10 Theodicies in Christian Thought

Paul Mayer

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1 Overview

The problem of evil is one of the most significant challenges to theism and Christianity in particular, asking why there seems to be so much evil if an omnibenevolent (all good), loving God exists [1]. In the words of David Hume,

> Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? [2]

The problem of evil, as posed by many atheists and agnostics today, (following Epicurus) often asserts that the following premises cannot all be true:

1. God exists, and is omnipotent (all-powerful)

2. God exists, and is omnibenevolent (all-good)

3. God exists, and is omniscient (all-knowing)

4. Evil exists

Christian thinkers over the past two thousand years have given various responses to the problem of evil in the form of various *theodicies*, or attempts to explain why evil exists (or appears to exist) given the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent (triple-O) God. This document serves as a brief overview of different theodicies offered by Christian thinkers throughout history.

2   Defining Evil

Because a theodicy is a response to evil, or the problem of evil, we first need to define what evil is. Put differently, the problem of evil is made more (or less) of a problem depending on which definition of evil one is using. Somewhat confusingly, these theodicies may differ in how they define evil. Here are some of the different ways evil is often defined:

- Evil is human suffering.

- Evil is suffering period, which includes human suffering along with the suffering experienced by other conscious creatures, including animals.

- Evil is that which goes against God's commands. In this case, God's commands define what is good.

- Evil is that which ought not to be. This defines evil in terms of teleology, or the purpose of things. Evil is considered to be that which goes against God's purpose which is derived from his character/nature[1].

- Evil is a lack of good. This denies that evil is its own "thing," and rather is simply the absence of good. This is similar to how darkness is usually defined as the absence of light.

- Evil is an illusion. This says that evil does not exist at all, rather we use it as a word to describe certain states of affairs we wish to be different.

- Evil is what we personally do not like. This makes evil grounded in our own personal preferences, such as when someone says a certain food is "bad" because they do not like the taste.

Note that the first two definitions of evil are close to a utilitarian notion of good (the quantification of pain and pleasure using hedonic calculus), made famous by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill [3, 4]. The third definition is more related to deontology (with the idea being we have a duty to follow

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[1]This is different than God's commands, because here it is God's character and purpose for creating the world that defines what is good, not the commands themselves.

God's commands), made famous by Immanual Kant [5]. The fourth definition is related to virtue ethics, made famous by Aristotle [6] and recently revived in the analytic Thomist tradition with authors like Alasdair MacIntyre and G.E.M. Anscombe [7, 8]. The final definition is an idea called *emotivism*, which says all of our moral statements are simply expressions of our emotional states and cannot have any truth value [9]. This final idea is considered incompatible with Christianity, but is believed by many naturalists and atheists [10, 11].

Furthermore will be helpful at times to distinguish between *moral evil* (an agent using their free will to commit a bad act) and *natural evil* (natural disasters like hurricanes). This is because some of these theodicies are more focused at explaining one than another. Additionally, depending on one's definition of evil, some argue that natural disasters like hurricanes are not truly "evil" in the way murder or rape is.

3   The Theodicies

These theodicies attempt to answer the problem of evil within the boundary of orthodox Christian teaching and thought. Most of these attempt to show that the dilemmas above are not true dilemmas, and there are no (logical or evidential) contradictions to all four premises above. These include:

3.1   Free Will Defense

The free will defense[2] was made famous by Alvin Plantinga but the connection between free will and evil has been discussed at length for thousands of years by notable thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo [12] and Thomas Aquinas [13]. Plantinga starts by observing that, on the surface, there is no explicit contradiction between the following two premises [14]:

- 1. An omnipotent, omnibenevolent, God exists

- 2. Evil exists

So the atheist must be adding some additional premises not discussed, which may include:

- 3. If God is omnipotent, then He can create any world that He desires.

- 4. If God is omnibenevolent, then He prefers a world without evil over a world with evil[3].

