THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

For many people it is, more than anything else, the appalling depth and extent of human suffering, together with the selfishness and greed which produce so much of this, that makes the idea of a loving Creator seem implausible and disposes them toward one of the various naturalistic theories of religion.

Rather than attempt to define "evil" in terms of some theological theory (for example, as "that which is contrary to God's will"), it seems better to define it by indicating that to which the word refers. It refers to
physical pain,
mental suffering
moral wickedness.

The last is one of the causes of the first two, for an enormous amount of human pain arises from people's inhumanity. This pain includes such major scourges as poverty, oppression and persecution, war, and all the injustice, indignity, and inequity that have occurred throughout history. Even disease is fostered, to an extent that has not yet been precisely determined by psychosomatic medicine, by emotional and moral factors seated both in individuals and in their social environment. However, although a great deal of pain and suffering are caused by human action, there is yet more that arises from such natural causes as bacteria and earthquakes, storm, fire, lightning, flood, and drought.

As a challenge to theism the problem of evil has traditionally been posed in the form of a dilemma:
if God is perfectly loving, God must wish to abolish all evil;
and if God is all-powerful, God must be able to abolish all evil.
But evil exists;
therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly loving.

Other Explanations for evil?

One possible solution (offered, for example, by contemporary Christian Science) can be ruled out immediately so far as the traditional Judaic-Christian *faith* is concerned. To say that evil is an illusion of the human mind is impossible within a religion based upon the stark realism of the Bible. Its pages faithfully reflect the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. They record every kind of sorrow and suffering, every mode of "man's inhumanity to man" and of our painfully insecure existence in the world. There is no attempt to regard evil as anything but dark, menacingly ugly, heartrending, and crushing. There can be no doubt, then, that for biblical faith evil is entirely real and in no sense an illusion.

Examples of the reality of evil and suffering in scripture?

THEODICY (theos – dike)

There are three main Christian responses to the problem of evil:

- the Augustinian theodicy, hinging upon the concept of the   fall of man from an original state of righteousness;

- the Irenaean theodicy, hinging upon the idea of the gradual creation of a perfected humanity through life in a highly imperfect world;

- the theodicy of modern process theology, hinging upon the idea of a God who is not all-powerful and not in fact able to prevent the evils arising either in human beings or in the processes of nature.

FREE WILL DEFENCE

Before examining each of these three responses, or theodicies, we will discuss a position that is common to all of them. The common ground is some form of what has come to be called the free-will defence, at least so far as the moral evil of human wickedness is concerned, for Christian thought has always seen moral evil as related to human freedom and responsibility. To be a person is to be a finite centre of freedom, a (relatively) self-directing agent responsible for one's own decisions. This involves being free to act wrongly as well as rightly. There can therefore be no certainty in advance that a genuinely free moral agent will never choose amiss. Consequently, according to the strong form of free-will defence, the possibility of wrongdoing is logically inseparable from the creation of finite persons, and *to say that God should not have created beings who might sin amounts to saying that God should not have created people*.

This thesis has been challenged by those who claim that no contradiction is involved in saying that God might have made people who would be genuinely free but who could at the same time be guaranteed always to act rightly. To quote from one of these:

If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good. (J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', 1955)

This argument has considerable power. A modified form of free-will defence has, however, been suggested in response to it. If by free actions we mean actions that are not externally compelled, but flow from the nature of agents as they react to the circumstances in which they find themselves, then there is indeed no contradiction between

our being free and our actions' being "caused" (by our own God-given nature) and thus being in principle predictable. However, it is suggested, there is a contradiction in saying that *God* is the cause of our acting as we do *and* that we are free beings specifically in relation to God. The contradiction is between holding that God has so made us that we shall of necessity act in a certain way, and that we are genuinely independent persons *in relation to God.* If all our thoughts and actions are divinely predestined, then however free and responsible we may seem to ourselves to be, we are not free and responsible in the sight of God but must instead be God's puppets. Such "freedom" would be comparable to that of patients acting out a series of posthypnotic suggestions: they appear to themselves to be free but their volitions have actually been predetermined by the will of the hypnotist, in relation to whom the patients are therefore not genuinely free agents. Thus, it is suggested, while God *could* have created such beings, there would have been no point in doing so—at least not if God is seeking to create sons and daughters rather than human puppets.

If the Free Will Defence stands up to scrutiny, then we can then go on to thinking of two basic ways of understanding God's Will. What two ways?

THE AUGUSTINIAN THEODICY

The main traditional Christian response to the problem of evil was formulated by St. Augustine (354—430 A.D.) and has constituted the majority report of the Christian mind through the centuries, although it has been much criticized in recent times.

