

Chapter 1

Why the Problem of Evil is a Problem

It is a truth universally acknowledged, to misuse Jane Austen,¹ that evil and suffering exist. They affect and infect every part of our lives. This has always been so, but for people of faith, if God is good and if creation and the people in it are good because they are kept and held in the divine goodness that caused them to be, then evil and suffering pose practical, philosophical and theological problems against the very existence of God which must be answered carefully, coherently and rationally.

That the problem of evil (the theodic problem) has so often not been answered in these ways adds to the spread of religious scepticism and avowed atheism in contemporary society. This has always been so at least from the time of classical Greece.

The philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) focussed on the problem of evil as a challenge to the theists of his day. He formulated a series of propositions, known as the 'Epicurean Trilemma' as follows:

P1. *If God is willing to prevent evil but not able to do so, he is not omnipotent and therefore not God.*

P2. *If God is able to prevent evil but not willing to do so, he is malevolent.*

P3. *If God is both able and willing to prevent evil, how come it exists?*

In sum, if God is neither able nor willing to prevent evil, he is not good and so not God.

1. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppv1n01.html (last accessed 16 July 2021).

The Epicurean Trilemma, developed by Leibniz and Hume, is relevant to the arguments of this book because it functions as a justification as to why we should or should not believe in God of love and justice – or indeed any god at all. Whether the Trilemma is sufficient to deny the existence of God or our faith in him, we should acknowledge the importance of Epicurus in raising concerns about evil and suffering in relation to our quest, after Anselm, for a rational and lively faith: *fides quaerens intellectum* (=faith seeking understanding).²

Possible Replies to the Epicurean Trilemma

1. Free Will

God wants us to love him without coercion. This means allowing for the possibility that people may not choose to do so. We have self-determination and this carries with it responsibilities. Responsibilities are especially important in our most intimate loving relationships which must always be entered into freely. Evil is an unfortunate consequence of our autonomy. If God were to intervene at any point in our wrongdoing that autonomy would be compromised. So, evil is not God's 'fault'.

It should be noted that this 'Free Will Defence' does *not* claim that God is entirely free of all responsibility for evil and suffering. If God has the power to intervene and does not then God seems to make choices. Perhaps it is in the making of choices through our autonomy that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

2. Soul Making

Our souls are incomplete. They must grow and develop by overcoming obstacles in our lives. This assumes that we have the free will to develop them or not. Evil is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a world in which we develop through our struggles. So God allows Evil to improve us. As we develop so we become purified and better fitted for an afterlife.

3. The Argument from Design

God designed a world that included the possibility of evil. Properly understood we would see that everything, including evil, 'works together for good'. This is a sub-set of 1 and 2 because they posit a world in which moral

2. G. Stanley Kane, 'Fides Quaerens Intellectum in Anselm's Thought', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol 26, issue 1 (1973), pp. 40-62.

action and growth are both possible and significant. A world designed in these ways is far better than one inhabited by God's puppets and robots.

4. Eschatological Hope

If we allow that arguments 1, 2 and 3 may have some merit then evil is finite. God will destroy it at the end of time (the *eschaton*). This offers hope that in the destruction of evil God will judge, compensate for and put into perspective all that we have suffered. The extension of this is that we must see ourselves as caught between the 'now' and the 'not-yet', a liminal space in which the promises of God are made. Moreover, the Church must be a community which looks forward in faithful hope by engaging in the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy *now*.³

5. God Suffers

God is not absent from evil. He stands in solidarity with us in our troubles. God weeps for Israel, Jesus suffers on the cross, the Holy Spirit grieves over our sin. They are exemplars of how we too *mutatis mutandis* might endure suffering. This response is often mistakenly regarded as a justification of why God allows evil. It is not. Rather it affirms that God is involved in the problematic nature of our sufferings and the evils we experience.

This is by no means acceptable to many Christians. It is offensive to Protestants who still insist on atonement by substitution. Others, as we will see, point to the infinite nature and impassibility of God. If God suffers, he does so on a very different level to us. Is it then still our suffering and, if so, how?

6. Theology of the Cross

Argument 5 contains the view that the suffering of God is still our suffering through the suffering of Jesus on the cross (*theologia crucis*). This is God's answer to the theodicy problem. The cross is the *only* justification of God's responsibility (if any) for the existence of evil. The work of redemption always trumps the role of Jesus' suffering. From the cross flows infinite suffering love which *is* the atonement for, judgement upon and victory over all evil.

