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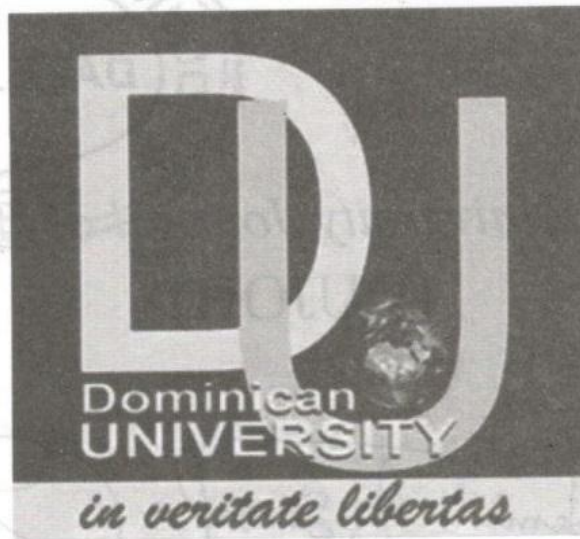
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EVIL AND THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION: RE-EXAMINING SOME TRADITIONAL THEODICIES

By

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Abstract

Reconciling the existence of a perfectly good God with the reality of evil in the world seems to be an impossible - or rather an unimaginable endeavour for some scholars. J. L. Mackie, for instance, maintains a logical incompatibility thesis, stating that three of the essential attributes of God, namely: omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence cannot be consistently upheld like the theists maintain, in the face of the reality of evil and human suffering in the world. Scholars like William Rowe, David Hume and J. S. Mill also contend that every instance or trace of evil and suffering in the actual human world makes the existence of the creator of the world who is also perfectly good at best, probable. However, some scholars have attempted to explain the compatibility of the existence of a perfectly good God with the reality of evil in the world. This very endeavour is known in philosophy of religion and theology as theodicy. There are four traditional types of theodicy: The Augustinian tradition, the Irenaean tradition, the Hickian Soul making tradition and Process theodicy. Using the methods of analysis and critical argumentation, we

attempt a critical re-evaluation of these theodicies, bringing out the problems inherent in them. Our critical investigation reveals that these theodicies inhere some weaknesses which render them insufficient in the rationalisation of the compatibility of the existence of a perfectly good God with the reality of evil in the world.

Keywords: Evil, Augustinian theodicy, Irenaean theodicy, Hickian theodicy, Process theodicy

Context

The problem of evil is a perennial issue in metaphysics, philosophy of religion, theology and other related fields. Balogun (2009, 1.) marks that the last words have neither been written nor heard about it. Accordingly, it remains an enduring problem awaiting solution. The world as we have it, is densely filled with unpleasant occurrences: it is embellished with various forms of suffering, agony and pain. Nevertheless, it is believed to have been created by God (at least, in the Judea-Christian belief) who is all powerful, all good and all knowing. These attributes, however, seem to be directly opposed to the occurrences in the world which is believed to have been so created by an Almighty God. Accordingly, some scholars maintain the position that the reality of evil in the world either contradicts the goodness of God or makes his existence at best, probable. Those scholars who uphold the former position argue from the logical point of view while those who maintain the latter argue from the evidential perspective. Consequently, those two arguments are known as logical and evidential arguments from evil. While those who maintain the logical stance contend that there is a contradiction or inconsistency in the attributes of God in relation to what is in fact, obtainable in the world (Mackie 1971, 92-93; Davies 2000, 581), those who maintain the evidential standpoint contend that every observable instance of evil in the world makes the existence of God dubitable or probable (Rowe 2007, 113, 119.) We shall not delve into the exposition of the two arguments here: we shall rather concern ourselves with the evaluation of the attempt(s) to falsify or prove the arguments wrong.

Reacting to the above, however, some traditional theologians find it imperative to defend the goodness of God in the face of the existence

of evil, thereby guiding against atheism. This attempt is known as theodicy and it has different versions. Richard Dawkins remarks that “theodicy, the vindication of divine providence in the face of the existence of evil keeps theologians awake at night” (Dawkins 2006, 135.) Theodicy, in this sense, is an attempt to reconcile the existence of a morally good God with the presence of evil in the world.

