

The problem of evil

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Teacher Notes

TN 7

Unlike the previous topic, this one is extremely popular with students and in most cases gains them the highest marks in the exam. Nevertheless, there is scope for students to answer more critically and in more depth than they often do. Although marks are awarded for a clear understanding of the material, more can be gained by demonstrating a strong philosophical awareness of the concepts involved. Encourage your students to explore beyond the classical theodicies of Augustine and Irenaeus and to consider the ways in which they have been taken up in the twentieth century by important contributors to the debate.

Because there is such a good range of excellent material on this popular topic, the text below provides a broad outline only of the main theodicies and the nature of the problem. The body of the lesson can be filled out with material from first-class resources such as Vardy's *The Puzzle of Evil* or Swinburne's *The Existence of God*.

Aims

On completion of this topic, students should:

- understand the wide dimensions of the problem of evil
- be aware of the nature of and reasons for the problem as it affects theistic believers
- be aware of the nature of and reasons for the theodicies offered in response to the problem
- be able to evaluate the success or otherwise of these theodicies

Lesson outline

- 1** The lesson should begin with an extended and highly structured consideration of the nature of the problem of evil. Don't rush this part as there is a real need for students to be able to talk about this at length in an exam. If they can only give a one-sentence summary of the problem of evil and a few examples of different kinds of evil, they will not be equipped to answer a 10-mark question, for example, on the nature of the problem.
- 2** Move on to the subject of theodicies. Make sure that the students are absolutely certain about the distinctive nature of a theodicy and why theodicies are necessary if there is to be any attempt at solving the problem of evil.
- 3** Go over details of the theodicies and their evaluations several times, and make sure that the students are happy with the different ways key concepts are used in different theodicies, i.e. free will, soul-making/soul-deciding, deterministic/teleological views of evil.
- 4** Remind students of the material they covered in the Topic 1 and of some of the relevant issues that have been raised in dealing with the existence of God.

Suggested timing

About 6 hours of teaching should be spent on this topic. It is almost guaranteed that your students will write about it in the exam, so it is a good investment of time and resources.

What is the problem of evil?

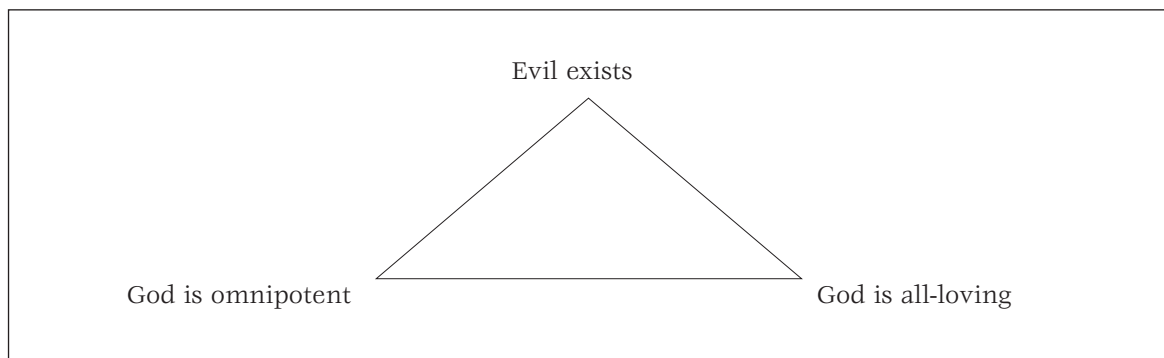
If God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent (perfectly good), then he should be able to destroy evil and should desire to do so. Since evil is apparent in the world, then it would appear that he either chooses not to remove it, or cannot. In either case this presents such a profound problem for classical theism that believers are compelled to consider whether they can and should continue to believe in the existence of God. At the very least, a God who cannot remove evil or who does not choose to do so is surely not a God worthy of worship.

This is the classic problem of evil, which presents four distinctive problems of its own. The problem of evil is:

- a **theological** problem – it challenges the nature of God
- a **philosophical** problem – it compels the believer to accept conflicting claims which it is logically impossible to reconcile
- a **diverse** problem – evil manifests itself in many ways which demand different explanations
- a **challenging** problem – it will not simply go away; the existence of evil and suffering is an objective reality which it is difficult, if not impossible, to deny

Now complete tasks 1 and 2 on WS7.

The problem of evil can be viewed as an **inconsistent triad** illustrated thus:



The theist is compelled to accept the bottom two angles: if God is not all-loving and omnipotent, then he is not the God they are committed to worshipping. But they must also accept the reality of the top angle. It is counterintuitive to deny the reality of evil and the theist must recognise what Basil Mitchell describes as 'the full force of the problem'. If one angle can be removed, the problem is solved, but while all three angles remain there exists a logical inconsistency that must be resolved.

Qualification of God's nature

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event...the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding... 'God does not really love us.'

Antony Flew, quoted in Basil Mitchell (ed.), Philosophy of Religion (OUP, 1971)

Antony Flew argues that the biggest challenge that the believer faces is admitting that the existence of suffering (or other reasons to deny the existence of God) is a serious question that demands an answer. It is not enough to say 'Oh well, we don't really understand how God works', and to carry on believing in the same way. If we say 'God's love is not like human love, so we can't expect him to intervene where there is suffering', this is simply *qualifying* God's love rather than demanding that we find good reasons why he should not intervene.

