

Key words:

Omnipotent – All powerful

Omniscient – All knowing

Omnibenevolent – All loving

Inconsistent Triad – the Omnibenevolence and omnipotence of God, and the existence of evil in the world, are said to be mutually incompatible

Theodicy – an attempt to justify God in the face of evil in the world

Natural evil – evil and suffering caused by non-human agencies

Moral evil – the evil done and the suffering caused by deliberate misuse of human free will

Privatio Boni – a phrase used by Augustine to mean an absence of goodness

Free will – the ability to make independent choices between real options

Epistemic distance – a distance in knowledge and understanding

The Problem of evil as a logical problem

Logically it is debatable whether a God of infinite power and love would do nothing to prevent evil; and evidentially, it is debatable whether the world contains sufficient evidence of the power and love of God to make belief tenable, given that there is also evidence of evil and suffering.

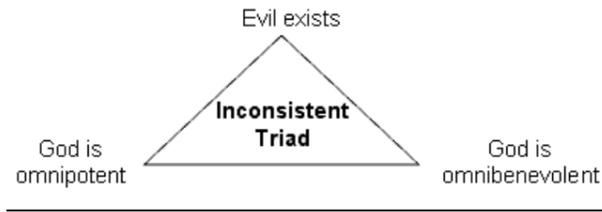
IF there is a God who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient then why do evil and suffering exist in the world?

Epicurus

- The problem of suffering contradicts the creation of the world but also the characteristics of God.
- Problem of suffering is a constant challenge to those that would believe in such a God (commonly referred to as the God of classical theism)
- If God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent then why would he allow suffering to exist?
- Why would God create a world that allows suffering when it is his creation?

“Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 1779

J.L. Mackie – the inconsistent triad



This argument is a modern version of the problem of evil.

The problem of evil sometimes makes reference to ‘the inconsistent triad’. There are three proposals we are asked to accept:

- 1) That God is perfectly good
- 2) That God is all powerful
- 3) That evil and suffering exist

Logically inconsistent that these three statements can all be true at once. This is because at least one of these must be false if the other two are true.

- Existence of evil is so evident in the world that it is not possible for all three of the statements to co-exist.
- Alternative solution → remove one of the points
- For example:
 - If we removed the quality of omnipotence from God then we can understand why evil exists as whilst he loves his creation, he does not have the power to stop it.
 - If we removed the characteristic of omnibenevolence then this would suggest that God has the power to remove evil but does not want to. However this is far from the God of classical theism.
 - If we remove evil → God keeps his qualities. We may be misunderstanding evil and it may have a purpose. However Hume rejects this and says that the effects of evil are felt too widely and therefore it is not possible for it to be dismissible.

Some people conclude therefore that there cannot be an all-loving, all-powerful God if there is evil and suffering in the world, on the grounds of logic alone.

As a logical problem, this argument against the existence of God is a priori as it argues on the basis of logic alone without the need for experience or evidence, that the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil.



The problem of evil as an evidential problem

A posteriori argument – takes the evidence of our own experiences (suffering, loss etc.)

John Stuart Mill

- Argued that evil alone is enough to prove that either God does not exist or that, if he does, he is not all-loving (perhaps even malevolent/cruel).
- Mill’s argument came in response to the design argument, which stated that the evidence of design in the world was proof of there being a designer. Mill’s response is that, using the same logic, evidence of evil in the world can be used as proof of a malevolent creator.
- He argues that the pain and suffering that humanity is put through on a daily basis must force us to question the existence of the God of classical theism
- Mill argues that nature is even crueller than the human mind. By implication, the “evidence” of design in nature points to a cruel designer, or else no designer at all.

Responses to the problem of evil: theodicy

A theodicy is the attempt to justify God in the face of evil and suffering

Tries to show that God can still have the character which is claimed by believer’s despite the evidence of evil and suffering



Augustine’s theodicy

- As a Christian did not believe that God could make anything imperfect ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’
- Augustine argued that evil is not a real, actual quality in its own right. It is what he called a privatio boni (privation) lack of good.
- Evil is not a quality in itself but a falling away from goodness
- Looking to creation, Augustine argued that variety is a part of the goodness and perfection of the created world. Each part of creation is good in its own right.
- Difference is a good thing, and the necessary result of difference is that some creatures will now be more limited than others.
- In Augustine’s view, evil first came into the world through the ‘Fall’ of the angels. He argued that the angels were all created perfect, but that some received less grace than others, as a part of the variety of things.
- The angels then fell away from God as a direct result of their misuse of free will. They chose not to worship God but to rival him.
- This was repeated in the Fall of Adam and Eve.