In this paper, we shall discuss four different versions of traditional theodicy namely: the Augustinian theodicy, which is traceable to St. Augustine of Hippo; the Irenaean theodicy, traceable to St. Irenaeus; the Soul-making theodicy of John Hick and the Process theodicy of Alfred North Whitehead. We shall also attempt a critical appraisal of these versions of theodicy accordingly.

The Augustinian Theodicy: A Re-examination

St. Augustine of Hippo is a forerunner of Medieval philosophers. Some scholars, however, prefer to categorise him as a Medieval philosopher. Nonetheless, he predates the Medieval period. He is a Neo-Platonist but before his subscription to Neo-Platonism, he passed through several philosophical ideologies and schools of thought. Augustine’s quest for wisdom, spiritual peace and his imagination concerning the existence of evil in the world and how to reconcile it with the goodness of God made him to doubt the Christian faith and morality which his mother had already taught him. He could not find a convincing answer to the perplexing problem of evil in the world and its discrepancy with the goodness of God in the Christian doctrine, this made him to join the Manichaeans who believe that there are two basic principles in the universe: the principle of light or goodness on the one hand, and the principle of darkness or evil on the other (Mann 2001, 40-41; Stumpf & Fiester 2003, 125.) These two principles, for them, are eternally locked up in conflict and they account for the presence of good and evil respectively in the world.

Though the Manichaeanist dualism seems to have settled the issue of the presence of good and evil in the world in Augustine’s mind, it however gave birth to other problems: why should there be only two conflicting principles in nature? If this cannot be explained, does it follow that intellectual certainty is impossible? Augustine felt that Manichaeism did not have convincing answers to his questions, so he

rejected Manichaeism and joined the Skeptics. Eventually, he left the Skeptics and became a Neoplatonist when he discovered that the former was not in any way better (Stumpf & Fiester 2003, 126.) According to McGrade,

Augustine's quest carried him through a number of intellectual positions, including Manichaean dualism, skepticism, and Neo-Platonism, to what he sometimes called "our philosophy," a genuine "understanding," as he saw it, of reality, truth, and the good, a share of the wisdom he had been after and which philosophers had been seeking over the centuries (McGrade 2003, 5.)

It was in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus that Augustine found answers to his skepticism about certainty and his imagination about the presence of evil and goodness of God (Omoregbe, 1993, 136-138.) Neo-Platonism taught him that the immaterial world is separate from the material world; that human beings possess the spiritual sense which enables them to know God and the immaterial world, and that evil is merely the absence of good. His conception of reality therefore stemmed from Plotinus' Neo-Platonism that reality consists of one entity with two parts – the physical and the spiritual – the physical being a lower division of the spiritual (Stumpf & Fiester 2003, 126.) Augustine therefore attempts to account for the origin of evil and how its origin does not pose any problem whatsoever to the existence of a morally perfect God. In other words, he attempts to reconcile the existence of a perfectly good God with the presence of evil. His theodicy takes four different forms. The first is a privation account of evil; the second is the argument from the misuse of free will; the third is the argument from the principle of plenitude and the fourth is the argument from beauty (Oshitelu 2010, 89-106.) We shall discuss the first and the second because the third and the fourth are like a repetition of the first two.

Augustine's first theodicy understands evil as a privation – that is, as the absence of good (Mann 2001, 44) – which, in other words, means that evil does not have its own independent existence per se. Accordingly, it can only surface or appear when the only thing (i.e. good) in existence is absent. In this wise, it is a negation of good, the

only reality. This explanation is predicated on Augustine's understanding that whatever God created is good and that reality is one and indivisible (Oshitelu 2010, 89-90.) However, this explanation is scarcely helpful in the sense that it does not shed a convincing light to the understanding of the problem. It is difficult to explain away the problem of evil as a mere absence of good given what is obtainable in reality. Suffering, sorrow, pain, anguish, agony and other inconveniences that characterize human existence cannot just be written off or explained away as mere absence of good.

