Theodicy: Understanding why a good God allows pain and suffering.



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course objectives:

1. Discover the 3 sources of pain and suffering and what God has done (and is doing) in order to deal with them.

2. Be equipped to have meaningful conversations with friends and loved ones who are walking through pain and suffering and learn how to point them to a source of lasting healing and hope.

3.Gain practical Biblical wisdom in order to discern the deceptive strategies of Satan and his minions and learn what the Bible says about the "already and not yet" of God's Kingdom that will bring clarity to the reason for our present pain and future hope.

course resources:

1. Receive a curated PDF of articles that Dr. Joel Muddamalle has put together to help you dig deeper into this study.

2. Unlimited replay of the video teaching for 90 days!

3. If you can't make the live teaching, or be present for the entire live portion you will receive the replay within 24-48hrs.

4. 1.5 hours of personalized and live seminary level teaching and training from Dr. Joel Muddamalle

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Theodicy: Section One



THEODICY (from Gk. *theos*, 'God', and the root *dik*, 'just') seeks to 'justify the ways of God to man' (Milton), showing that God is in the right and is glorious and worthy of praise despite contrary appearances. Theodicy asks how we can believe that God is both good and sovereign in face of the world's evil—bad people; bad deeds, defying God and injuring people; harmful (bad) circumstances, events, experiences and states of mind, which waste, thwart, or destroy value, actual or potential, in and for humankind; in short, all facts, physical and moral, that prompt the feeling, 'This ought not to be'.

All theodicies view evil as making for a good greater than is attainable without it. Thus, Leibniz (who coined the word 'theodicy' in 1710) argued that a world containing moral and physical evil is better, because metaphysically richer, than one containing good only, and that God must have created the best of all possible worlds. Hegel, a closet pantheist, held that all apparent evil is really good in the making; it looks and feels bad only because its character as good is as yet incomplete. Process theologians picture their finite God struggling against evil in hope of mastering it some day. Biblical theists, however, reason differently. Affirming with Augustine that evil is a lack of good, or a good thing gone wrong, they begin by agreeing that:

1. Pain, though it hurts, is often not really evil. The stab of pain acts as an alarm, and living with pain can purge, refine, and ennoble character. Pain may thus be a gift and a mercy.

2. Virtue (choosing good) is only possible where vice (choosing evil) is also possible. An automaton's programmed performance is not virtue, and lacks the value of virtue. In making man capable of choosing the path of grateful obedience, God made him capable of not doing so. Though not sin's author, God created a possibility of sin by creating the possibility of righteousness.

3. Moral growth and maturity are only possible when the consequences of action are calculable. Since God means this world to be a school for moral growth, he gave it physical regularity so that consequences might be foreseen. Frustrations through miscalculation, and natural events called disasters because they damage humans, are therefore inevitable. Unfallen man would have experienced them. In fact, we mature morally through coping with them.

Beyond this point in theodicy, speculations intrude. John Hick posits universal salvation, arguing that nothing less can justify all the evil that God for soul-building purposes permits in his world. Advocates of the 'free-will defence' (of God, against the charge of being the source of evil) speculate that God cannot prevent humans from sinning without destroying their humanity—which would mean that glorified saints, being still human, may sin. Some Calvinists envisage God permissively decreeing sin for the purpose of self-display in justly saving some from their sin and justly damning others for and in their sin. But none of this is biblically certain. The safest way in theodicy is to leave God's permission of sin and moral evil as a mystery, and to reason from the good achieved in redemption, perhaps as follows:

Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
Exported from Logos Bible Software, 5:52 PM May 1, 2023.

a. In this fallen world where all have turned from God and deserve hell, God has taken responsibility for saving individuals and renewing the cosmos, at the cost to himself of the death of Jesus Christ his Son (see Atonement; Redemption; Substitution). The cross shows how much he loves sinners (Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 1 Jn. 4:8–10), and induces responsive love in all whom he calls to faith. b. God enables believers, as forgiven sinners, to relate to all evil (bad circumstances, bad health, bad treatment, even their own bad past) in a way that brings forth good—moral and spiritual growth and wisdom, benefit to others by example and encouragement, and thanksgiving to God; so that facing evil becomes for them a value-creating way of life. c. In heaven, where the full fruit of Christ's redemption will be enjoyed, earth's evils will in retrospect seem trivial (Rom. 8:18), and remembering them will only increase our joy (Rev. 7:9–17). Thus through God's sovereign goodness evil is overcome; not theoretically, so much as practically, in human lives.