Plantinga's free will defense for moral evil states that people freely choosing to have a relationship with God is a much greater good than people who are

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[2]Plantinga explains that the difference between a defense and a theodicy is that a theodicy aims to provide an account of why God actually permits the evils in the world while a defense seeks merely to show that atheist has failed to show that evil is incompatible with God's existence.

[3]This popular version of Free Will Defense is articulated by William Lane Craig [15]

coerced or forced into such a relationship. Furthermore (following Aquinas [13]), Plantinga claims God cannot do anything that is logically contradictory, like make a square circle or force someone to freely choose to do something. As a result, God *could have* created any possible world, but perhaps He chose to create one where people had an option of freely choosing Him. And in the world where people have an option of freely choosing to be with Him, they also can choose to abuse their free will and turn away from God. In other words, Plantinga would object to premise 4.

Now this may seem compelling for moral evil, but what about natural evil? Plantinga has an answer for this too - perhaps natural disasters are the result of demons, spirits, or wizards abusing *their* free will. While this objection may sound ridiculous and ad-hoc, remember the original claim is that the existence of God and natural evil is *logically impossible*, not *improbable*. In other words, the burden of proof is on the atheist to show where the logical contradiction is, and Plantinga is trying to point out that there could be many possibilities as to why God would permit evil, including what we may consider natural evil.

A majority of professional philosophers do believe Plantinga's free will defense solves the *logical* problem of evil [16]. Robert Adams says, "it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem. That is, he has argued convincingly for the consistency of God and evil [17]." There are a few notable dissenters, including and A.M. Weisberger [18] and Graham Oppy, who says in [19] "Many philosophers seem to suppose that [Plantinga's free-will defense] utterly demolishes the kinds of 'logical' arguments from evil developed by Mackie [but] I am not sure this is a correct assessment of the current state of play." Regardless, the evidential (or probabilistic) version of the argument is still hotly debated.

In summary the Free Will defense claims,

- There is no obvious contradiction between an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God existing and evil existing.

- A world where some people freely choose good may be a much better world than one made of robots.

- God cannot force people to freely choose Him.

- Evil is a result of free will - to have the choice to do good means having the freedom *not* to.

3.2 Augustinian Theodicy

The Augustinian theodicy, articulated by Hick [20], is inspired by (and named after) the 4th century philosopher and theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo. This theodicy denies that evil exists the way that good does: In the words of St Augustine, "evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil' [21]."

To better understand this idea, consider a point on a 2D map, such as your house, as "good." While the closet point to your house obviously exists (it is

your house), no analogous point exists exists that represents the "furthest" or "opposite" point of your house. Instead, there is only "closer to" or "further away from" your house. This is how Augustine would define evil - in terms of distance *from* good, rather than a destination in and of itself. This is especially significant because Augustine was a convert from a religion called Manichaeism, which saw the world in a struggle between good and evil, both existing in a positive manner rather than evil existing as an absence of good.

To those who follow the Augustinain theodicy, evil exists in the world because God gave humans free will, and they can choose to accept or reject God (thus moving further or closer from "good"). Because humans abused their free will to reject and/or rebel against God, God is not ultimately responsible for evil, rather humans are[4]. Put another way, God lets people choose, and evil comes from choosing to deny or reject God. Note that this is similar to the free will defense, but it makes the additional claim that evil is the absence of good, similar to how darkness is the absence of light or cool is the absence of heat.

In summary, Augustinain Theodicy makes the following points:

- God is perfectly good and created the world without sin or evil

- God gave humans free will, which means they can choose to accept or reject God

- Evil is not its own "thing", rather it results from a lack or rejection of good.

- As a result, God is not ultimately responsible for evil.