The weakness of Augustine's first explanation of the origin of evil, if analogized with the presence or absence of a colour, will reveal itself. Let us, for instance, using Augustine's style, define "black" as the absence of "white". Does this render to us any help in our attempt to explain the origin or meaning of colour black? Definitely no. In the same manner, Augustine's explanation of evil as the absence of good does not provide us with any helpful explanation of the problem. In fact, in our analogy, apart from the fact that it does not provide a helpful explanation on the meaning and origin of colour black, "the absence of white" does not necessarily imply the presence of black. There are other possibilities of colours such as green, red, blue, yellow, etc. In the same manner, "the absence of good" as Augustine says, does not necessarily imply the presence of evil if evil, as he contends, does not have an independent existence.

Augustine's second argument for the origin of evil is from the misuse of freewill (Omoregbe 1993, 138; Mann 2001, 44.) He argues that God created angels and human beings and bestowed them with an unrestricted freewill. However, these angels and human beings started rebelling against God, who initially created them good and perfect just like himself. The rebellion of the angels marks the beginning of their fall and the origin of natural evil while the deviation of human beings marks the beginning of sin and the origin of moral evil. This implies that angels and human beings have the freewill to choose between good and evil that is, they have the option to either remain perfect as they were created or derail to imperfection, which is evil. According to him, freewill is the cause of doing wrong because it is the capacity for self-determination (Oshitelu 2010, 93-94) and the freedom of angels and human beings which results in the origin of evils cannot be blamed on

God. In fact, Augustine argues that such natural evil as earthquake and storm are God's punishment for human sin. This is because all evil are either sin or punishment for sin (Hick 1990, 42.)

What Augustine's theodicy aims to achieve in the opinion of John Hick is to load the huge burden of responsibility of the existence of evil on God's creature and clear God of any responsibility for its existence. This he does by attributing the origin of evil to the deviation of human beings and to the fall of angels (Hick 1990, 42.) Alvin Plantinga also notices this when he avers that Augustine holds nonhuman spirits, namely Satan and his cohorts for the existence of evil rather than God (Plantinga 1977, 58.)

It could however, be posed as an objection to Augustine's second argument that if God possesses the three attributes of Omnipotence (all-powerfulness), Omniscience (all-knowing) and Omnibenevolence (all-good), He should be able to, in the first place, create perfect creatures with freewill (angels and humans alike) who cannot, come what may, deviate from their perfection to imperfection. In the second place, He should be able to know prior to the creation of those beings that at a particular point in their existence, they will rebel and deviate from their perfect nature to the state of imperfection. In the third place, He should be able to decide to act otherwise or refrain from creating such beings altogether, given the fore-knowledge He has about their future relapse or deviation to imperfection prior to their creation. If God possesses these three attributes, He cannot be easily excused or vindicated from the responsibilities of evil in the world. This is because the attributes of God redirect Augustine's argument from freewill to God instead of human beings and nonhuman spirits in the sense that we can argue, given God's three attributes, that He has the freewill not to have created the universe at all, knowing beforehand that His creatures will deviate from him and relapse to evil, instead of arguing that God has given his creature an unrestricted freewill to either retain their perfection or deviate to imperfection.

The Irenaean and Hickian Soul-Making Theodicies:

A Reconsideration

The Irenaean theodicy is traceable to St. Irenaeus while the soul-making theodicy is traceable to John Hick. These two versions of theodicy are

placed together here because they are almost the same. Hence, we consider it frivolous to discuss them under separate sections. On the one hand, they are similar in the sense that they both view human moral and spiritual development as a progressive movement from a lower level to a higher level. On the second hand, they are similar in the sense that the Iranaean theodicy identifies two stages of creation and the Soul-making theodicy identifies two stages of human development – the first, characterised by hardship pain, suffering and evil for the realization of the second, which is the state of purity and fellowship with God. Both theodicies therefore, explain the reality of evil as a necessity for the ultimate moral and spiritual growth and edification of human beings.