This unspeculative, confessional, pastoral theodicy leaves with God the secret things (*cf.* Dt. 29:29), justifies and glorifies God for what is revealed, calls forth wonder and worship, and resolves the feeling, 'This ought not to be,' into the contented cry, 'He does all things well!'—which is a supremely positive declaration that God is in the right, and is to be praised. Meantime, logic declares it possible, and faith, reasoning as above, thinks it certain, that the final state of things will demonstrably be better than anything God could have achieved by taking a different course at any stage.

See also: SUFFERING.

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THEODICY

From Gk *Theos*, 'God', and the root *dik*-, 'just', theodicy seeks to 'justify the ways of God to man' (Milton). A theodicy is thus an attempt to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and loving God with the occurrence of evil and suffering in the world. Why does a supposedly loving and all-powerful *God create a world in which creatures suffer horrendous evil? The term 'theodicy' was first used by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his treatise on this subject published in 1710.

Theological and philosophical responses to the experience of *evil and *suffering are frequent in Judeo-Christian writings. One highly influential figure is *Augustine of Hippo who, following a tradition extending back to Plato, argued that evil is *privatio boni*—the privation, or lack, of the good. Augustine wished to emphasize that what is primary and original in creation is goodness (Gen. 1:31) and that evil is an intrusion within creation; it is the absence of goodness. Thus, for example, sickness is the absence of health, or the weapons of war indicate the absence of peace. Augustine is primarily arguing against Gnostic and Manichean traditions which were *dualist; they argued that good and evil were two opposing and co-original forces, often associating matter with evil. For Augustine, however, evil is not something 'in itself'; the good is ontologically primary, and evil is parasitic on the good because evil is merely the absence of the good. Of course, evil is *experienced* as a positive force and not merely as an 'absence'. However, Augustine is not concerned with how we experience evil, but with what evil *is* in relation to God and creation. He claims that, next to God and his good creation, evil is quite literally *nothing*. In strict terms, Augustine's approach is not a theodicy because he does not seek to *justify* the occurrence of evil. Augustine taught that only the good is justifiable because goodness is rational and intelligible. Evil, on the other hand, is intrinsically unintelligible. How could there be *reasons* for horrendous evils such as cancer in children? Famously, Augustine did not provide any reasons for the *fall, because there could be no *reason* to turn from God. Instead, Augustine writes of God's *redemptive response to evil in Christ and our role as free moral agents in bringing evil into the world.

The notion that evil is a privation of the good was highly influential until the early modern period. However, it is with the advent of modern philosophy and theology that theodicy, understood strictly as the attempt to justify God, becomes a major topic of concern. In this period, particularly under the influence of David *Hume and Immanuel *Kant, the notion of an a-theological moral standard lying outside God which can thereby be used to 'judge' God becomes influential and prominent. God becomes a moral agent. This marks the beginning of a distinction between those philosophical (or *natural theological) *arguments* which seek to justify God in the face of evil and suffering (theodicy), and those theological *responses* which refer to what God has actually done in Christ with respect to sin, evil and suffering within the economy of *salva-

tion (soteriology).

