# The Problem of Evil and Suffering – a priori

## The logical aspect of the problem of evil and suffering

### Overview

The 3rd-4th Century BC philosopher Epicurus presented a logical challenge against the existence of God based on the understanding that God is, as typically described, all powerful and all loving. This challenge was echoed by David Hume in the 18th Century and named the Inconsistent Triad suggesting that if God were all loving and all powerful then there should be no evil and suffering in the world.

In the 20th Century, McCloskey and Mackie presented another version of this same challenge calling it the logical problem of evil which goes as follows:

**Premise 1**: God is omnipotent which means he could stop all suffering.

**Premise 2**: God is benevolent which means he desires the wellbeing of his creation.

**Premise 3**: God is omniscient which means he was aware of the suffering that would occur and is aware of all suffering in the world.

**Premise 4**: Humans suffer.

**Conclusion**: Premises 1-3 is incompatible with premise 4.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Key Terms** | **Omnipotent**: *adj*. from the Latin meaning all powerful.  **Benevolent**: *adj*. from the Latin meaning all loving.  **Omniscient**: *adj*. from the Latin meaning all knowing. |
| **Extracts** | **David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion***  *Epicurus’ 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?*  **J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism***  *Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.* |
| **Videos** | • Crash Course Philosophy: [Problem of Evil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AzNEG1GB-k).  • [The logical problem of evil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k64YJYBUFLM). |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. What is an attribute?
2. What is meant when theists say that God is omnipotent?
3. What is meant when theists say that God is benevolent?
4. What is meant when theists say that God is omniscient?
5. What is the Inconsistent Triad as presented by Epicurus and Hume?
6. Why are the three parts of the problem inconsistent?
7. What is the Logical Problem of evil and suffering as presented by McCloskey and Mackie?
8. Why are premises 1-3 incompatible with premise 4?

## Re-evaluation of the nature of God

### Overview

Both the Inconsistent Triad and the Logical Problem of Evil are based on specific definitions for the attributes of God and use them to show how they are incompatible with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. However, as Josh McDowell points out, we know God through his attributes which are revealed through scripture. In Psalm 50:21 it states: “You thought that I was just like you” (Psalms 50:21). God is not like us and so our definitions of God’s attributes do not necessarily apply to God in any prescriptive way.

We call God omnipotent because he created the universe, loving because he sent Christ to save mankind from sin, and omniscient because he can judge us for our actions, but in reality, we have no idea what those terms actually mean and so it is senseless to use those unclear terms as a basis for challenging God’s existence.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Extracts** | **Pseudo-Dionysius**  *I cannot call God good because I have no idea what it means to call God good.*  **Brian Davies**  *[God] is beyond assertion since he is ‘the perfect and unique cause of all things’. He is beyond denial by virtue of his ‘pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free from every limitation, beyond every limitation.*  **Moses Maimonides, *A Guide for the Perplexed***  *I do not merely declare that he who affirms attributes of God has not sufficient knowledge concerning the Creator ... but I say that he unconsciously loses his belief in God.* |
| **Videos** | • [Josh McDowell on the attributes of God](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FW_6nXCmVVc).  • [William Lane Craig on the Problem of Evil and Suffering](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtx5GyP7i7w). (Must watch) |
| **Further Reading** | • [McCloskey and Mackie’s Logical Problem of Evil and Suffering](https://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/#:~:text=McCloskey%20(1960%2C%20p.,of%20God%20on%20the%20other.)  • [Addressing the emotional problem of evil and suffering](https://www.equip.org/article/addressing-emotional-problem-evil-christians-hope/). |

### Evaluation of the argument

To what extent is the existence of evil and suffering incompatible with the existence of God?

**Consider the following:**

* Is the logical aspect to the problem of evil itself logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is the logical aspect argument *a priori* (based in reason)?
* How convincing is the logical aspect of the problem of evil and suffering?
* Who can you use to support this position?
* What part of the logical aspect of the problem of evil challenged by an evaluation of the nature of God?
* How convincing is the response to this problem?
* Who can you use to support the response to the problem of evil?
* Can the logical aspect of the problem of evil survive against the re-evaluation of God’s nature?

# The Problem of Evil and Suffering – a posteriori

## The evidential aspect of the problem of evil and suffering

### Overview

John Stuart Mill complained that the idea that there is a benevolent designer God was incompatible with the evidence we have of the world of suffering both caused by humans and that takes place in nature itself. In *On Nature*, he comments that the evils that nature commits would be condemnable were they to be committed by human beings. This being the case we cannot conclude that it was created by a sane and benevolent designer.