3.3   Original Sin Theodicy

This theodicy, drawing from Augustine as well as John Calvin and Martin Luther later, states that evil entered into the world given the Fall. In other words, the reason evil exists is a result of the choices of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. To those who follow an original sin theodicy, we inherit a sinful nature biologically (St Augustine thought it was through semen). They see the existence of evil as a just punishment for Adam and Eve's rebellion. In other words, God is a just God, and allows humans to suffer the consequence of their sins, including its corrupting effect on fellow beings. With that being said, God provides a path to reconciliation through the death of Jesus.

One key question that comes up is whether Darwinian evolution causes problems for an original sin theodicy (according to evolutionary biology, it appears that death and decay existed before humans did). One response often given is that the "death" referred to in Genesis refers to a spiritual death, not a biological one [22]. This argument rests on an assumption that death is not necessarily "bad" or even "evil," with some theologians remarking that God has no problem using death for the purpose of a greater good, such as with the death of Jesus

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[4]Under this view, one could argue God is partially, but not ultimately, responsible for evil for giving humans free will.

[23]. Rather, what counts as evil is, following Augustine, a corruption of the will to rebel against God. For instance, even Augustine's view of the Genesis account

> ... was not of six consecutive twenty-four hour days. He thought that God had imbued the created world with, as it were, seeds of potentiality that over time would grow into the biological diversity that we see today. It wasn't a theory of evolution a la Darwin, but it was a sort of front-loading, as it were, of the creation and its fruition over time [24, 25].

The original sin theodicy is often combined with Augustine's theodicy to claim that what we deem as evil is simply a lack of the good, and our nature to go "against" the good comes from Adam and Eve. In summary the original sin theodicy claims,

- It was Adam and Eve who caused evil to enter the world

- God, being just, allows us to live with the consequences of sin

- God also provides a path to reconciliation through the death of his son, Jesus

- The "death" mentioned in Genesis could refer to a spiritual death, allowing original sin to be compatible with Darwinian evolution

3.4   Leibnizian "Best of All Worlds" Theodicy

Leibniz, famous for co-discovering calculus (along with Newton) is also famous for his theodicy and modal metaphysics, which are closely related. Leibniz starts by noticing there are many ways the world *could* have been. If God exists and created the world, He had to decide which of the possible worlds He would bring about (we can imagine other "possible" words, perhaps one where mountains are made of mashed potatoes or something entirely different). God, being all good and all powerful, thus created the *best* of all possible worlds. To Leibniz, if there is a "better" world God could have created, God would have created this world because He is all good (and because He is all-powerful, He can create any such world He desires). Put another way, would God really be the "greatest" being He did not create the best of all possible worlds?

Some scholars, most notably Voltaire, have criticized Liebniz's optimism in saying this world is truly the best [26]. However others believe Voltaire misunderstood what Leibniz meant by this world being the "best [27]." First, Leibniz's claim is that this world is not just morally the best world, but *metaphysically* the best (more on this in a bit). Furthermore, Leibniz himself thought God had other many goals, and simply maximizing the happiness of human creatures (in a utilitarian sense) is only one of them: "The happiness of rational creatures is one of the aims God has in view; but it is not his whole aim, nor even his ultimate aim [28]."

Leibniz claims that God had many "constraints" when building the world, and none of the worlds God wanted to create could be free of evil and/or suffering. As the IEP states, "Rather than maximizing one feature of a world, which would be impossible, Leibniz reasons that God must optimize the competing criteria of richness of phenomena, simplicity of laws, and abundance of creatures." This is similar to a large (linear) programming problem, where the optimal solution exists within a set of many constraints [29]. Such a mathematical and optimization-based take on the world makes sense given Leibniz's interests and contributions to mathematics. In summary, the Leibnizian theodicy says

- God, being the best of all beings, chose to create the best of all worlds.

- God is not only trying to optimize our happiness or minimize our suffering, like a utilitarian.

- God also wants to create world where there is a balance of natural beauty, predicable scientific laws, and free will.

- None of the worlds God is interested in creating is free of suffering or evil.