Now complete task 3 on WS7.

Associated issues

The problem of evil is potentially vast. Consider how the issues listed below may be linked with it and how they may be tackled by believers and atheists.

- **Death** – is it an evil in itself?
- **Sin** – how is it related to evil and suffering?
- **Animal suffering** – should we be concerned? If so, is the nature of our concern the same as the concern we have about human suffering?
- **Evil as an illusion** – read the quotation below and consider how successful it is to suggest that evil is an illusion.

Evil has no reality...it is simply an illusion, and it has no real basis...when a sufferer is convinced that there is no reality in his belief in pain...how can he suffer longer?

Mary Baker Eddy (founder of Christian Science), cited in John Hick, Evil and the God of Love (Fontana, 1968), p. 30

Now complete task 4 on WS7.

Theodicy

A true theodicy *does not*:

- deny the existence of evil
- qualify the nature of God
- advocate giving up faith when faced with evil and suffering

A theodicy *does*:

- demonstrate that God, being omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, has good reasons for occasionally allowing the continued existence of evil and suffering
- demonstrate that the existence of evil and suffering provides greater benefits than the benefit of removing evil

Summaries

The Augustinian theodicy

Soul-deciding
 Man in the likeness of God
 Man with true moral autonomy
 Freedom leads to the Fall
 Free will leads to suffering
 Man redeemed through Christ

The Irenaean theodicy

Soul-making
 Man created imperfectly
 Man with true moral autonomy
 Freedom gives potential for growth
 Free will leads to development
 Man redeemed through his own actions

The problem of evil

Information Sheet continued

God foresaw the Fall

God remains at an epistemic distance

Evil is part of an aesthetic pattern

Evil and suffering are necessary for growth

Evil is a privation

Evil can lead to good

Consider these quotations from the work of **Richard Swinburne**, who favours the Irenaean approach.

A generous God will seek to give us great responsibility for ourselves, each other, and the world, and thus a share in his own creative activity of determining what sort of world it is to be. And he will seek to make our lives valuable, of great use to ourselves and to each other. The problem is that God cannot give us these goods in full measure without allowing much evil on the way.

Richard Swinburne, Is There a God? (OUP, 1996), p. 96

Agents are born and die and during their life give birth, partly through their own choice, to other agents. They can make a difference to the world...agents can make each other happy or unhappy and can increase or decrease each other's power, freedom and knowledge. Thereby they can affect the happiness and morality of generations distant in time...

A God has a reason for making such a world.

Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (OUP, 1979), p. 175

Now complete task 5 on WS7.

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Worksheet

WS 7

- 1 Consider the following quotation from Richard Swinburne. Why is it so important that believers are able to say why they continue to believe in God even when the evidence of evil appears to count against it?

There is a problem about why God allows evil, and if the theist does not have (in a cool moment) a satisfactory answer to it, then his belief in God is less than rational, and there is no reason why the atheist should share it.

Richard Swinburne, Is There a God? (OUP, 1996), p. 96

- 2 The traditional distinctions made between types of evil are **moral** and **natural** evil. Consider the two descriptions below and then discuss and note different kinds of evil which may fall into these categories, and the particular problems which they may present. Consider, too, how evils may overlap, and other subcategories of evil which may not be immediately evident from these two basic headings.

Moral evil I understand as including all evil caused deliberately by humans doing what they ought not to do, or allowed to occur by humans negligently failing to do what they ought to do, and also the evil constituted by such deliberate actions or negligent failure.

Richard Swinburne, Is There a God? (OUP, 1996), p. 97

Natural evil is the evil that originates independently of human actions, in disease, in bacilli, in earthquakes, storms, droughts, tornadoes, etc.

John Hick, Evil and the God of Love (Fontana, 1968), p. 18

- 3 Consider ways in which believers may attempt to qualify God's nature rather than confronting the problem of evil. Is Flew right in accusing believers of this? Why might it seem preferable to do this rather than to confront 'the full force of the conflict' (Basil Mitchell)?
- 4 Discuss what the biblical writers say about suffering and pain.
- 5 Go through the two traditional theodicies summarised on IS7 in more detail. Both have significant problems. Consider what these may be.

Homework tasks

- 1 A relatively modern approach to the problem is that of **process theology**. Technically this is not a theodicy, since it demands that the nature of God is qualified to accommodate the existence of evil in the universe. Research the work of process theologians on the problem of evil and bring your work to class as instructed by your teacher.
- 2 Refer to the summaries of the traditional theodicies on IS7. Then write an essay based on how far you agree with the following statement:
The problem of evil is an insurmountable problem to religious believers.
- 3 Attempt the following questions as an extended homework task, or as a timed essay in no more than 50 minutes. Remember that an exam essay should total no less than 750 words, and ideally contain 1,000 or more, depending on how quickly you can write.
 - (a) What is the problem of evil? (5)
 - (b) Outline two solutions to the problem. (10)
 - (c) Consider the success or otherwise of these solutions. (10)