

The problem of evil: solutions of augustine and irenaeus



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The existence of evil in this world is undeniable. Everyday, people have to face challenges and sufferings which would be difficult to believe are good. Everyone have his or her fair share of committing evil deeds or have to contend with situations of which the morality is questionable. Furthermore, the existence of natural calamities and diseases does not have particularly beneficial result to those who are affected. These lead some to question God's purpose for allowing such predicaments. God's omnipotence, omniscience and omni-benevolence do not allow the existence of evil.

The very existence of evil has led to some to believe that God's attributes are not completely accurate, or that God simply does not exist. The problem of evil does not only pose a serious question for humanity, it questions the very existence of God. It is understandable that most of those who try to find a suitable solution for the problem of evil come in defense of God and his goodness and power. Two of the most prominent defenders are St. Augustine of Hippo and Irenaeus of Lyons, who both notably posed some of the most accepted answers for the existence of evil being compatible with God.

St. Augustine and the Problem of Evil Like most defenders of religion, especially of Christianity, Augustine of Hippo was troubled by the problem of evil. He has spent much of his career understanding God and has searched for the cause of the existence of evil. At first he confessed that he " had no clear and explicit grasp of the cause of evil" (Ferguson n. p.). He, however, was desperate to find a solution if he was to defend God's immutability on the problem of evil. Like most theist, Augustine would not accept to alter any of God's attributes in order to justify the existence of evil.

He therefore sought to find another solution that would make God's characteristics be compatible with the existence of evil. First he resolved that evil is not at all a 'substance' but that it is caused by the privation of good. He argued that "things which are liable to corruption are good" in that "if they were not good at all, they could not be corrupted" (Ferguson n. p.). He argued that "all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all. " (Ferguson n. p.).

Augustine held that all things were created by God and that all things created by God are good. If evil would turn out to be a substance, then it would be good. Therefore, Augustine concluded that evil, which is not good, is not a substance, and from which it only follows that it was not created by God and is therefore immutable to evil. The argument of Augustine that evil has no substance was met with the question of human morality or the belief that suffering is a punishment from God because of sin. How could humans choose evil if it does not exist?

That humans are capable of doing moral evil only proves the distinction between good and evil, and therefore evil exists on its own, in contrast to just the deprivation of goodness. Atheists believed that if God is all-knowing, he would know the hearts of humans, thus, by knowing, would in turn give him knowledge of an impending evil performed by men, and by virtue of his omnipotence and benevolence would be able to prevent such evil from happening. Furthermore, if suffering is God's way to punish the sins of humans, then it would seem unfair that he become immutable for such evil which he has the power to prevent.

Augustine argued “ that the origin of moral evil and the punishment it entails is a consequence of the free choice of rational creatures” (Ferguson n. p.). He argued that sin is consistent with evil as deprivation of good in that sin is a product of human’s aversion to God, who is the supreme good. He defended that humans could not claim that God is the author of sin in that they had the choice whether to partake in an evil act or not. He used the account in Genesis (chapter 3) where Adam and Eve committed the original sin.

Humanity’s fall from grace as initiated by Adam and Eve is the cause of moral evil and that evil continue to exist where humans deliberately turns away from the goodness of God. It is also argued that God had created humans and the world free of evil but that God has especially given humans free will. Evil began to exist, and will continue to exist, when humans decides from his own free will to avert from God’s goodness. Augustine argued that “ because that defective movement (sin) is voluntary, it is placed within our power. If you fear it all you have to do is simply not to will it, it will not exist” (Ferguson n. .).

Just as God had punished Adam and Eve, Augustine argues that all humans deserve to be punished as all are seminally present in Adam. When faced with the question of why had God created men with free will knowing that it may, and has been, used for evil to prosper, Augustine asserted that the creation of man which was made in his own image could be perfected in virtue by giving him free will, which at first seemed to be the cause of imperfection. In the end, Augustine concluded that “ for God... evil does not exist at all” (Ferguson n. p.).

Evil is a concept made by humans who do not see or understand God's overall design. He stated that "it is clear to a learned man that what displeases in a portion displeases for no other reason than because the whole, with which that portion harmonizes wonderfully, is not seen, but that, in the intelligible world, every part is as beautiful and perfect as a whole" (Ferguson n. p.). Evil, then, turns out to be an illusion when things which appear to be evil are considered or observed from a finite perspective, from which they are only a part of the totality of God's design.

Irenaeus and the Problem of Evil Another theist who defended God in the problem of evil is Irenaeus of Lyons. Unlike Augustine who had an 'outdated' view of the free will, Irenaeus used a progressive view of free will. While Augustine's view of free will was regressive in that it caused humans to fall from God's grace, Irenaeus held that free will is the path to perfection in that humans will be able to understand evil and its consequences. Irenaeus' theodicy revolves around evil and free will. By giving humans the choice to decide, they come to know, understand, and appreciate goodness.

McGrath explains that "unless a real choice is available between good and evil, the biblical injunctions to 'choose good' is meaningless" (232). If God would every time interfere with human decisions, then free will would no longer exist. If free will was to exist, then the natural order of things would have to be designed with the possibility of evil. Therefore, Irenaeus concluded that evil is necessary in order to create humans with perfection, ultimately developing humans into the likeness of God.

Conclusion Irenaeus' theodicy, while seeming to be more optimistic than with Augustine's, offers more questions than answers in the problem of evil. While <https://assignbuster.com/the-problem-of-evil-solutions-of-augustine-and-irenaeus/>

it is true that most who have found God have done so through experiencing profoundly immense situations of suffering and distress, Irenaeus' theodicy nevertheless gives dignity to evil, which in turn gives justification to immorality, which again questions God's divine retribution against those who commit grievous sins, especially those without remorse.

Irenaeus' theodicy also posits that God could not create perfect humans without giving them free will. It questions God's benevolence by stating that God had willingly created an imperfect world, a world where humans must endure suffering before they can be united with God and his perfection. Furthermore, Irenaeus' theodicy posits that God is the source of evil, a point which had in the first place gave rise to the problem of evil.

On the other hand, Augustine had some effective solutions to the problem, although not necessarily without objection. Augustine's claim that evil had come from nothing does not answer the philosophical and theological question of evil. Even human free will causing the existence of evil still causes some to question God's omniscience and omni-benevolence. Perhaps giving up in not having an answer for the cause of evil, Augustine admitted that he does not have the answer. He is, however, convinced that evil does not come from God.