The Iranaean theodicy contradicts the Augustinian explanation of the perfection of the universe and its creatures at the initial stage of creation. St. Iranaeus identifies two stages of creation. The first stage marks the creation of human beings as mere intelligent animals endowed with the capacity for moral and spiritual development. These human beings are immature and imperfect creatures. The second stage is the stage of their moral and spiritual transformation and growth from human animal to children of God. The first stage is the stage where human beings are made in the *image* of God while the second stage is where they are made in the *likeness* of God. These two stages explain how human beings grow from the state of imperfection to the state of perfection. This growth however, implies moral and spiritual freedom (Hick 1990, 44.) Accordingly, the human situation is characterised by struggle between natural selfishness arising from their instinct to strive for survival and the call for moral development and spiritual growth which will transform them from the initial stage of self-centeredness to a higher stage of fulfillment (Hick 1990, 45.)

Iranaeus' explanation for the origin of moral evil is that it is a necessary occurrence that ensues from the transmogrification and development of human beings from the initial imperfect stage of human animals or mere *image* of God, which puts them in an epistemic distance with the true nature of God, to the perfect stage of fulfillment, which transforms them to the *likeness* of God and qualifies them as children of God (Hick 1990, 45.) This process of growth, it should be remembered, implies moral and spiritual freedom. Those who aspire and grow to the second stage of creation are perfect and those who

relapse into the first stage of creation remain imperfect. These are the people responsible for the existence of moral evil. Accordingly, Iranaeus, like Augustine, also attributes the origin of evil to the misuse of human freedom. There are however, instances of evil which do not originate from human beings but from the natural order of the universe. The Iranaean theodicy fails to account for this type of evil. This is where the Hickean Soul-making Theodicy intervenes.

Hick argues that the world is not a hedonistic world where human beings enjoy boundless pleasure throughout – where there will be no pain, suffering and evil. Rather, the world is like a soul-making field where human beings are groomed and nurtured to match up with the glorious status of God (Keller 2007, 7; Hick 2010, 256.) He invites us to imagine how a hedonistic world which would be free from all experiences of pain and suffering would be. For him, in that kind of world, ethical concepts would have no meaning, there would be nothing like harm, and for him, it “might well be the worst of all possible worlds” (Keller 2007, 46.)

We can, however, criticise these theodicies in the following ways. We can raise an objection to the Iranaean version by asking whether it was necessary in the first place for God to take human beings through two different stages of creation in order to make them perfect or qualify them for His *likeness*?. Following Iranaeus’s explanation, it was the process of development from the first and to the second stage of creation that gave room to the occurrence of evil: those who could not graduate from the first stage of creation to the second stage remain mere *images* of God instead of growing up to His *likeness*. Accordingly, they deviate and perpetrate evil. However, given God’s attributes, it should not be difficult for Him to have created creatures who would qualify directly for the second stage of creation thereby preventing the possibility of the occurrence of evil from the first to the second stage of creation. This objection can also be directed to the Hickean version in a different way. How, it could be asked, would God in His graciousness, mercies and greatness consider pain, suffering, agony, and all manner of other inconveniences of existence as only viable means for the “making of human souls” in order to qualify them for an eternal “fellowship” with Himself? This is, at best, absurd as it is not reconcilable with the attributes of God.

Following the above line of thought, Hick's soul-making theodicy presupposes that human beings can only develop or grow morally and spiritually under the influence of inconveniences of the world - under the presence of evil, suffering pain, hardship and all manner of unpleasantness. However, this does a little or nothing to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the existence of a perfectly good God. The presence of evil and suffering is not a warrant or justification for God's moral perfection if the claim is to be maintained strictly on the ground of soul-making. Given God's supposed goodness, taking human beings through a long process of suffering and pain in the name of "making their souls" will be contradictory. Given His power, He should be able to create beings who will directly qualify or measure up morally and spiritually with his status. Given His knowledge, He should be able to know the best way of bringing creatures into existence without simultaneously giving room to the existence of evil - or perhaps, He could have simply omitted the task altogether if none of the above options is possible.