3.5 Natural Law Theodicy

The natural law theodicy says God allows suffering as a consequence of a world governed by simple, predicable natural laws. Following Leibniz, it states that a world governed by predictable laws is metaphysically better (more beautiful and simple) than one where one cannot predict what will happen [30]. It claims that God allows some suffering as part of the world's normal operation according to scientific "rules," and that such a world is, all things considered, better than one where God always intervenes to stop suffering.

For instance, some may argue a "better" world be one where I feel no pain when I stub my toe. Someone following the natural law theodicy would respond by saying that God allows us to feel pain when we stub our toe because this allows us to learn the way the world works, and keeps us out of danger. Being able to predict how the natural world functions allows us to recognize the patterns required build and design stuff, allowing science and engineering to work. As a result, God does not intervene in the natural order except in special circumstances because our ability to "do science and engineering" (and the beauty of such a predictable world) is a greater good than an unpredictable one.

Still, hurricanes and tsunamis do happen, and we wish to know whether God could have good reasons for allowing natural disasters. Some skeptics, for instance argue that God could have created a better world where there were no extreme weather patterns that cause death. Someone following the natural law theodicy may respond that these natural disasters are not really evil: while they may cause suffering and death, in many cases they are also a critical or necessary part of the ecosystem [31].

Those following the natural law theodicy may also invoke the free will theodicy to point out how the suffering caused by natural disasters is greatly magnified

by human actions. Take the 2010 Haitan earthquake, which is estimated to have killed over 100,000 people. As Rev Doug Chaplin explains, the *earthquake* was caused by tectonic plates colliding. However the *catastrophe* was caused by the earthquake happening in a poverty-stricken, overcrowded country with a long history of imperialism and governmental corruption. Arguably, human action (and inaction) were far more responsible for the severe the loss of life than the laws of nature.

In summary, the natural law theodicy says:

- A world governed by simple, predicable patterns that can be discovered through logic and mathematics is "better" than one that cannot be predicted

- If God was always intervening to alienate our suffering, the world would not follow the kinds of natural laws we discover through science as closely.

- As a result, we would be unable to appreciate the beauty and simplicity of the natural world.

- God cares about our growth and ability to understand the world, and some of that understanding comes from making mistakes and learning from them.

3.6 Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theism is best summarized by responding "God works in mysterious ways" to the problem of evil. For the skeptical theist, this is not meant to be a cop-out; rather it is to call attention to our limited understanding and lack of omniscience. To better understand skeptical theism, first notice that not all suffering or badness is evil. For instance, if we choose to vaccinate our child, we may allow them to experience some pain when the vaccine is administered to allow for a greater good (or a greater reduction of suffering) in the future. Skeptical theism sees us in a similar position to the child discussed above, who may not understand the pain associated with the vaccine is necessary to bring about a greater good in the future. As a result, it is hardly evil for someone to vaccinate their child because it causes them a short amount of pain, especially if this immunizes them to later suffering.

The problem of evil requires that the evil in question is truly *gratuitous*, or serves no greater purpose, since the theist may grant that some amount of evil or suffering promotes growth or the possibility of future growth. Theists wanting to avoid the problem of evil often say every instance of apparent evil actually serves some greater purpose - a claim they bear the burden of proof for. However, when an atheist or anti-theist finds an example of evil they believe is gratuitous, *they* bear the burden of proof of showing that this evil is truly gratuitous. Skeptical theism is *skeptical* of our ability to say any apparent evil is truly gratuitious, given the fact that we do not not have all relevant details the way God would. From the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [32],

> Skeptical theism is the view that God exists but that we should be skeptical of our ability to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance. In particular, says the skeptical theist, we should not grant that our inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not God might have a good reason for doing or allowing something. If there is a God, he knows much more than we do about the relevant facts, and thus it would not be surprising at all if he has reasons for doing or allowing something that we cannot fathom.

In summary, skeptical theism makes the following points:

- God has reasons for allowing *some* suffering or evil.

- Not all suffering is evil: we can think of times where some suffering lead to our future growth and strength.

