



### Part 3: Theologians and Thinkers on Good and Evil

From Greek philosopher **Epicurus**:

'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is God able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is God both able and willing? Then where does evil come from?

Is God neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?'

Two Christian approaches to evil (theodicies),

**From Irenaeus:** a second century bishop, living in Roman France.

- Humans, although made in the image of God, are clearly not perfect. We are not yet like God.
- We are still learning. We learn about goodness through witnessing evil. We learn about love through our experience of suffering.
- God allows us to experience evil and suffering because they teach us so much, although their presence means we are at an imperfect stage of creation.
- As we learn, we move towards the second stage of creation, which will be easier, but we are not there yet.

This is a 'soul-making' view of good and evil in which the evil leads to a greater good – the education of our souls!

**Augustine:** a fourth century bishop, living in Roman North Africa.

- There is certainly evil in God's wonderful world, but what is evil?
- Evil is not a thing in itself; it is the absence of good.
- Although God's original creation was perfect and blissful, it changed when human beings arrived.
- When the first humans disobeyed God they suffered, and every human who gives in to temptation and allows evil into the world suffers. We have brought evil into God's perfect creation.

Augustine thought humans have a natural predisposition to sin, which raised the question of where sin came from, since it contradicts God's omnibenevolence to suggest that God created it. He concluded that humanity is to blame, and looked to the Genesis story as an explanation.

According to Augustine humans inherit Original Sin from Adam and Eve as we were all 'seminally present in the loins of Adam'. Augustine thought that the biological basis for procreation was an "invisible and intangible power ... located in the secrets of nature", and argues that all future generations of people are "in the loins of the father". This means that we are all born sinful beings who therefore deserve the punishment of living in a fallen world. God is not responsible for evil as it results from the free will of angels and humans.

*"All evil is either sin or a punishment for sin"* – Augustine.



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Is Augustine's view supported by science?

Geneticists claim that the evidence we have of genetic diversity means that it's not possible for all of humanity to have descended from two people. This, plus the other evidence for evolution, suggests that we evolved and were not created. Augustine wrongly thought that reproduction worked by there being little people inside us, so when Adam sinned all future humanity became infected by it. The story of Adam and Eve is unscientific.

**Alvin Plantinga** developed a 'free will defence' of the co-existence of God and evil. This responds to the problem of evil, which says that it is impossible for God and evil to exist together. Plantinga says it is possible for God and evil to co-exist because evil is the result of free will.

Plantinga suggests that it is logically possible for natural evil to either result from:

- The free will of demons and Satan.
- The free will of Adam and Eve justifying God in allowing natural evil into the world as punishment.

This raises the question of why God gave us free will at all. Wouldn't it have been better for us to live in a perfectly good world yet not have free will? Plantinga answers that if God didn't give us free will, our universe would have no value. Like this...

- Evil is the result of the misuse of free will.
- God cannot remove evil without removing free will (that would be logically impossible).
- Life would be valueless without free will, so it is better to have free will despite the evil its misuse can lead to.
- It is therefore better for evil to exist than not to.
- An omnibenevolent and omnipotent God therefore would allow evil.

It is logically impossible for God to remove evil without removing the greater good of freewill. A perfect God would therefore allow evil.

Do you find this theodicy persuasive?

Followers of **Pelagius** (4<sup>th</sup> Century) objected that Adam's crime is not a personal crime of his descendants. So, it still seems unfair, unjust and incompatible with omnibenevolence to suggest that we deserve punishment for it. Does a child deserve cancer because the child has original sin?

Augustine would have to say it is God's justice for that child to get cancer and that God is still omnibenevolent despite allowing it.

Augustine puts this down to the "secret, yet just, judgement of God", indicating that it is inscrutable, but we should have faith that it is just. Augustine quotes Psalm 25:10: 'All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth,' and concludes: 'God's grace cannot be unjust, nor his justice cruel'.

For many however the case of innocent children suffering natural evil destroys Augustine's argument. Augustine still thinks that giving in to original sin counts as a choice. Are small



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children able to *choose* to sin. There is no logical way to claim that small children deserve to suffer. So, Augustine's theodicy is not coherent and so fails to solve the logical problem of evil.