In support of Mill’s attack on God on the basis of the cruelty of nature and in line with Fry’s attack on God, Richard Dawkins refers to the reproductive habits of digger wasps who paralyse prey, such as caterpillars, in order to inject their larvae inside them to incubate before exploding out. This cruelty in nature, Dawkins argues, is characteristic of the blind forces of nature and can never be attributed to any foresight by a benevolent God.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Key Terms** | **Nature evil**: *noun*. the evils that take place naturally, Peter Vardy including: natural disasters, illness, animal suffering, human frailty, psychological illness.  **Moral evil**: *noun*. the evils that take place as a consequence of human actions. |
| **Extracts** | **John Stuart Mill, *On Nature***  *Nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's everyday performances. Even the love of 'order', which is thought to be a following of the ways of nature, is in fact a contradiction of them. All which people are accustomed to deprecate as 'disorder' and its consequences, is precisely a counterpart of nature's ways. Anarchy and the reign of Terror are overmatched in injustice, ruin, and death by a hurricane and a pestilence. Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which was ever framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.*  **Richard Dawkins, *A River out of Eden***  *We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor callous – but simply callous: Indifferent to all suffering, lacking all ideas of purpose.* |
| **Videos** | • [Stephen Fry’s challenge on the problem of evil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo). |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. What is meant by natural evil and suffering?
2. What is meant by moral evil and suffering?
3. What does Mill mean when he calls ‘disorder’ a counterpart to ‘nature’s ways’?
4. What does Mill mean when he says that no moral theory can make the ‘the government of nature…at once good and omnipotent’?
5. In what way does the digger wasp example show that there cannot be a loving God?
6. How does the digger wasp example support a ‘blind watchmaker’ model of the universe?
7. Why does Stephen Fry call God a maniac?
8. What does Stephen Fry mean when he calls God evil?

## Gottfried Leibniz’ response to the evidential problem of evil and suffering

### Overview

The term “theodicy” was first coined by Gottfried Leibniz, the 17th-18th Century German Philosopher, taking from the Greek terms: *theos* (God) and *dikē (justice).* A theodicy is therefore an attempt to justify God in spite of the existence of evil and suffering. Leibniz argued that this was the best of all possible worlds and he gave two reasons why God can’t remove evil.

1. You have no idea how removing a token feature would impact on creation.

2. We do not know what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mean to God.

The evidential problem of evil attempts to show that suffering in the world is evil and that only an evil God would allow it, or else there is no God at all. However, this is a false equivalence, just because something causes pain does not necessarily mean that it is evil, so the existence of suffering in the world is no indication that God is evil, nor a proof that there is no God at all.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Extracts** | **Gottried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Abridgement of the argument reduced to syllogistic form***  *…The best plan is not always that which seeks to avoid evil, since it may happen that* the evil is accompanied by a greater good*. For example, a general of an army will prefer a great victory with a slight wound to a condition without wound and without victory. We have proved this more fully in the large work by making it clear, by instances taken from mathematics and elsewhere, that an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole. In this I have followed the opinion of St. Augustine, who has said a hundred times, that God has permitted evil in order to bring about good, that is, a greater good; and that of Thomas, that the permitting of evil tends to the good of the universe.*  **John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism***  *The Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce [pain].* |
| **Videos** | • [Bishop Robert Barron’s response to Stephen Fry](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07AWWJiyAU8).  • [How Christians respond to the problem of evil and suffering](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CScwmXkzvo). |
| **Further Reading** | • Leibniz, [Theodicy](http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/leibniz%20-%20theodicy.htm). |

### Evaluation of the argument

“Suffering in the world is proof that there can be no God.” Discuss.

**Consider the following:**

* Is the evidential aspect to the problem of evil itself logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is the evidential aspect argument *a posteriori* (based in experience)?
* How convincing is the evidential aspect of the problem of evil and suffering?
* Who can you use to support this position?
* What part of the evidential aspect of the problem of evil challenged by Leibniz?
* How convincing is the response to the vidential problem?
* Who can you use to challenge the evidential problem of evil and suffering?
* Can the evidential aspect of the problem of evil survive against the Leibniz’s challenge?

