real possibility.

Most of the modern theodicies seek to solve the problem of evil by in some way modifying the premise that God is omnipotent. But is this necessary? Augustine and others that followed him, like Aquinas and the Reformer John Calvin, did not think so. They believed that God could be an all-powerful and all-knowing creator and yet still not be responsible for evil. This has been called the 'no risk' view of providence and has been recently restated by Professor Paul Helm.

### **Divine Miracles and the Problem of Evil.**

Maurice Wiles, who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, agreed that miracles, by definition, must be rare events but pointed out that if they were acts of God then God was both an arbitrary and an inconsistent being. According to the Bible God performed a miracle to enable the Jews to cross the Red Sea yet did nothing to prevent their extermination in the Nazi holocaust. To solve the problem Wiles adopts a deist position. God created the world but then stepped back and, although He does continue to sustain it, He no longer intervenes in its affairs. Wiles modifies one of the premises of our initial dilemma by claiming that God is not all-powerful because He is bound by the laws he has created.

### **Can Suffering and Evil ever be the Will of God?**

An essential part of the teaching of Augustine was that God has total control over his creation and the destiny of his creatures is in the hands of God. God creates some men and women to enjoy eternal life, but others are destined to be 'vessels of wrath (God's anger)'. Thus God determines or **predestinates** them and their fate does not depend on the lives they live. Thus Augustine writes, " Within the number of the elect (chosen) and the predestinated, even those who have led the worst lives are by the goodness of God led to repentance ... But the rest of mankind who are not of this number ... are brought into the world for the advantage of the elect. These will "... treasure up for themselves after their hardness and impenitent hearts, wrath against the day of wrath." (Augustine *Contra Julianum Pelagianum*. 5.14)

In spite of this, neither Augustine nor Calvin hold God responsible for evil because they insist that mankind still chooses freely to do evil. The freedom they envisage is freedom of spontaneity. Man is free because he acts voluntarily and without external compulsion. God **permits** us to do wrong because He does not usually stop us, although He sometimes does. We do not know how much evil God allows, because there could presumably be more evil in the world, and perhaps God does stop a lot of evil from occurring. This does not, however, make the evils that do exist any more justifiable from our point of view.

The inadequacies of this for a theodicy are obvious. If God fixed man's destiny from the beginning how can he hold man responsible for what he does? Does it not mean that God is ultimately the author of sin? The Calvinist Jonathan Edwards clearly saw the problem. Those whom Jews and Christians recognised as 'the elect' were often born of incestuous and

adulterous relationships and thus, for the elect to exist, God must have allowed sinful acts to be committed. If God is totally free to elect whom he wishes, and election is not dependent on the life a person leads, then there is no reason why God should not elect or predestine everybody to eternal life. His failure to do so makes God less than perfect. It would seem that this attempt to maintain the omnipotence of God intact, stumbles on the other horn of the dilemma, and makes God less than perfect.

### **The Problem of Animal Suffering.**

Animal suffering presents a particular problem because it seems that animals do not have as their goal the knowledge of God and the freewill defence does not apply to them. Earlier generations, less sensitive to animal suffering, found it less of a problem. Augustine believed that there was a harmony in nature and that animal suffering contributed to that harmony. Aquinas believed that the Bible, in forbidding cruelty towards animals was either thinking about the loss of the animal to its owner, or envisaging that cruelty to animals could lead to cruelty to humans.

For John Stuart Mill spoke not of a benevolent but of a cruel God. " ... one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals. They have been lavishly fitted out with instruments necessary for the purpose ... If a tenth part of the pain which have been expended in finding benevolent adaptations in nature, had been employed in collecting evidence to blacken the character of the Creator what scope for comment would have been found in the entire existence of the lower animals." (John Stuart Mill *Three Essays on Religion: Nature*. (Longmans Green. London.1875) 58)

We do not know how much suffering animals endure. In humans, suffering not only involves the immediate experience of pain, but is intensified by the memory of previous pains. In the animal world it seems possible for one animal to be devouring another and yet be blissfully ignorant that it, in turn, is being eaten. Much of the suffering is caused to animals by man and it is claimed that the closer animals are to man, for instance domesticated animals, the greater their experience of pain. It is also difficult to apply relevant criteria to assess animal suffering. Different species respond in different ways to stress. Adrenalin, for example, increases the heart rate in animals but decreases it in birds. It is often assumed that animals kept in confined spaces suffer more than those that roam free, but experimental evidence suggests otherwise.

It is often assumed that the alternative to 'nature red in tooth and claw', which results from the survival of the fittest, is animals living in gay abandon in a pleasant pastoral setting. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As Peter Vardy points out the real alternative to evolution is a decadent world with overpopulation, starvation and a weakening of the gene pool. Natural selection ensures that adaptation can take place and animal species can improve.

Do animals have a particular role to play in God's purposes? Christians believe that they do. Paul sees the animal creation linked up with humans in redemption. He says, " ... the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8.19,21) Does this mean that some animals will have a life in the world to come? We do not know, although some writers, like C.S.Lewis, believe that they will.



## **The Greater Good Argument.**

In his Protest Theodicy Roth said the problem of evil and suffering remain because God cannot redeem the past and give back what is lost. Traditional theodicies say that he can. Augustine believed that God, who is a supremely good being, would never permit the existence of anything evil among his works and because he is also omnipotent he can bring good out of evil. It is possible to look at the problem of evil and suffering as an academic problem and to lose sight of the real issue that suffering and evil cause pain and distress. Swinburne is in danger of doing this and has, on more than one occasion, had his views described as obscene. But it is equally easy to distort one's perspective when one is going through a time of suffering. It is instructive to compare the measured arguments presented by C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Problem of Pain* with the honest account of his feelings in the book, written after the death of his wife, entitled *A Grief Observed*. In another of his books, *The Great Divorce*, an allegory about Heaven and Hell, Lewis describes how mortal man, without the benefit of God's perspective, can, "... say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it', not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even the agony into a glory." (C.S. Lewis. *The Great Divorce* (Fontana. London 1972)62)

For the Christian God is not the impassive observer of suffering but a participant. Christianity teaches that God became a man and suffered at the hands of his creatures. In Christ's death moral evil is punished and divine righteousness is upheld and through it comes pardon and renewal. The Church Fathers described it as, *O felix culpa* (a happy fault) because the fall of man made God's grace possible and the end result for redeemed humanity will be greater than it would have been in a state of primitive innocence if man had never chosen to do wrong.

Suffering must be seen from a personal perspective, because suffering happens to persons. Mary Craig is a Roman Catholic writer who gave birth to two badly deformed babies. The first son, Paul, died in childhood. She writes about him in this way,

"What did we really feel when Paul died - this child of ours who had never even recognised us? I can only speak for myself and admit to a confused complexity of emotions ... Our friends were so sure that Paul's death was an unqualified blessing that I felt for him. I knew that what hurt most in the general rejoicing was the assumption that Paul's life had been a useless irrelevance, a disaster best forgotten. To me it did not seem like that. Yes, I was glad that he was dead. But at the same time I owed him an incalculable debt. If our value as human beings lies in what we do for each other, Paul has done a very great deal; he had, at the very least, opened the eyes of his mother to the suffering that was in the world and had brought her to understand something of the redemptive force it was capable of generating." (Mary Craig. *Blessings*. (Hodder. London 1979) 115-116)

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