

In what ways does the existence of evil and suffering pose physical problems for theists? Discuss. (33)

“Theism is the belief in the existence of one or more divinities or deities. There is also a narrower sense in which theism refers to the belief that one or more divinities are immanent in the world, yet transcend it, along with the idea that divinity(s) is/are omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent”.

Therefore, one of the greatest problems facing a believer in a good, all powerful God is the existence of evil and apparent undeserved suffering in the world. The problem has been presented as: “Either God wishes to remove evil but is unable and therefore cannot be all – powerful, or he is able to remove evil but is unwilling and therefore cannot be wholly good. The assumption is that a good God would eliminate evil as far as he is able. Given that he is all-powerful therefore he should eliminate it all. However evil exists. In other words God has the means (power) and the motivation (love, goodness) to eliminate evil. So why doesn’t he? This is an important question to theists, as they believe that God is omnipotent and omni-benevolent.

The world is full of suffering and disasters – as well as great beauty, compassion and courage. However, if one looks at the victims of earthquakes and tidal waves, of young children with cancer dying, TB or AIDS, it can be difficult to believe that this world was created by a loving, good God who cares for human beings. The philosophical problem of evil depends on five basic presuppositions: God exists and created the universe from nothing and is still interested in it (i.e. a theistic as opposed to a deistic view of God), God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, God does not which suffering to take place and lastly, Evil exists. All of these five principles have to be true; otherwise the problem of evil would be abandoned.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) maintained that God creates human beings with free will and evil is the sole responsibility of human beings for making wrong choices either through the sin of Adam at the Fall or else by individual actions. He based his theodicy on two assumptions: Evil is not from God – God’s creation was faultless and perfect, and Evil came from within the world. To summarise, Augustine said that sin and death entered the world through Adam and Eve, and their disobedience. This brought about “disharmony” both in our human nature and in Creation. He then said we all share in the evil nature brought about by Adam and Eve, because we were “seminally” present in them. We therefore should deserve to be punished. From this, he said that natural evil is a consequence of the disharmony of nature brought about by the Fall. Human action brought it about. Importantly, Augustine said that God is justified in not intervening, because the suffering is a consequence of human action. So, God is perfect. The world he created reflected that perfection. Lastly, he said that evil is not a substance – but it is a deprivation.

Augustine’s theory hinges on the idea that evil is a privation. He uses the analogy of the blindness – blindness is not an “entity”, but an absence of sight. Augustine accounts for evil by ascribing it to human agency. Evil came about as a result of the

misuse of free will. All suffering is therefore a consequence of this abuse of free will. However, God has not abandoned any responsibility for the world. If God were simply just, everyone would be suitably punished. Instead, God's grace brought about the possibility of reconciliation through Jesus Christ, whose crucifixion saved a certain number from eternal punishment.

Theists would respond to this in several ways by commenting on different aspects. For example, by placing the responsibility for evil on the Devil and human agencies it might be thought that God is absolved from blame. It is not clear that this is so. If God is all powerful then both the Devil and human beings are ultimately under his control and God must therefore accept the final responsibility. Alternatively, if God has limited his omnipotence by giving angels and mankind genuine freewill, then there is no guarantee that God will ultimately triumph over evil. This would mean that God is not omnipotent, as He is not able to triumph over evil; this raises a concern to theists.

However, Irenaeus (130-202) presents an alternative view: "Irenaeus held that God created imperfect human beings and they are brought to perfection through the existence of evil. He traced evil back to free will. He differs from Augustine in that he admits God did not make a perfect world. He said that God's aim in the creation of the world was to make humans flawless – in his likeness. And genuine human perfection, cannot be ready-made, but must be achieved through free-choice. Since God gives us free choice, God had to give us the potential to disobey him. If there were no possibility of evil, then humans could not disobey God. Therefore the natural order had to be designed with the possibility of causing harm. God cannot compromise our freedom by stopping suffering. Eventually evil and suffering will be overcome and everyone will develop God's likeness, living in glory in heaven. This justifies the temporary evil.

Many Christians would probably reject Irenaeus's theodicy as he argued that everyone goes to heaven. This would appear unjust, in that evil goes unpunished. Morality becomes pointless. Also, it is not orthodox Christianity, as it denies the Fall, and Jesus' role is reduced to that of a moral example. Also, theists believe that God is wholly good and omnipotent, but if He is to be these qualities, then why does He allow suffering to enter the world? This is important, and theists would look at Irenaeus's theodicy and formulate that, perhaps, God created this evil and suffering for human beings to develop and, eventually evil and suffering will be overcome and everyone will develop God's likeness, living in glory in heaven.

Overall, theists would look at this problem in different ways as explained above in Irenaeus' and Augustine's theodicy. They believe in the existence of God and that He is immanent in the world, yet transcendent, along with the idea that He is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. From this, theists would say that evil and suffering should not be a problem in the world, because God is all loving and wholly good, and He would not allow this to be present in the world today. However, by looking at Irenaeus's theodicy, one could say that suffering and evil are present in order for us as humans to grow and develop into better people.