# The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Augustine’s Theodicy

## Augustine’s theodicy

### Overview

St Augustine considered evil a problem on the following basis:

**Premise 1**. God created all things.

**Premise 2**. Evil is a thing.

**Conclusion**. God created evil.

St Augustine relied on the Genesis Creation Story to show that all things came from God and that all things were made good by God. This being the case, evil things need accounting for, as God, who is good, cannot be the author of evil things. Augustine used the term ‘privation’ to describe evil. He said that things are evil when they are deprived of their goodness, so a person is evil when he is emptied of good and his actions are not the actions that we should be performing. In this way, God does not make anything evil, instead, evil is a consequence of human beings using their free will to act in opposition of the will of God.

Augustine went on to say that God created all things in a hierarchy including divine beings, like angels, some of whom were created with too little grace and also “fell” from perfection. Natural evil, then, is the consequence of the fall of creation and the impact of sin on the world.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Key Terms** | **Privation**: *noun* the state in which something is lacking; for Augustine, evil is a privation of good. |
| **Extracts** | **St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, Book 7 Chapter 12***  *Therefore, if they shall be deprived of all good, they shall no longer be. So long, therefore, as they are, they are good; therefore whatsoever is, is good. That evil, then, which I sought whence it was, is not any substance; for were it a substance, it would be good. For either it would be an incorruptible substance, and so a chief good, or a corruptible substance, which unless it were good it could not be corrupted. I perceived, therefore, and it was made clear to me, that Thou made all things good, nor is there any substance at all that was not made by You; and because all that You have made are not equal, therefore all things are; because individually they are good, and altogether very good, because our God made all things very good.* |
| **Videos** | • Mr McMillan Revise: [Augustine’s Theodicy](file:////Users/juliearliss/Desktop/Members%20GT%20Q&A/brilliant%20club%20/youtube.com/watch%3fv=E1ysPBjXXk4).  • SDA: [What about the Problem of Evil](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/goodman/problem-of-evil/)? |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. How does Augustine phrase the problem of evil and suffering?
2. Why is it significant that Genesis states that God created everything good?
3. Why does Augustine talk about evil as a privation of good?
4. What does Augustine mean when he said that if something was absent of all good it would cease to be?
5. How does privation account for moral evil actions by people?
6. What is meant by the hierarchy of creation?
7. How does Augustine account for natural evil and suffering?
8. What is the problem with Augustine’s explanation of natural evil and suffering?

## Responses to Augustine’s theodicy

### Overview

It seems a matter of semantics to say that evil is not a thing, it’s just the decisions people make. Goodness is not a thing either, it is just something that happens. Either evil happens or it does not. If it does happen then it could have not happened. If God was benevolent and omnipotent he would have been able to prevent it from happening.

Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that there is a logical contradiction in Augustine’s idea of a perfect world where humans and angels fell from grace and brought sin into the world. If God is omniscient, He should have known that mankind would disobey Him. Therefore, whether or not we have free will, God is still accountable for the suffering as He was aware of it when He created the world. Indeed, the fact that God creates hell is indication that God knew the world would go ‘wrong’.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Extracts** | **John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love***  *The creature's fall is either impossible, or else so very possible as to be excusable. It does not seem feasible for the creature to be in a perfectly neutral position; either he is so vividly conscious of God as to be held in God's presence and service by the overwhelming immensity of the divine reality and goodness, or else he is not thus set consciously in God's presence, and self-centredness rather than God-centredness is a very natural possibility for the realization of which the creature can hardly bear the virtually unlimited guilt attributed to him in the traditional free-will defence. In short, then, men (or angels) cannot meaningfully be thought of as finitely perfect creatures who fall out of the full glory and blessedness of God's Kingdom. Sin — self-centredness rather than God-centredness — can only have come about in creatures placed in an environment other than the direct divine presence. Only in such an environment could they have the freedom in relation to God that is presupposed by that state of posse peccare (able to sin) that is evidenced by their actual fall.* |
| **Videos** | • [The Free Will Defence: A good God vs the problem of evil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJYycge3eFc).  • Mr McMillan Revise: [The Free Will Defence](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEB72UE7P2A). |
| **Further Reading** | • Augustine, [The literal meaning of Genesis](https://www.ancient.eu/article/91/st-augustine-from-the-literal-meaning-of-genesis/).  • Augustine, [Confessions](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm), Book Three, Chapter VII.  • Alvin Plantinga, [God, Freedom and Evil](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f36d7c1e5b6cb8c0d88151/t/5b819b372b6a282494d6a96e/1535220574762/Plantinga+-+God%2C+Freedom%2C+and+Evil+.pdf), Part 1. A. 4. The Free Will Defense. |

### Evaluation of the argument

“Augustine’s theodicy successfully justifies the existence of God despite evil and suffering.” Discuss.

