

Evil is Necessary for the Development of Moral Character

In a world without “trials and tribulations” we wouldn’t develop our moral characters or test and prove the strength of our souls. Such a world, so this argument goes, wouldn’t elicit such good qualities as generosity, courage, kindness, mercy, perseverance, creativity. These qualities are forged out of suffering and difficulty.

Irenaeus’ Theodicy



St Irenaeus presents a contrasting view to Augustine, whereby evil has a positive benefit in teaching us to develop moral characteristics.

Irenaeus (c130-200) developed a theodicy of what we can describe as ‘soul making’. His theodicy is more concerned with the development of humanity and the moral character of human beings.

Irenaeus distinguished between the ‘image’ and the ‘likeness’ of God. Adam had the form of God but not the content of God. Form here suggests potential, and content implies the completed, finished, full characteristics of God the Father (generosity, goodness, love). Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden because they were immature and needed to develop, so that they might grow into the likeness (content) of God. They were the raw material for a further stage of God’s creative work.

The fall of humanity is seen as a failure within this second phase of becoming more like God in content.

Suffering is a necessary part of God’s created universe – it is through suffering that human souls are made noble. The world is a ‘vale of soul making’.

One of the ways in which this ‘test’ is carried out is through faith. God’s purpose cannot easily be discerned, but believers continue to believe despite the evidence. This faith becomes a virtue. John Hick calls this lack of understanding an ‘epistemic distance’.

To summarise Irenaeus’ Theodicy:

- Humans were created in the image and likeness of God.
- We are in an immature moral state, though we have the potential for moral perfection.
- Throughout our lives we change from being human animals to ‘children of God’.
- This is a choice made after struggle and experience, as we choose God rather than our baser instinct.

Taken from Peped: <https://peped.org/philosophicalinvestigations/handout-problem-evil/>

- God brings in suffering for the benefit of humanity as a direct consequence of human free will.
- From it we learn positive values, and about the world around us.

Suffering and evil are:

- Useful as a means of knowledge. Hunger leads to pain and causes a desire to feed. Knowledge of pain prompts humans to seek to help others in pain.
- Character building. Evil offers the opportunity to grow morally. If we were programmed to 'do the right thing' there would be no moral value to our actions. 'We would never learn the art of goodness in a world designed as a complete paradise' Swinburne.
- A predictable environment. The world runs to a series of natural laws. These laws are independent of our needs and operate regardless of anything. Natural evil is when these laws come into conflict with our own perceived needs.

There is no moral dimension to this. However, we can be sure of things in a predictable world governed by what Aquinas later calls the 'eternal law' which is partially revealed to us in the natural law (which he develops into a fuller moral theology) and the divine law (the Bible).

Heaven and hell are important within Irenaeus's Theodicy as part of the process of deification, the lifting up of humanity to the divine. This process enables humans to achieve perfection.

John Hick's theodicy

Irenaeus never developed his theodicy fully, but his ideas were later taken up by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and more recently by John Hick (1922-2012), who has argued:

“Human beings were brought into existence as intelligent creatures endowed with the capacity for immense moral and spiritual development. They are not the perfect pre-fallen Adam and Eve of the Augustinian tradition, but immature creatures, at the beginning of a long process of growth”. John Hick (1966:249)



John Hick's theology shares many aspects of Irenaeus'. Both believed in a vale of soul-making and that everyone would eventually be saved.

According to Hick, the divine intention in relation to humankind is to bring forth perfect finite personal beings by means of a “vale of soul-making” in which humans may transcend their natural selfishness by freely developing

the most desirable qualities of moral character and entering into a personal relationship with God.

Any world, however, that makes possible such personal growth cannot be a hedonistic paradise whose inhabitants experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. Rather, an environment that is able to produce the finest characteristics of human personality – particularly the capacity to love – must be one in which,

“There are obstacles to be overcome, tasks to be performed, goals to be achieved, setbacks to be endured, problems to be solved, dangers to be met” (Hick 1966: 362).

A soul-making environment must, in other words, share much in common with our world, for only a world containing great dangers and risks, as well as the genuine possibility of failure and tragedy, can provide opportunities for the development of virtue and character. A necessary condition, however, for this developmental process to take place is that humanity be situated at an “epistemic distance” from God (a knowledge gap, similar in Aquinas' thought to the gap that exists between the eternal law in the mind of God and the revealed natural law and divine law, which are partial, incomplete).

On Hick's view, in other words, if we were initially created in the direct presence of God, we could not *freely* come to love and worship God. So, to preserve our freedom in relation to God, the world must be created religiously ambiguous or must appear, to some extent at least, as if there were no God. And evil, of course, plays an important role in creating the desired epistemic distance.

Problems with Irenaeus' Theodicy

Irenaeus and Hick have argued that everyone goes to heaven. This would appear unjust, in that evil goes unpunished, and contradicts the view of Augustine that God orders punishment as a logical consequence of sin. Morality also arguably becomes pointless. This is not orthodox Christianity. It denies the Fall, and Jesus' role is reduced to that of moral example rather than the sacrifice that makes our redemption possible.

Why should 'soul making' involve suffering? The 'suffering is good for you' argument seems unjust, especially in the suffering of innocents. Hume was critical: 'Could not our world be a little more hospitable and still teach us what we need to know? Could we not learn through pleasure as well as pain?' asks David Hume. Swinburne argues that our suffering is limited, by our own capacity to feel pain, and by our lifespan.

Can suffering ever be justified on the grounds of motive? Suffering does not sit easily with the concept of a loving God. It seems difficult to justify something like the Holocaust with the concept of 'soul making'.

If the moral character development argument is combined with the free will defence then we have given the best account of evil possible. This is not a theodicy—a complete explanation—but a defence—a partial explanation. We could even add that since there is another world evil here is no big deal anyway. That is, all this pain will be insignificant when we all enjoy eternal bliss. Of course, even if we can overcome the problem of evil that doesn't mean the theistic story is true.