

The problem of evil (2)

- (a) Explain what is meant by the problem of evil. (20 marks)
- (b) Identify one solution to the problem of evil and assess how far it succeeds in resolving the problem. (20 marks)

- (a) The problem of suffering is an age-old one for believers, and one to which Richard Swinburne claimed that the believer must have a satisfactory answer otherwise there is no reason why the atheist should share his faith. David Hume identified the problem of suffering as 'the rock of atheism' and the biggest single reason why the atheist might consider the theist's faith to be little more than wishful thinking. Recently, Richard Dawkins, a contemporary atheist scientist, posed the question of whether religion is the 'root of evil'.


The essential problem is that if God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, then why does evil exist in the world? If he is able to remove it, but does not do so, then he is malevolent; if he desires to do so, but cannot, then he is impotent. Neither option surely leaves the theist with a God worthy of worship who fulfils the characteristics of the God of classical theism. However, J. L. Mackie observed in his paper *Evil and Omnipotence* that these three propositions constitute an inconsistent triad — that is, the conjunction of any two entails the negation of the third. Mackie argued that: 'From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.'

The problem of suffering therefore creates philosophical problems for the believer as he or she must reconcile conflicting claims — that there is a God who is all-powerful and all-loving and that evil exists in the world. Believers will not want to deny the first claim, and they cannot deny realistically the other; it is counter-intuitive to argue that evil and suffering do not exist when it is empirically real.

The problem of suffering, or evil, therefore challenges the nature of God and believers must find a way around this if they are to continue to have a meaningful faith. Anthony Flew criticised the inclination of believers to 'qualify' their faith by attempting to adapt the qualities of God to fit in with the problem of evil, as a consequence ending up with a God who does not fulfil their original definition. When faced with the problem of evil, believers claim that we cannot understand God's reasons for allowing such things to happen, or that we should not measure God's love against human standards. However, Flew argued that this effectively means that we change God's nature to fit the circumstances, rather than recognising that there is a genuine problem that needs to be resolved.

The problem of suffering is also a diverse problem. There are so many different types of suffering that the believer must reconcile with the existence of God: moral evil (caused by humans), natural evil (presumably outside man's control), metaphysical evil and emotional suffering, animal suffering, and death itself. All types of evil raise distinct problems. Why did God create a natural order that was capable of bringing such suffering to humans? Why did he create human free agents who were capable of choosing to perform morally evil actions?

Believers need to reconcile many things if the problem of evil is genuinely to be resolved. They must demonstrate why God has good reasons for allowing evil when he could and should remove it; they must show that there are good reasons for worshipping a God who chooses not to intervene at all times in cases of suffering; they must find satisfactory explanations for different types of evil; and they must consider whether a world without evil would actually be a better one for mankind. This will not be possible simply by denying the existence of the problem, and as Basil Mitchell observed, believers must 'face the full force of the conflict'.

 This question could potentially cause several problems for the candidate — he/she may have expected to write a brief answer explaining the problem of evil, but to write for 20 marks demands a lot more at your fingertips than might have been planned. However, the candidate is not thrown by this. He/she avoids aimless citing of different examples of evil and suffering, and instead shows a more sophisticated awareness of the challenge posed by the problem. Different types of evil have been mentioned, without listing specific events. Rather, the candidate has concentrated on considering the wider problems raised and the need for an explanation if theism is to be meaningful. The student has resisted offering explanations for the problem too early in the essay and the range of relevant scholars included is impressive.

- (b) In *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus argued that the world reflects the plan and purpose God had to provide humanity with the opportunity to develop the qualities necessary to reach perfection as children of God. According to Irenaeus, there were two stages in the creation of the human race. First, humans were made in the 'image of God' (Genesis 1:26). Second, they had the potential to grow into the 'likeness of God' (Genesis 1:26) by developing into perfect moral and spiritual beings.

Irenaeus maintained that God could not have created humans in complete perfection because attaining the likeness of God needed the willing cooperation of human individuals. This meant God had to give them free will, the only means by which humans can willingly cooperate, or act without coercion. Therefore, God did not make a perfect world because evil has a valuable part to play in God's plans for humanity: freedom requires the possibility of choosing good instead of evil. Irenaeus claimed: 'How, if we had no knowledge of the contrary, could we have instruction in that which is good?' Evil provides opportunities for humans to develop the characteristics needed for perfection, such as courage, generosity, kindness and love. Humans have to make

responsible choices in real situations and contribute to the world in a genuinely significant way.


Modern scholars have developed Irenaeus's ideas further. John Hick suggested that if God had made human beings perfectly they would have been like robots and would love God automatically without thought or question. He said that such love would be valueless. If God wanted humans to be genuinely loving, he was right to let them have the freedom to develop love for themselves. In *Evil and the God of Love* he wrote that the value of this world was 'to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making'. To achieve perfection while remaining free, God had to create human beings at an epistemic distance from him. This is a distance in dimension or knowledge so that humans are not overwhelmed by him.

Supporters of Irenaean theodicy argue that this world is therefore the best of all possible worlds because it offers an environment in which humans are able to develop the finest characteristics. There are general laws of nature that allow the operation of science and discovery, and there are dangers, difficulties and problems to overcome and pain, sorrow and suffering to experience.

The Irenaean theodicy is a flexible solution to the problem of evil and offers an optimistic view of how evil and suffering can contribute to the development of the world and of humans. It is an upwards theodicy that does not demand that believers accept the traditional biblical account of creation and the fall which doomed humans to separation from God. Richard Swinburne is a staunch supporter of a modern Irenaean theodicy as a genuine solution to the problem of evil. He argued that a world that includes suffering is the best possible world for humans. God had a choice of what kind of world to create, and his choice to create one in which humans could meaningfully contribute through their free responses to the imperfection in which they were placed was the best possible choice. He claimed that although God could have made a world in which the cure for cancer was prayer, to have done so would be to take away from humans the opportunity to be involved in discovering the cure for themselves. This responsibility and opportunity is far better for humans than to be in a world in which whatever they did would make little difference as God was controlling it in order to ensure that good would always prevail. Instead, humans are given the opportunity to grow in power, freedom and knowledge, and to make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others in the present and the future. Although the price may sometimes be high, it is a price worth paying, and points more fully to the existence of a loving God than a world in which humans could make no appreciable difference.

However, others have argued that the challenges of the world do not always result in genuine human development, and often seem to produce nothing but great misery and suffering. This development does not justify the actual extent of human suffering, such as the Holocaust. Does the world really need such extremes of suffering to produce good? Furthermore, many people develop good qualities without suffering and many

who have suffered a great deal are made worse by their experiences. In reality, evil seems to be a random occurrence and many people feel there is no apparent reason why some people suffer and others do not. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the theodicy offers a realistic understanding of the world and its possible relationship with God, and in that respect serves as a reasonably satisfactory solution to the problem of evil.

 Again, the candidate could have been caught out here if he/she had expected to write about more than one theodicy. However, the student has ensured he/she can write at as much length about one theodicy as about two. The theodicy is discussed at length, making reference to modern scholars as well as to Irenaeus. The candidate has also genuinely answered the question, reaching a careful evaluation of the theodicy and settling on a clear conclusion. Overall, nothing less than full marks would be appropriate for this strong essay.

Be prepared for any conceivable distribution of marks. It would have been reasonable for the candidate to expect this question to be balanced differently. Within reasonable boundaries, don't make assumptions about how the examiner will style the questions and award the marks.