**Consider the following:**

* Is Augustine’s theodicy logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is Augustine’s argument justified by scripture?
* How convincing is Augustine’s argument?
* Who can you use to support Augustine?
* What part of Augustine’s argument is being challenged by Schleiermacher?
* How convincing is Schleiermacher’s challenge?
* Who can you use to support Schleiermacher?
* Can Augustine’s theodicy respond to Schleiermacher’s challenge?

# The Problem of Evil and Suffering: The Irenaean Theodicy

## John Hick’s version of the Irenaean theodicy

### Overview

John Hick’s theodicy is based on the theodicy of St Irenaeus who argued that God created all human beings in His image, but not His likeness. By this, he meant that we are created in the embryonic form of God. We are in God’s image (we have reason and morality etc.) but we are not yet like God. In the same way that children are born in their parents’ image but are not yet grown to be like them. And for that to happen, God allows suffering in the world.

Hick argued that we are at an epistemic distance from God and so God’s existence is not certain to us, so we must live a life of faith trusting in God, struggling against suffering and what he called “soul-making”. Hick interpreted the incarnation of Christ as the perfect example of what humans should be like. As Christ suffered, so do we suffer until we die, when all will be redeemed eschatologically,

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Key Terms** | **Soul-making**: *noun* the process by which we grow while on earth to make our souls more like God.  **Epistemic distance**: *noun* the between God and man, not a physical distance but a distance in understanding.  **Eschatological**: *adj.* in the end, at the end of the world. |
| **Extracts** | **John Hick, *Evil and the Love of God***  *Instead of regarding man as having been created by God in a finished state, as a finitely perfect being fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence, and then falling disastrously away from this, [this account] sees man as still in process of creation.*  *[…] By this 'likeness' Irenaeus means something more than personal existence as such; he means a certain valuable quality of personal life which reflects finitely the divine life. This represents the perfecting of man, the fulfilment of God's purpose for humanity, the 'bringing of many sons to glory', the creating of 'children of God' who are 'fellow heirs with Christ' of his glory.'*  *[…] Following hints from St. Paul, Irenaeus taught that a man has been made as a person in the image of God but has not yet been brought as a free and responsible agent into the finite likeness of God, which is revealed in Christ.* |
| **Videos** | • Mr McMillan Revise: [Irenaean Theodicy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWcgHmXV09g). |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. In what way is Hick’s theodicy an Irenaean theodicy?
2. What does it mean to say that we are created in God’s image but not likeness?
3. What does it mean to say we are made in the embryonic form?
4. What does it mean to say that life is about soul-making?
5. Why is Christ so important in Hick’s theodicy?
6. What is universal salvation?
7. What is problematic about the notion that everything will be resolved eschatologically?
8. Why does Hick think it is better to see suffering as a test rather than a punishment?

## Dewi Zephaniah Phillip’s response to the Irenaean theodicy

### Overview

Dewi Zephaniah Phillips challenges John Hick’s suggestion that God planned suffering into the world as this would make God an evil God if he were prepared to let so many innocent people suffer for the price of freedom. He gave the example of the Holocaust in his rejection of any theodicy which presents suffering as instrumental, arguing that such suffering cannot be justified, regardless of any good that comes of it. We see this position reflected in the voice of Ivan in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

Additionally, Hick’s theodicy suggests universal salvation which is contrary to Christian thinking and so is incompatible with Judeo-Christian theism. Besides, if all will be saved, it makes life meaningless.

### Resources

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Extracts** | **Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov***  *[I]f the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. 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! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.* |
| **Videos** | • [Hick’s theodicy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6PFPE2cwv8).  • PragerU: [God and Suffering](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNtz5wgnopQ&t=57s). |
| **Further Reading** | • Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, [The Problems with Evil and with God](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226753738_D_Z_Phillips'_problems_with_evil_and_with_God). |

### Evaluation of the argument

“John Hick’s theodicy successfully justifies the existence of God despite evil and suffering.” Discuss.

**Consider the following:**

* Is John Hick’s argument logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is Hick’s argument more reasonable than Augustine’s?
* How convincing is Hick’s argument?
* Who can you use to support Hick?
* What part of Hick’s theodicy is being challenged by Phillips?
* How convincing is Phillip’s challenge?
* Who can you use to support Phillips?
* Can Hick’s theodicy respond to Phillip’s challenge?