Process Theodicy: Some Critical Remarks

Process theodicy is a modern defense of the goodness of God in the face of evil. It is advocated by philosophers like Whitehead and David Griffin. Unlike the traditional accounts of Augustine and Irenaeus which uphold the supremacy and control of God over the universe, process theodicy upholds the view that God influences the universe through persuasion and lure. This is necessitated by the metaphysical structure of reality, which subjects God himself to the limitations imposed by the laws of nature. These laws are general in such a way that no alternative to them is conceivable (Keller 2007, 48-49.) David Griffin remarks that God's use of persuasion instead of control over the creature is not due to the reason that persuasion is a better option but because God cannot completely control his creatures (Griffin 1979, 279.) In this sense, God himself is seen as a fellow sharer in the various inconveniences and sufferings of the world.

The argument of the process theologians is that creation is a form of continuous activity initiated by God. God initiated the actual process of creation. However, every actual process initiated by God, inhabits a potential creative power which it subsequently actualises without the

control of God. Those actualised creativities also inhere creative power which they further actualise. This is how the process goes on and on, rendering God powerless on the regenerations or recreations of the world process. "Thus, God's power over each occasion and in directing the stream of occasions as a whole is necessarily limited, and the reality of evil in the world is the measure of the extent to which God's will is in fact, thwarted" (Hick 1990, 50.) All these instances of creations and recreations instigate a kind of inconformity among the creational processes with the will of God, who is now powerless over the whole process. Hence, Whitehead claims that "so far as the conformation is incomplete, there is evil in the world" (Whitehead 1930, 51.)

Evil is of two types according to process theologians. The process of creation encompasses an actual occasion of experience which embodies harmony and intensity. If it fails to attain harmony, it exhibits evil of discord. This discord, according to Whitehead, "is the feeling of evil in the most general sense, namely physical pain or mental evil, such as sorrow, horror, dislike, etc" (Whitehead 1933, 330.) On the other hand, if a moment of experience fails to attain the highest appropriate intensity, it exhibits the evil of needless triviality. Accordingly, the evil of discord or needless triviality are unavoidable in the creative process. Consequently, evil is inherent in the creative process of the universe (Hick 1990, 50.) The argument of the process theologians, therefore, is that the evolution of the universe is a continuous divine effort to maximize harmony and intensity, which results in regeneration and recreation of greater harmony and intensity and paves ways for further possibilities of recreation and regeneration.

Process theologians are also of the view that though it is undeniable that the process initiated by God which later proves to be uncontrollable leads to the emergence of evil, it also leads to the emergence of good. However, the process is justifiable on the ground that the good it has produced and will produce outweighs the evil it has produced and will produce. This is because God could have left the preexisting chaos instead of initiating the process of universe which gives room to the possibility of higher and greater actualities due to its ability to recreate and regenerate. God is therefore responsible for the origin of evil and good alike but the elimination of evil is beyond his power. However, since the good in the world could not have emerged

without evil and since the good can be said to outweigh evil, God can be said to be morally perfect and good even in the face of evil (Hick 1990, 51-52.)

Nevertheless, it could be posed as an objection to process theodicy that God should have left the universe in the primordial chaos instead of initiating a complex process of creativity which further gives rise to further recreations and regenerations that are beyond His power. Process theologians deny that God has the power to control the regenerated processes of creation. However, it would have been better if He has abstained altogether from initiating the first world process over which He has power. It would not have generated the subsequent processes that are beyond His control. The argument that God does not have power over regenerated processes of the world does not therefore excuse God from taking responsibility for those processes. This is in consonance with Arthur Schopenhauer's objection to Leibniz' description of this world as the best of possible worlds. For Schopenhauer,

Even though Leibniz' contention that this is the best of all possible worlds were correct, that would not justify God in having created it. For He is the creator not of the world only but of possibility itself; and therefore, He ought to have so ordered possibility as that it would admit of, something better (Schopenhauer 2005, 13.)