- Given our lack of omniscience, we cannot truly know whether something that appears to be gratuitous evil is, in fact, gratuitous evil.

3.7 Irenaean "Soul Making" Theodicy

This theodicy was also made famous by John Hick [20], and is the idea that evil and suffering exist to develop humans into virtuous creatures capable of following his will. In the words of Nietzsche (and Kelly Clarkson), what doesn't kill us often makes us stronger [33], and the idea here is similar: God is not simply trying to maximize our sensory pleasure and instead wants us to practice virtue and develop as creatures capable of love[5]. In this case, suffering can even be a *good* thing insofar as it has the ability to promote growth or knowledge. For example, experiencing the pain from a consequence of a bad decision is arguably a good thing, as we come to understand the why. In this way, God permits evil to exist to a certain degree to promote greater goods (such as knowledge in the previous example). Such greater goods are those which include the possibility of our development (hence the term "soul-making") and perhaps some amount of evil and suffering is necessary for this development. Richard Swinburne argues that if there was no evil,

> Many of us would then have such an easy life that we simply would not have much opportunity to show courage or, indeed, manifest much in the way of great goodness at all. We need those insidious processes of decay and dissolution which money and strength cannot ward off for long to give us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid, to become heroes [34].

Swinburne continues by giving an example of why God may not step in to cure cancer:

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[5]Notice the link here to virtue ethics: ethics being something that requires *practice*, like a skill.

> If God answered most prayers for a relative to recover from cancer, then cancer would no longer be a problem for humans to solve. Humans would no longer see cancer as a problem to be solved by scientific research—prayer would be the obvious method of curing cancer. God would then have deprived us of the serious choice of whether to put money and energy into finding a cure for cancer or not to bother; and of whether to take trouble to avoid cancer (e.g. by not smoking) or not to bother.

This theodicy dates back to Irenaeus and Origen from the 2nd and 3rd century. Origen, for instance, saw the world as a school and hospital for our souls, with God as the teacher and doctor. Suffering, to Origen, plays an educative and healing role. Origen further suggested that all humans could eventually reach Heaven, with Hell referring to the purification of the sinful parts of our souls. Irenaeus saw creation as occurring in two distinct parts: one is humans being created in the *image* of God, while the second is humans being created in the *likeness* of God. To Irenaeus, this fist part is complete, while the second stage is still in progress (and may happen anew for each person).

The Soul Making theodicy is summarized as follows [35]:

1. God created the world for the soul-making of rational moral agents.

2. Humans develop moral character by choosing their responses to the soul-making process.

3. If God was not hidden, free will would be compromised.

4. This hiddenness is created, in part, by the presence of evil in the world.

5. The distance of God makes moral freedom possible, while the existence of obstacles makes meaningful struggle possible.

6. The end result of beings who complete the soul-making process is "a good of such surpassing value" which justifies the means.

3.8 Contrast Theodicy

Do you enjoy and appreciate food more when you are hungry, or when you are full? If you answer when you are hungry, then you understand the basic idea behind the Contrast Theodicy: the idea that God created (or simply allows) evil to help us appreciate good [36]. Some theologians believe if there was no evil or suffering, we may not look for a relationship with God, nor would we able to appreciate the full goodness of God. In this case, the juxtaposition of God's nature with the rest of the world may drive us to want a deeper relationship with God, who is often seen as the ground of goodness itself [37, 38].

Some describe this as "pain as God's megaphone theodicy;" that God allows pain and suffering to point us towards Him [39]. In this case, evil serves a greater purpose in God's greater plan. This is compatible with different perspectives

on evil, including the idea that evil itself is an illusion, or that the evil that does exist is part of why this world is the best of all possible worlds. In the words of theologian John Yoder, "God permits human evil to keep itself under control by using evil against itself [40]."

In summary,

- We can take things for granted if we cannot imagine the world without them

- Evil exists to help us appreciate good.