The main philosophical position is the idea of the negative or privative nature of evil. Augustine holds firmly to the Hebrew-Christian conviction that the universe is *good - that* is to say, it is the creation of a good God for a good purpose. There are, according to Augustine, higher and lower, greater and lesser goods in immense abundance and variety; however, everything that has being is good in its own way and degree, except insofar as it has become spoiled or corrupted. Evil— whether it be an evil will, an instance of pain, or some disorder or decay in nature—has therefore not been set there by God but represents the going wrong of something that is inherently good. Augustine paints to blindness as an example. Blindness is not a "thing." The only thing involved is the eye, which is in itself good; the evil of blindness consists of the lack of proper functioning of the eye. Generalizing the principle, Augustine holds that evil always consists of the malfunctioning of something that is in itself good.

As it originally came forth from the hand of God, then, the universe was a perfect harmony expressing the creative divine intention. It was a graded hierarchy of higher and lower forms of being, each good in its own place. How, then, did evil come about? It came about initially in those levels of the universe that involve free will: the free will of the angels and of human beings. Some of the angels turned from the supreme Good, which is God, to lesser goods, thereby rebelling

against their creator; they in turn tempted the first man and woman to fall. This fall of angelic and human beings was the origin of moral evil or sin. The natural evils of disease, of "nature red in tooth and claw," and of earthquake, storm, and soon are the penal consequences of sin, for humanity was intended to be guardian of the earth, and this human defection has set all nature awry. Thus Augustine could say, "All evil is either sin or the punishment for sin."

The Augustinian theodicy adds that at the end of history there will come the judgment, when many will enter into eternal life and many others (who in their freedom have rejected God's offer of salvation) into eternal torment. For Augustine, "since there is happiness for those who do not sin, the universe is perfect; and it is no less perfect because there is misery for sinners… the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin."' He is invoking here a principle of moral balance according to which sin that is justly punished is thereby cancelled out and no longer regarded as marring the perfection of God's universe.

The Augustinian theodicy fulfils the intention lying behind it, which is to clear the creator of any responsibility for the existence of evil by loading that responsibility without remainder upon the creature. Evil stems from the culpable misuse of creaturely freedom in a tragic act, of cosmic *significance,* in the prehistory of the human race—an act that was prefigured in the heavenly realms by the Incomprehensible fall of some of the angels, the chief of whom is now Satan, God's Enemy.

CRITICISMS OF AUGUSTINE'S THEODICY

1   The perfect universe has gone wrong

A universe which God has created with absolute power, so as to be exactly as God wishes it to be, containing no evil of any kind, has nevertheless gone wrong.

It is true that the free creatures who are part of it are free to fall. However, since they are finitely perfect, without any taint or trace of evil in them, and since they dwell in a finitely perfect environment, they will never in fact fall into sin. Thus, it is said, the very idea of a perfect creation's going wrong spontaneously and without cause is a self-contradiction.

The basic criticism, then, is that a flawless creation would never go wrong and that if the creation does in fact go wrong the ultimate responsibility for this must be with its creator: for 'This is where the buck stops"! (cf. Mackie's Criticism)

It is significant that Augustine himself, when he asks why it is that some of the angels fell while others remained steadfast, has to conclude that *"These angels, therefore, either received less of the grace of the divine love than those who persevered in the same; or if both were created equally good, then, while the one fell by their evil will, the others were more abundantly assisted, and attained*

Does this explanation suffice?

2   Augustine's Theodicy does not square with scientific explanations of the rise of humankind

A second criticism, made in the light of modern knowledge, is that we cannot today realistically think of the human species as having been once morally and spiritually perfect and then falling from that state into the chronic self-centeredness that is the human condition as we now know it. All the evidence suggests that humanity gradually emerged out of lower forms of life with a very limited moral awareness and with very crude religious conceptions.

Again, it is no longer possible to regard the natural evils of disease, earthquakes, and the like as consequences of the fall of humanity, for we now know that they existed long before human beings came upon the scene. Life preyed upon life, and there were storms and earthquakes as well as disease (signs of arthritis have been found in the bones of some prehistoric animals) during the hundreds of millions of years before *Homo Sapiens* emerged.

How convincing is this criticism?

3   The eternity of Hell appears to question the 'integrity' of God's Justice – can the notion of an eternal hell be part of any theodicy?

A third criticism attacks the idea of the eternal torment of hell, which is affirmed to be the fate of a large proportion of the human race (cf. Calvin). Since such punishment would never end, it could serve no constructive purpose. On the contrary, it is said, it would render impossible any solution to the problem of evil, for it would build both the sinfulness of the damned, and the nonmoral evil of their pains and sufferings, into the permanent structure of the universe.

Does the very notion of 'eternal hell' mean that God cannot be 'acquitted' in the problem of evil?

THE IRENAEAN THEODICY

Even from before the time of Augustine another response to the problem of evil had already been present within the developing Christian tradition. This has its basis in the thought of the early Greek-speaking Fathers of the Church, perhaps the most important of whom was St. Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 202 A.D.).

He distinguished *two stages* of the creation of the human race.

- In the first stage human beings were brought into existence as intelligent animals endowed with the capacity for immense moral and spiritual development. They were not the perfect pre-fallen Adam and Eve of the Augustinian tradition, but immature creatures, at the beginning of a long process of growth.