Schopenhauer's argument above is that the subsequent processes of regeneration and recreation were also initiated by God in as much as He initiated the very first process. In addition, Schopenhauer maintains that even possibility itself which makes room for further processes of recreation and regeneration was created by God. This makes God responsible for it. However, if that is granted, it follows that God has a fore-knowledge that an infinite range of complex creative processes which will be beyond His control will accompany the initiation of the first world process over which he directly Has power. Given His fore-knowledge of the possible world processes that would go beyond His control, He could have omitted the initiation of the first world process altogether. Nevertheless, defenders of process theodicy may argue that God was, in fact, not aware that the first world process which He

initiated would regenerate further processes which would be beyond His power. By so doing, however, they will be stripping God of the attribute of Omniscience the way they deny His Omnipotence just for them to be able to rationalise His goodness in the face of evil. Be that as it may, the attribute of perfect freedom is also there. God is said to also possess an essential attribute of perfect freedom in which case, He is perfectly free to choose whether to initiate the world processes or not. This as well makes God responsible for the reality of evil in the world which, according to the process theologians, originated from the subsequent world processes that grew beyond the controlling power of God.

Again, it could be objected that process theodicy sacrifices the minority for the interest of the majority. Its advocates argue that God is good because the number of good in the world which He initiated outnumbers the rate of evil observable in the world. By so doing, it appears to adopt the principle of utility which commends any action that promotes greater balance of good over evil for greater number of people and condemns any action which promotes greater balance of evil over good for greater number of people. In this wise, it sacrifices the minorities and the victims of evil for the interests of the majority and the beneficiaries of good.

The first problem with the above line of thought is that of quantification or measurement. The following questions could be raised: how is the measurement made to determine whether or not good outnumbers evil in the world? Who did the quantification? What are the parameters or criteria used for the quantification? All these questions cry helplessly for answers and I doubt if process theologians like Alfred North Whitehead, David Griffin and the rest of them ever envisioned those questions or made any attempt to answer them.

Moreover, if justice is to be taken into consideration, to commend or justify any action that favours only the majority is not a morally perfect judgement. Besides, it is a counterfactual claim that the number of good in the world overshadows the number of evil in it. As David Hume aptly observes, no one has ever passed through life without cruel inroads of remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection and despair – all of which, according to him, serve as constant tormentors to human beings. Hume resolves, therefore, that “all the

goods of life united would not make a very happy man, but all the ills united would make a wretch indeed" (Hume, 1970, 85), by which he means that if we are to quantify the amount of both good and evil in the world, we would exercise no hesitation in maintaining that human beings experience a greater balance of evil over good than a greater balance of good over evil - a situation which makes human existence more miserable than enjoyable.

However, despite all the shortcomings indicated in it, process theodicy seems to have more profound explanation for the reality of evil than the other versions of theodicies which we have previously considered. Nonetheless, this does not make its explanation justifiable on the reality of evil, neither does it convincingly explain why the presence of evil in the world is reconcilable with the existence of a perfectly good God.

Summary

In this paper, we discussed four versions of theodicy. The first is the theodicy of St. Augustine of Hippo. Two major arguments are considered here: the privation argument and the argument from free will. The two arguments are also appraised accordingly. The second version is the Irenaean theodicy, while the third is the Soul-making theodicy of John Hick. These two theodicies are discussed under one section because of their similarities. They are also appraised accordingly. The fourth version of theodicy discussed in this paper is the process theodicy of Alfred North Whitehead and David Griffin. We also attempted a critical assessment of this theodicy. We discovered, however, that all these versions of theodicy which we considered do not succeed in their attempts to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the existence of a perfectly good God. Accordingly, the problem of evil and the question of compatibility with divine goodness remain open-ended like the Epicurean dilemma seems to suggest. That does not, however, make it insurmountable or irreconcilable in the light of further scholarly investigations. Stronger or more viable theodicies are therefore needed in future scholarship to explain, justify, rationalise and reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the perfect goodness of God.

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