“Free will is the cause of our doing evil... thy just judgement is the cause of our having to suffer the consequences” *Confessions*

The Irenaeus theodicy

- Does not believe that humans or the world was made perfect.
- In order for us to develop then we need to live in a world where we are challenged with difficulties.
- All of our admirable human qualities are relative to other things
- We need evil in the world in order for us develop as free individuals who make their own moral decisions
- When God made people in 'his image' this included free will. We had to have freedom like God, if not we would be like puppets!
- Distinction between God's image and likeness → believed that God made us in his image but we have to grow into his likeness
- In order to become the likeness of God we have to develop and mature and reach our potential
- Irenaeus believed it had to be earned as if it was just given it would not mean anything
- He argued that humanity is not capable in this world of being in the likeness of God, this only happens after death.



John Hicks Irenaean 'soul-making' theodicy'

Took similar approach to Irenaeus → if we never experienced any difficulties or challenges, we would not be able to grow as personalities, we would not learn anything morally.

“a world which is to be a person-making environment cannot be a pain-free paradise but must contain challenges and dangers, with real possibilities of many kinds of accident and disaster, and the pain and suffering they bring.”

John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1966 p. 318

- Describes the world as a 'vale of soul making' where things happen to us for our own good
- Argued evil is not an unfortunate accident that God failed to anticipate
- God deliberately gave us a world in which we would have the best circumstances to choose a free and loving relationship with Him.
- This includes struggles and hardships and also includes what is known as 'epistemic distance'
- Epistemic distance → a distance in knowledge and understanding. Effectively God deliberately chooses to remain partially hidden from humanity.
- If God were to present himself to us so that there could be no possible doubt of his existence, then faith in God would not be a choice.
- But Hick argues that God wants us to have that choice, so that if and when we do turn to him, it is because we want to do so and not because we were forced into it.
- Hick's theodicy depends on a belief in life after death.
- Present hardships can only be justified if there is the promise of better things to come after death, if our 'soul making' experiences are in order to prepare us for some other, better kind of existence ahead

Strengths of Augustine's theodicy

- ✓ Augustine's approach is Biblically based, which will appeal to Christians with conservative beliefs in creation and the fall [however the flipside to this is that it has less appeal to those who take a non-literal reading of the Bible.
- ✓ We could appeal to a 'best possible worlds' theory (Leibniz) to support Augustine's theodicy i.e. a world with free will, original sin, disobedient humans and the existence of suffering and evil must still be the best possible world God could have made. That is because an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God, when faced with an infinite amount of possible worlds to create could not help but create the best of those (which would not necessarily be 'perfect' in our eyes)
- ✓ Augustine's theodicy resolves the logical problem of evil by giving God more than one good reason to not intervene to prevent suffering (therefore undermining the first premise that the GCT would always act to prevent evil and suffering)
- ✓ Augustine's claim that evil doesn't really exist as an entity seems to render Mackie's 'inconsistent' triad actually consistent [but it does seem counter-intuitive to argue that suffering and evil don't really exist and tell that to someone who suffers
- ✓ One of the key strengths of Augustine's theodicy is that it totally shifts the blame for evil – both its introduction into the world and its continued presence in the world – onto God's disobedient created beings and therefore God cannot be held accountable

Weaknesses of Augustine's theodicy

- ✓ A lot of Augustine's theodicy depends on a literal interpretation of the Bible. However, it can be convincingly argued that the fall was not an actual event in human history but, rather a myth that tells us about God's relationship with humans more generally. Therefore we cannot claim that the fall (of either humans or angels) is literally responsible for moral or natural evil [counter argument: even if the fall is a myth, it could still be true that humans are naturally disobedient and it is our sinful nature that has spoilt God's otherwise perfect creation and brought evil into the world
- ✓ The concept of original sin seems grossly unfair and seems to undermine God's omnibenevolence. No creature animal or human, should have to suffer as a result of A & E's mistake thousands of years ago. A good God would not allow such an unjust legacy.
- ✓ God's omniscience is threatened; He should have foreseen the fall and all that would follow from A & E's mistake. [However, this can be refuted by Hick's concept of epistemic distance. It could simply be the case that we are not in a position to say what God knows and how He should act on such knowledge.
- ✓ God's omnibenevolence is undermined further by original sin, when we consider that He allows unbaptised babies to go to hell. Even the concept of hell is problematic. A & E may have brought the first evil into the world but God multiplies such evils by His response [However, some argue that hell is merely 'just' and justice is a form of goodness.
- ✓ Augustine's theory lacks coherence e.g. on the one hand evil doesn't exist, on the other hand it does and acts as a punishment, while being necessary to create 'contrast' and aesthetic beauty in the moral universe.

