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Theodicy

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Theodicy (Evil)

The word theodicy derives from the Greek theos (god) and dîkê (justice), referring to “the justice of God.” More simply, a theodicy analyzes the problem of evil. It is an exercise in which theologians and philosophers attempt to reconcile a belief in a benevolent, omnipotent being with the existence of evil in the world.

Almost every culture has a tradition to explain the existence of evil. Within the Western tradition, the best-known theodicy is in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). The book of Job presents the story of a perfectly righteous and faithful man who suffers a series of personal and physical disasters. The book questions whether the universe operates on a principle of reward and punishment. It also outlines discussions for appropriate responses to innocent suffering. In the end, the book does not advocate an answer to the problem of evil; instead, the author admits that there are times when suffering remains a mystery.

In early Christianity, Augustine addressed the question of evil with his “free will defense,” whereby he argued that creation initially reflected God’s goodness and that humanity was created without sin but with free will. As such, Adam and Eve’s choice to eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6) brought about evil and, as the common origin of humanity, their fall has affected subsequent generations of humanity. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas built upon Augustine’s concept that evil is a deviation from the good. Aquinas denied the ontological existence of evil, contending instead that evil is an absence of goodness in some thing. Thus, as in Augustine’s thought, God has no role in the creation of evil because evil is not a thing in itself, but merely a privation (lack) of goodness in a thing.

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz is a key figure in the later European theodicy debates. Leibniz outlined an “optimist” position in which he admitted that while evil exists in the world, this world is still the best of all possible worlds because a perfect God created it. Philosophers such as John Mackie countered Leibniz, arguing that God could have created a world in which people would make better choices. Alvin Plantinga responds to Mackie’s challenge with his contention that there are limits to divine omnipotence (for example, God cannot make $1 + 1 = 4$), and because of human free will God could not have created Mackie’s “better choices world.”
Key Points/Challenges

- Almost every Christian theodicy begins with an argument for God's existence, followed by a discussion about the nature of God.
- Questions of human free will (see determinism) and divine freedom often play an important role in discussions about theodicy. Proponents of free will argue that God does not interfere with human actions.
- The Holocaust, Euro-American colonialism, the history of slavery, and ethnic cleansing campaigns have all posed difficult questions for twentieth-century theologians seeking a coherent theodicy.
- Some philosophers contend that, if any theodicy were valid, there would be no system of morality because any evil event would be rationalized as permitted or affected by God. Others contend that the problem of evil is incompatible with discussions about divine nature.
- Recently, process and evolutionary theodicies reframe the question in terms of God’s participation in creation, asserting that the means by which creation occurs allows for the existence of evil at least temporarily (see process philosophy/theology).

Further Reading

Contains several points of view by significant Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers responding to the Holocaust.

Representative of recent theodicies rejecting the question of why there is suffering and evil in a world created by an omnipotent and loving God, instead seeking out God’s response to suffering and evil.

Introductory commentary on a biblical text wrestling with the problem of God, injustice, and suffering in the world.

German philosopher’s seminal text containing his approach to God and position on moral order.

Contains Leibniz’s key writings on theodicy.

Now classic essay that prompted the development of several logical proofs concerning the problem of theism and the existence of evil.


Analytical approaches to theodicy from an American Protestant philosopher and major figure in the field.

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**Trinity (Perichoresis)**

The belief that God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—presents an inescapable tension within Christian monotheism, which can seem an outright contradiction but possesses great creative potential. Pondering trinitarian unity and diversity, an infinite commonality of nature marked by distinctiveness of persons, has not only spawned the historical development of the concept of human personhood, it has also highlighted the beauty of interrelatedness.

While the term trinity does not occur in Scripture, it is implied by the high Christology of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1 NRSV) and by the call to baptize people from every nation “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 NRSV). Belief in the Trinity arose from the belief that the Son and the Spirit are fully equal to God the Father but in some manner distinct from the Father and from one another.

The full development of trinitarian doctrine was not completed until some 350 years after the crucifixion. Eventually the church settled on the formula of one substance (ousia) and three persons (hypostasis, plural, hypostaseis). The Cappadocians, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa (all ca. 330–95), were the first to work out an explicit understanding of the fully equal divinity and status of Father, Son, and Spirit. Gregory of Nazianzus was also the first to use the term perichoresis to explain the interrelated unity of the three persons.

The great “payoff” to trinitarian doctrine is the relational identity of God. Because the unity of divine nature is perfectly and infinitely shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, each person is fully understood, fully expressed, fully loved. Only God can understand the infinite fullness of divine perfection; thus, only the persons of the Trinity can fully understand one another. We can imagine a human person capable of great thought or portraying great beauty, but what if there were no one who could fully understand the thought or beauty that was expressed? Such a situation could lead only to frustration and deep loneliness. The greatness of trinitarian doctrine is that it incorporates the inherently relational being of God, so that God is understood as three distinct persons who share one divine nature.