3. For the distinction between the corporal spiritual acts of mercy see my *How to See a Vision: Contemplative Ethics in Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), Fn. to Preface, p. xi.

7. Fideism

According to D.Z. Phillips and other neo-Wittgensteinians who are the main proponents of fideism, theodicy does not seek to answer the problem of evil so much as to affirm basic Christian truth-claims in the face of it. God is good and in control, hence God is to be trusted despite – or even possibly because of – our suffering.

8. Protest

This position continually asks God a question: ‘Why?’ It objects to evil and suffering on the grounds that God *could* prevent horrendous evils, like the Holocaust, and *should* have done. Having posed and teased out possible answers, people holding this view do not turn away from God in disgust but wait. At best, this position seeks to affirm with fideism some basic Christian truths but I fear it is also fallacious, deriving an *is* (*could*) from an *ought* (*should*).

9. Rejecting Theoretical Theodicy

This view is gaining traction in the (apostate?) ‘Emerging Church Movement’ who oppose all systematic theoretical theology on the grounds that its terms are impenetrable to most people. This is true too, apparently, even of the language of the Eucharist, so that its celebration must be curtailed. It is not my purpose here to either describe their spurious position in detail, nor to respond to it.

As we will see, there are many respectable practical theologians who believe that theoretical approaches to theodicy are guilty of operating on a level which has little, if any practical application. Rather than work deductively from theory to praxis, if any, they work the other way around, inductively from lived experience to any general theory that might arise from it.

10. Sapiential Theodicy

This explores the outer limits of human understanding especially in relation to suffering and evil. It follows the Hebraic Wisdom tradition that recognises that God is both the giver and the taker of Wisdom. The goal is to see what can and cannot be known about evil and suffering. They are a puzzle affording infinite possibilities for a solution. The means of solving the puzzle are responding to God in love and awe.

This book is intended to demonstrate that an eleventh approach should be added to this list: mystical theodicy as we have it in *Revelations*

of *Divine Love*. It is, I contend one of the few approaches to theodicy which can properly take account of the following additional difficulties which arise for anyone attempting to write a theodicy.

Additional Difficulties for Theodicy

1. Natural Evil

This concerns the suffering which results from volcanic explosions, earthquakes, floods, drought, plagues, diseases such as Covid 19, genetic defects and the like. Natural evil explores how, if at all, these things are compatible with the traditional predicates of God.

2. The Devil

Many Christians unwittingly practise Manichaeism. That is, they believe that there are two forces in the world engaged in a battle for supremacy: Good (God) versus Evil (Satan). The forces are for the moment equal and it is the Devil which is responsible for our suffering because he cannot accept that his final defeat has already been accomplished on the cross. Suffering and evil are the remaining skirmishes as he retreats. This is as simplistic as it is false. It is spiritually dangerous. It projects all our wrongs and responsibility for them away from ourselves and into a vague abstraction called 'The Devil'. It is a rather curious reversal of Feuerbach's psycho-theology.⁴

3. Experience

How? Why? In what ways does our suffering have anything to do with the (theoretical) issues of theodicy? What does our suffering say about our capacities for imagination and creativity? What damage has been done to us by suffering? Where is hope?

4. Horrendous Evils

What can theologians reasonably say after the Holocaust? Do we have the right to say anything in the face of sexual abuse, paedophilia, torture and genocide? If we do, what words do we use and, far more importantly,

4. See B.M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966).

dare we speak to the victims of a God of infinite goodness and love, or should we hang our heads in shame and keep a prayerful silence?

5. *Structural Sin*

Some theodicies deal with the 'innocent' suffering of individuals, taking little notice of the context(s) in which evil arises, or the ideologies, social structures and systems that comprise it. This must be included if a modern theodicy is to make sense.

6. *Metaphysics*

So now we come full circle, still asking questions. What is evil anyway? How did it begin and why? Is evil a negative thing, a privation or deviation from good? Does it have its own ontological existence, or is it no-thing so that, though real and destructive, it can only be understood in the sense that it is not-good?

In what follows we will deal with each of the responses to evil and the additional questions, especially in the debates between pastoral and theoretical theodicists to which I now turn.