**G. K. Chesterton** argued that you could see evidence for original sin 'in the street'. Augustine's doctrine of original sin being evidenced from observing human behaviour and society

Do you agree?

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton 1887)

Is it common knowledge that power corrupts people? When people gain the opportunity to sin and get away with it, are they are more likely to do so?

#### **An interesting twist**

Pelagius suggested that Augustine's observations reflect society, not human nature.

Although it might appear that we have strong forces within us that incline us toward evil, Pelagius argues that could simply be because of the way we are raised and it only appears to be our nature because of how thoroughly corrupted we are by our upbringing, Pelagius refers to this as being "educated in evil".

Contemporary historical and sociological may add evidence to Pelagius' point.

**Martin Luther King** said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice".

**Steven Pinker** attributes to the power of human reason that violence has decreased, even considering the 20 century. The average human life seems more secure now than at any prior point in history. If Augustine were correct that original sin caused an irresistible temptation to sin, then human behaviour could not have improved, yet it has.

So, we can conclude, original sin does not exist and can't be used to justify or explain evil.

#### **Does 'Free Will' have a Biblical basis?**

*The free will approach, argues that moral evil is due to human abuse of free will. The value of free will is a great good: the possibility of morally good choice and of human beings imaging God by way of these choices. But free will has the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of moral evil. In response to this we might ask, if free will of this sort is so valuable then why doesn't God have it, and why won't we have it in heaven?*

How about an 'inscrutability' approach? Did Augustine really mean this one?

*Inscrutability argues that no one can know enough to conclude that God doesn't have good reason for permitting (what we call) evil. We just cannot grasp God's knowledge, the complexity of his plans, or the deep nature of the good he aims at in providence. And there is no proof that God does not have good reasons for allowing evil, but because he is good we can only assume that he does. Here we don't have to come up with 'theodicies' to defend God against the problem of evil. Rather, the way of inscrutability shows that it is entirely to be expected that creatures like us can't come up with God's reasons, given who God is and who we are.*

Part of the problem of evil is that some people have used the issue to disprove the existence of God rather like the quote from Epicurus that we started with.



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The empiricist **David Hume** puts forward an **evidential problem** of evil.

- 1 – Animal suffering. Why shouldn't nature be created such that animals feel less pain, or indeed no pain at all?
- 2 – Creatures have limited abilities to ensure their survival and happiness
- 3 – Why does nature have extremes which make survival and happiness more difficult?
- 4 – Why doesn't God intervene to prevent individual natural disasters?

A God could have made this world without such evil, making it evidence against a perfect God existing. Hume says it is 'possible' that a perfect God exists but allows evil for reasons consistent with omnibenevolence, 'but they are unknown to us'. Hume is arguing that whatever speculations theologians like Augustine and Irenaeus might invent about God's reasons for allowing evil, we have no evidence that God has such reasons.

Hume, as an empiricist, insists that we are only justified in believing what the evidence suggests. The evidence of an imperfect world, while logically compatible with a perfect God, makes belief in a perfect God unjustified. You can't infer perfect goodness from evil. An empirical inference from evil to belief in a perfectly good God is not valid. So, because of evil, belief in God is not justified.

Is this a convincing proof that God does not exist?

**William L. Rowe** (1931- ) argues that it's all well and good to show that it's *logically possible* that God is all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, and yet there is evil; however, it's quite another thing to show that that's actually the case.

For this reason, Rowe thinks that we need to move on from discussing whether God is *logically* compatible with the evil in his creation, and start discussing whether we have *evidence* to think that God actually is compatible with the evil in his creation.

In Rowe's opinion, the evidence we have of pointless suffering is sufficient to show that there is no God. But he calls this position "*friendly atheism*" because, although it is atheism, it is at least still open to the possibility that believers in God could also produce evidence that the evil we see in the world is redeemed by some divine plan or justice. It's just that no one has convincingly given us that evidence yet.

Is there convincing evidence that God exists?