Theodicy in its modern guise often distinguishes between 'natural evil' (those evils such as suffering caused by natural disasters which occur due to nature and not human agency) and 'moral evil' (those evils which arise because of human agency, such as war or torture). However, many philosophers and theologians reject this distinction because certain occurrences of evil and suffering seem to be neither straightforwardly 'natural' nor 'moral'. For example, the suffering due to an earthquake (natural evil) could equally be due to housing being deliberately built in high-risk areas for reasons of exploitation and profit (moral evil). It is also not clear in what sense an earthquake is evil *in itself*. Nevertheless, one of the most popular theodicies, known as the free-will defence, applies particularly to so-called moral evil. It is claimed that much of the evil and suffering in the world is not due to divine action, but to human beings who are created as free moral agents and who are therefore at liberty to perform evil as well as good acts. A world which consists of such free agents is judged to be intrinsically better than a world of automatons who necessarily (rather than freely) perform good actions. The possibility of a world of free agents who nevertheless always perform good actions is discussed in the literature (see Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*). Alvin *Plantinga's work on free will and evil has been particularly influential (see *Will).

John *Hick's 'soul-making' theodicy has generated much discussion with regard to so-called natural evil. Hick supposedly follows *Irenaeus of Lyon in claiming that God allows evil and suffering as a means by which souls might be fashioned for eternal life. It is argued that humans are created with potential and, through the process of suffering and the making of significant free choices, mature into the likeness of God as creatures able to share the divine life. This theodicy has obvious appeal to those whose experience of evil and suffering is not only painful, but also a time of growth which changes their perspective on themselves, their neighbour and God. It is also suggested that coping with the suffering of loss teaches one to value the gifts of life in a more profound way. However, Hick's theodicy is prone to some telling criticisms. For example, in common with a large number of theodicies, evil and suffering is justified by rendering it in some way *good for us*. This does not seem to account well for the highly destructive experience of acute evil which is all too common in human lives. Hick responds to such criticisms in his *Evil and the God of Love*.

Amongst other contemporary contributions to theodicy, the English philosopher Richard Swinburne has argued that there may be reason for God to permit certain forms of suffering and evil because they allow the display of 'higher order goods'. The performance of particular forms of extreme courage or generosity, for example, are logically dependent on certain kinds of suffering. This is a variation on the argument that, in order to know or perform the good, we must also have some experience or knowledge of evil. Notice that Swinburne's position, in making certain goods logically dependent on certain evils, is the reverse of

Augustine's: the good is now parasitic upon evil and not vice versa.

The traumatic suffering during the world wars of the twentieth century, and particularly the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, provoked a number of responses with respect to evil, particularly from theologians (see *Holocaust). In contrast to much philosophical theodicy, these theologians turned to the specifics of God's revelation in *Jesus Christ. Jürgen *Moltmann has argued that God suffers in solidarity with creatures and that this experience is a crucial aspect of the divine characteristics of love and sympathy. For Moltmann, to be incapable of suffering is to be incapable of *love. Such suffering love, which is eternally present in God himself, is redemptive within human history. By contrast, Karl *Barth, in common with traditional Chalcedonian orthodoxy, maintained God's *impassibility, but emphasized God's suffering solidarity in the *incarnation and the human nature of Christ. Consistent with his rejection of natural theology, Barth resisted any philosophical notions of God's omnipotence (particularly discussions of what God might or might not do with regard to eliminating evil) in favour of an emphasis on what is actually revealed in Christ concerning the redemption of evil and suffering.

Other recent discussions of evil and suffering have sought to emphasize St Paul's teaching in Rom. 8 that we must 'consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (v. 18). Such responses to evil and suffering stress that, viewed *eschatologically, the experiences of this life, even the most horrific evils imaginable, are wholly overwhelmed by the richness of the heavenly life which God offers (see Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* and *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*). Meanwhile, there has been an attempt to render the discussion of evil less metaphysically and theologically abstract by examining the ways in which Jews and Christians respond in practice to the experience of evil and suffering and continue to find speech about God meaningful and rational in the face of human tragedy (see Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*). Such an approach does not seek 'solutions' to the quandary of the so-called 'problem of evil' in the form of justifications of God, but rather examines why the expression of the problem of evil is itself problematic with respect to the doctrines of God and creation, and why the modern project of theodicy is open to *theological* challenge (see especially Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*).

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