Strengths of Irenaeus/Hick

- ✓ **Gil Edwards** supports Hick, stating that qualities such as courage and trust can only come about through suffering. This idea says God is justified so that humans have an arena in which to develop.
- ✓ **Peter Vardy used Soren Kierkegaard's** analogy of the king who falls in love with a peasant girl to support Hick's argument that God needed to allow humans to freely develop themselves morally and spiritually. This, Vardy argues, is because goodness and love that has been developed by free choice is infinitely better than the programmed goodness of robots. Vardy points out that although the king could have forced the girl to marry him, he chose not to as love cannot be created by compulsion. In the same way, God had to allow humans to love and obey Him for themselves if their love for him was to be genuine.
- ✓ If we accept that human perfection must be developed rather than ready-made, then other aspects of Hick's theodicy must also be accepted. If we are to develop we had to be created imperfect, we had to be distanced from God and the natural world could not be paradise.
- ✓ **Richard Swinburne** believes that it is necessary for God to allow even the worst suffering in order for us to mature. If God were continually intervening in the world to remove evil and not allowing us to suffer, He would be like an "over-protective parent who will not let his child out of his sight for a moment." In such a situation we would be unable to develop our souls.
- ✓ The theodicy provides a rational explanation for why the God of classical theism who is omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving permits both natural and moral evil and the suffering that results from it. It agrees with the modern scientific theory of evolution as humans are developing from one stage to another, they were not created perfect by God.

Weaknesses of Irenaeus/Hick

- ✓ The extent and severity of suffering – would it not have been sufficient for four million Jews to die instead of six million. Even if we accept that the world cannot be a paradise does it have to be plagued with excessive natural evils such as earthquakes and tsunamis?
- ✓ The challenges of the world do not always result in genuine human development. They often seem to produce nothing but greater misery and suffering, for example the Holocaust. In addition, there is the problem of the severity of human suffering. Much human suffering seems too great compared to the good, if any, which comes out of it. It also does not explain the seemingly pointless evil which benefits no one.
- ✓ Hick's theodicy claims that evil is part of God's plan because he loves us and wants us to develop. D.Z. Phillips however argued that allowing suffering to happen can never be regarded as "loving". How can the suffering and death of a child be justified as part of God's loving plan? "If God is this kind of agent, He cannot justify His actions and his evil nature is revealed"

Weaknesses continued...

- ✓ Evil and suffering does not always result in soul making. The challenges of the world often seem to produce nothing but greater misery and suffering, e.g. the holocaust. The evidential problem of evil highlights that many examples of evil and suffering bring about not further goodness. They simply cause misery.
- ✓ Suffering is not balanced. Many ask the question 'why would an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God distribute evil so inconsistently? If suffering is essential to human development as Hick suggests then it is fair that some miss out on suffering.'
- ✓ Animal suffering is difficult to explain
- ✓ Hick's view of salvation → many argue it undermines the whole value of Christianity (what is the purpose of Christ's death on the cross)?
- ✓ His optimistic view that everyone will eventually be free could be criticised, on the grounds that if this turning to God is inevitable, it cannot also be free.
- ✓ Hick seems to be taking a consequentialist view when presenting his theodicy. The means which God uses might be unpleasant, but they are justified by the ends (our freedom of will and our better-shaped souls).
- ✓ D.Z Phillips → it is not right to suggest that God not only allows evil and suffering, but that he actually planned for it to happen and worked it into his design of the world before the world was even made. He argued that this would be an evil God, if he were prepared to let so many people suffer in order that there should be freedom.

Is it possible to defend monotheism successfully in the face of evil?

- ✓ Even if evil does provide strong evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God, there is even stronger evidence that such a God does exist. There is not just evil in the world, but also goodness, beauty and love. It could be argued that in total, the good still outweighs the bad and pushes the probability in God's favour.
- ✓ It could be argued that even if we do not know a plausible reason for God allowing evil, there could still be such a reason. Our not knowing it does not prove that the reason does not exist.
- ✓ We should not expect to understand God and the things he does. It should be enough for us to know there is an all-powerful, all loving God who does not make mistakes; we should not require of God that he explains himself to us. It might be argued that theism is about faith in the unknown, and not about the deductive logic or the balance of probabilities.

Possible exam questions

- 'Discuss critically Augustine's view that God cannot be blamed for the existence of moral and natural evil in the world'
- 'Evidence of evil and suffering in the world provides a greater challenge to the existence of God than the logical problem of evil'
- 'The logical problem of evil proves that the God of classical theism does not exist'

Key philosophical viewpoints

- ✓ Vardy → God has to allow us to develop if our love for him is to be genuine
- ✓ Swinburne → Death brings about suffering, but it is necessary to ensure that humans take their responsibilities seriously
- ✓ J.S Mill → The world is full of evidence for evil and it points to a sadistic creator. We cannot look to God as omnibenevolent
- ✓ Mackie → If omnibenevolence and omnipotence are essential characteristics of God, then the existence of evil disproves the existence of God
- ✓ D.Z Phillips → it is never justifiable to hurt someone in order to help them
- ✓ Schleiermacher → it is logically contradictory to claim that a perfectly created world went wrong. This implies that evil created itself ex nihilo, which is logically contradictory. Agrees with Mackie that it was logically possible for God to have created free beings who would never fall.