- God may be responsible for creating evil, or He may simply use it to point us towards Him.

3.9 Thomistic/Pascalian "Heaven Swamps All" Theodicy

The "Heaven swamps all" theodicy claims that the eternity of Heaven easily outweighs whatever finite evil exists on the earth. Thomas Aquinas famously made this argument, though it is often combined with Blaise Pascal's[6] ideas on probability [41, 42]. According to Pascal, "there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain...what you stake is finite [43]." In other words, any evil experienced on earth will only be experienced for a finite duration, while Heaven, which is eternal, thus contains infinite good. The idea here is even if God permits the existence of some evil, this evil is nothing compared to the overall good, "all things considered." Many times when this is invoked, people will quote from the Bible, such as Revelation 21:4 "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Of course, the atheist can turn this into an argument *against* God by arguing the evils of Hell outweigh God's good nature. At this point the theist has several options. One is to argue that eternal punishment for sin is not truly evil. In this view, sin is evil, while God allowing people to experience the consequences of choosing is not. Alternatively, they can argue that Hell is simply eternal separation from God, which God reluctantly grants to people who reject Him [44]. For instance, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states Hell is "the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed [45]." Regardless, this theodicy is best paired used in tandem with other theodicies. In summary,

- Heaven is eternal, while life on this earth is finite.

- Evil will eventually be conquered by God, meaning evil's existence is finite while the existence (and thus amount) of good is infinite.

- Any transient evil experienced on this planet is inconsequential relative to the infinite good experienced in Heaven.

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[6]While the word "Pascalian" is usually used when discussing Blaise Pascal's ideas, I think "Blaisian" (pronounced blaze-e-un) sounds even cooler.

3.10   Turning the Tables

This theodicy uses our recognition of *evil* to imply that a standard for good exists. It turns the table on the problem of evil by arguing God must exist for us to recognize evil in the first place. In effect, it says that the problem of evil is self-defeating as an argument against God. The theodicy starts by arguing that if God does not exist, no standard for good and evil exists and thus there is no "problem of evil." On the other hand, it claims if there *is* genuine evil, then God must exist for us to know this fact.

This theodicy claims the problem is with the "problem of evil" itself: it claims there is a contradiction between two premises ("God exists" and "evil exists") that are logically connected. In other words, trying to use the existence of evil to disprove the existence of God is like sawing off the branch you are sitting on: if there is no God, there is no standard of good and thus "evil" is no longer a coherent concept, making the argument self-defeating. Writer and literary scholar CS Lewis famously made this argument:

> My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense [44].

Lewis concludes that "Conscience reveals to us a moral law whose source cannot be found in the natural world, thus pointing to a supernatural Lawgiver." Some argue that this theodicy misses the point - that the problem of evil is simply an "internal critique" of theism. Defenders of this theodicy respond that this is misleading, as the problem of evil is often given as an argument for atheism [1, 46], not posed as an internal critique. Further, defenders often say there can be no "internal critique" of theism if moral epistemology itself (how we know things to be right or wrong) is contingent upon God's existence [47]. In summary, someone "turning the tables" on the problem of evil would claim:

- The problem of evil uses the identification of evil to argue against the existence of God.

- God must exist for there to be moral knowledge, including knowledge of evil.

- If God does not exist, we have no way to identify evil or justify our moral intuitions.

- The problem of evil fails as an argument for atheism because it is self-defeating.

4 Conclusion

Throughout this document, I have attempted to articulate an overview of the different responses Christian thinkers have proposed to the problem of evil. In the case that a single theodicy fails to provide a satisfactory result, perhaps a cumulative case can be made by taking ideas from various theodicies to tackle the apprarent pervasiveness and diversity of evil we see.

Regardless, these theodicies are a response to the intellectual problem of evil, and for someone experiencing suffering, such a response may seem cold and uncaring. For those dealing with suffering, perhaps it is our support and comfort they need more than the logical defenses offered by the thinkers cited here.

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