- In the second stage of their creation, which is now taking place, they are gradually being transformed through their own free responses from human animals into "children of God." (Irenaeus himself described the two stages as humanity being made first in the "image" and then into the "likeness" of God—referring to Genesis 1:26).

But why would God have created humans in this way?

Possible answers centre upon the positive value of human freedom.
- From intuition, we might claim that a human goodness that has come about through the making of free and responsible moral choices, in situations of real difficulty and temptation, is intrinsically more valuable than a goodness that has been created ready-made, without the free participation of the human agent.

- If humankind had been initially created in the direct presence of God, they would have no genuine freedom in relation to their Maker. In order to be fully personal and therefore morally free beings, they have accordingly (it is suggested) been created at a distance from God—not a spatial but an *epistemic* distance, a distance in the dimension of knowledge. They are in a universe within which God is not overwhelmingly evident but in which God may become known by the free response of faith.
  Thus the human situation is one of tension between the natural selfishness arising from our instinct for survival, and the calls of both morality and religion to transcend our self-centeredness.

Thus the answer of the Irenaean theodicy to the question of the origin of moral evil is that it is a necessary condition of the creation of humanity at an epistemic distance from God, in a state in which one has a genuine freedom in relation to one's Maker and can freely develop, in response to God's noncoercive presence, toward one's own fulfilment as a child of God.

We may now turn to the problem of pain and suffering. Even though the bulk of actual human pain is traceable to misused human freedom, there remain other sources of pain that are entirely independent of the human will—for example, bacteria, earthquake, flood, drought, blight.

Does an Irenaean Theodicy show that every human pain serves God's good purposes?

No, it does not show positively that each item of human pain serves God's purpose of good.

What light, then, does Irenaean Theodicy shed on the fact of 'natural evil'?

It does seem possible to show that the divine purpose, as it is understood in the Irenaean theology, could not be forwarded in a world that was designed as a permanent hedonistic paradise.

According to the Irenaean theodicy, God's purpose was not to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. The world is seen, instead, as a place of "soul making" or person making in which free beings, grappling with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God" and "heirs of eternal life." Our world, with all its rough edges, is the sphere in which this second and harder stage of the creative process is taking place.

This conception of the world (whether or not set in Irenaeus's theological framework) can be supported by the method of "counterfactual hypothesis." Suppose that, contrary to fact, this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded.

The consequences would be very far-reaching. For example,
- no one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer's knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air;
- the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars;
- fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow leave the fabric of society undamaged.
- No one would ever be injured by accident.
- There would be no need to work, since no harm could result from avoiding work;
- there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or dangers.

The laws of nature would have to be extremely flexible: sometimes gravity would operate, sometimes not; sometimes an object would be hard, sometimes soft. There could be no sciences, for there would be no enduring world structure to investigate. In eliminating the problems and hardships of an objective environment with its own laws, life would become like a dream in which, delightfully but aimlessly, we would float and drift at ease.

How convincing is this counterfactual hypothesis in supporting an Irenaean Theodicy?

If this 'counterfactual' world were real, what would happen to:
- **the notions of right and wrong?**
- **the notion of courage?**
- **the notions of generosity, kindness, the agape aspect of love, unselfishness, and so on?**

Consequently, such a world, however well it might promote pleasure, would be very ill adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality – that is, for 'soul making'.

And so the Irenaean answer to the question, Why natural evil? is that only a world that has this general character could constitute an effective environment for the second stage (or the beginning of the second stage) of God's creative work, whereby human animals are being gradually transformed through their own free responses into "children of God."

Irenaean Theodicy and Life after Death

There are three main issues for life after death examined under this Theodicy.

Is the project of 'soul-making' ended with death?

Why go through all the toil and pain of 'soul-making'?

Since everyone undergoes 'soul making', what can we say of their prospects for ultimate bliss in heaven?

Having studied both Augustinian and Irenaean Theodicy, what contrasts between them can you draw?

Whereas the Augustinian theodicy sees our perfection as lying in the distant past, in an original state long since forfeited by the primordial calamity of the fall, the Irenaean type of theology sees our perfection as lying before us in the future, at the end of a lengthy and arduous process of further creation through time.

Irenaean Theodicy seems to deal mainly with moral evil.

This Irenaean type of theodicy has been criticized from a variety of points of view. Some Christian theologians have protested against its rejection of the traditional doctrines both of the fall of humanity and of the final damnation of many. Philosophical critics have argued that, while it shows with some plausibility that a person-making world cannot be a paradise, it does not thereby justify the actual extent of human suffering, including such gigantic evils as the Jewish Holocaust. Others, however, claim that this theodicy does succeed in showing why God's world, as a sphere involving contingency and freedom, is such that even these things must, alas, be possible—even though human history would have been much better without these conspicuous crimes and horrors. There is also irresolvable disagreement as to whether so painful a creative process, even though leading to an infinite good, can be said to be the expression of divine goodness.