

The problem of evil: augustine and irenaeus essay



a) Explain how the theodicy of Irenaeus differs from that of Augustine. One of the main arguments used by non-believers against the existence of God is the presence of evil and suffering in the world. The term 'evil' is often used to describe something that is morally wrong.

Philosophers make a distinction between moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil results from human actions that are morally reproachable, and Natural evil results from the malfunctioning of the natural world, which produces entities such as disease and famine. St Augustine (354 – 430CE) based his arguments on the Bible, especially the accounts of the creation and the fall in Genesis. His influential theodicy rests upon two major assumptions; evil did not come from God since God's creation was faultless and perfect, and evil came from elsewhere and God is justified in allowing it to stay.

Augustine started from the assumption that God is wholly good and that God created a world free from faults. Following the teaching in Genesis 1, Augustine emphasised that 'All God has made pleased Him'; suffering and evil were therefore unknown.

He made the logical point that it is not possible for God to be responsible for evil since evil is 'not a substance'. Instead, evil refers to what is lacking in a thing; it is a 'privation of good'. Augustine used the analogy of blindness, which is not an entity in itself but an absence of sight. If God cannot have created evil, Augustine traced its origin to those areas within the world that have free will; specifically, angels and human beings.

These abused God's gift of freedom and chose wilfully to turn their attention away from God, the supreme good, and to idolise instead 'lesser goods'. In

keeping with the story of the fall in Genesis 3, he argued that the desire for power proved too much for Adam and Eve, who were tempted by Satan, a fallen angel, to break God's command and to eat the forbidden fruit. Having explained the origin of evil, Augustine went on to show that all suffering is a fully deserved consequence of human sin. Natural evil originated from the loss of order within nature following the first sin.

This destroyed the delicate balance of the world. From then on, there was to be hostility between humans and other creatures. Humans would have to battle constantly to grow enough food. Pain, such as that resulting in childbirth, entered the world, along with death.

The first sin also caused the world to become distanced from God. In this new and damaged environment, remote from God, moral evil flourished and spread. Augustine concluded his theory with a reminder of God's grace: if God was simply just, everyone would go to their rightful punishment in Hell. Through His grace, however, God sent His son to die on the cross so that some might be saved and go to Heaven. This shows that God is merciful as well as just. Irenaeus (c.

130 – 202CE), as with Augustine, traced evil back to human free will. He differs in that he admits that God did not make a perfect world and that evil has a valuable role to play in God's plan for humans. Unlike Augustine, Irenaeus admitted that God is partly responsible for evil. His responsibility extends to creating humans imperfectly, and making it their task to develop to perfection. This idea is based upon Irenaeus' interpretation of Genesis, where God said, ' Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. '

Irenaeus concluded that at first, humans were made in God's image and only later would develop into His likeness.

For Irenaeus, being in God's image involved having intelligence, morality, and personality, yet it lacked completion. Completion would only be gained upon transformation into God's likeness. It was Irenaeus' claim that evil was an essential means to this transformation. Irenaeus explained that humans did choose evil, which is why the fall occurred. But although evil clearly makes life difficult, it nevertheless is beneficial in that it enables us to understand what good is; " How, if we had no knowledge of the contrary, could we have instruction in that which is good? " – Irenaeus.

Having explained the necessity of both potential and actual evil, Irenaeus looked ahead to Heaven, where everybody will have completed the development into God's likeness, and where the sufferings on Earth will have been long forgotten.