

## SKETCHING THE TERRAIN

### Evil, God, and the human experience

Everywhere we look in the world, people are suffering. I've visited slums in Calcutta, pubs in Northern Ireland, coastal towns in Ecuador, churches in New York City, rice fields in China; there is no place where pain is absent – no place where human and animal suffering does not exist.

In some ways it seems that our world has gotten better over the eons since *Homo sapiens* first emerged on planet Earth. Indeed, there has been solid progress, especially in harnessing nature. And much of the barbarism of ancient times seems to have waned overall. But the world is certainly no utopia...not yet, anyway. The twentieth century experienced terrible human atrocities. In that century, for example, close to half a billion people died from smallpox; over 200 million lives were spent in war and *democide* (the murder of people by a government);<sup>1</sup> and roughly twelve million died from AIDS – most of them in the last fifteen years of the century.<sup>2</sup>

There is always the hope that a new century will bring peace, prosperity, and the eradication of persisting evils. But the reality is that it may well be a hope unfulfilled. Most of us have the *desire*, but if only we had the *ability* to remove the turmoil in the world, we would do so in a heartbeat. If only we had the power, evil and misery would be gone in a flash.

But wait! Many believe that there is someone who has not only the desire but the knowledge and the power to forever remove the evil and suffering which exist in the world. For most theists, there is a God who exists as an all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good being. Certainly if this kind of being exists, he/she would destroy evil and suffering. So why does it persist? Philosophical skeptic David Hume recognized this problem and expressed it concisely:

Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?<sup>3</sup>

This is one important version of the problem of evil. The roots of this argument go as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE), and the problem has taken on many forms throughout the centuries.

In this chapter we will examine the problem of evil in some of its most important manifestations – both the problem itself and various responses and solutions which have been offered historically and in recent times. Before moving on to the arguments themselves, however, let's first sketch some of the central issues relevant to the debate.

### Classifying evil

Some familiar terms are fairly easy to understand but almost impossible to define. Take the word “game,” for example. As Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out, it is virtually impossible to define this word, even though we usually have no problem picking out a game from some other activity or event.<sup>4</sup> (If you doubt the difficulty of defining “game,” just try to offer a definition that includes only games and excludes everything else.) Many other words are like this, including the term “evil.” While a number of definitions of “evil” have been offered over the centuries, debates about how it should be defined are endless. So, rather than attempting to offer a formal definition, we will use familiar examples of what are commonly taken to be evils as our standard and guide. Here, then, are some common examples of evil: natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and forest fires in which innocent life is killed; intense suffering and pain such as a child being beaten to death by a barbaric tribal enemy, or a pregnant woman dying from cancer, or a zebra being eaten alive by a lion; physical, mental, or emotional impairments such as being born with a cleft palate, or having borderline personality disorder, or experiencing weakness of will at a crucial moment, and so on. Evil comes in all variety of shapes and sizes. Given this fact, philosophers have classified evil in various ways, and one of the most common classifications is distinguishing between natural evil and moral evil.

#### Natural and moral evil

John Hick offers a very concise description of this distinction when he writes: “Moral evil is what we human beings originate: cruel, unjust, vicious, and pervasive thoughts and deeds. Natural evil is the evil that originates independently of human actions: in disease...earthquakes, storms, droughts, tornadoes, etc.”<sup>5</sup> Moral evil is the kind of evil for which a moral agent is morally responsible, including both actions (such as lying, raping, murdering, etc.) and character traits (such as maliciousness, greed, envy, and so on). Natural evil includes those events for which moral agents are not responsible.

**Natural evil:** evil which results from natural phenomena and is not brought about by the free will of a moral agent. It includes natural disasters and certain human illnesses.

**Moral Evil:** evil which results from a moral agent misusing his or her free will such that the agent is blameworthy for it. It includes human actions as well as character traits.

*Horrendous and gratuitous evil*

As I'm writing this chapter, I discovered that a dear colleague was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. She has a husband and two small children and, given the odds, she doesn't stand a great chance of living more than five more years or so. Why did this happen? Why her? Why now? What can be gained from her going through several years of chemotherapy, pain, and the terrible thought of leaving her husband and children without a wife and mother?

I also just read in the local newspaper that a mother of several children was backing out of her driveway, unaware that her three-year-old daughter went out of the house and walked behind her vehicle. The mother inadvertently backed over the little girl, killing her in the process. Don't these events sound rather pointless? And if God – an omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (wholly-good) being – exists, why would he let them happen? What's the point? These are examples of gratuitous evil, and they are innumerable.

There are also examples of evil of a different sort – what are referred to as horrendous evil. These are horrific evils which, when experienced by a person, give her reason to doubt that her life as experienced could be taken to be a great

**The Bambi case (gratuitous evil):** suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented. Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented the fawn's apparently pointless suffering? The answer is obvious, as even the theist will insist. An omnipotent, omniscient being could have easily prevented the fawn from being horribly burned, or, given the burning, could have spared the fawn the intense suffering by quickly ending its life, rather than allowing the fawn to lie in terrible agony for several days. Since the fawn's intense suffering was preventable and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn't it appear that...there do exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse[?]

good to her on the whole. Philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams offers examples of horrendous evils, including the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, slow death by starvation, and having to choose which of one's children shall live and which will be killed by terrorists.<sup>6</sup> Two illustrious examples are commonly used to exemplify gratuitous and horrendous evil – examples referred to as the Bambi and Sue cases. The Bambi case was offered by William Rowe<sup>7</sup> and the Sue case by Bruce Russell<sup>8</sup> (see boxes). The Bambi case appears to be gratuitous (there seems to be no point to its occurrence), and the Sue case appears to be horrendous (you would be hard pressed to find a more grisly example of horrific violence in which the victim could legitimately question whether, given this evil, her short life could be taken overall to be a great good to her).

There are different ways of expressing the problems which exist, given evils like these and the alleged existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent

**The Sue case (horrendous evil):** in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1986, a little girl was brutally beaten, raped, and then strangled in Flint, Michigan. The girl's mother was living with her boyfriend, another man who was unemployed, and her three children including a nine-month-old infant fathered by her boyfriend.

On New Year's Eve, all three adults went drinking at a bar near the woman's home. The boyfriend, who had been taking drugs and drinking heavily, was asked to leave the bar at 8:00 p.m. After several reappearances he finally left for good at about 9:30 p.m. The woman and the unemployed man remained at the bar until 2:00 a.m. at which time the woman went home and the man went to a party at a neighbor's home. Perhaps out of jealousy, the boyfriend attacked the woman when she entered the house. Her brother intervened, hitting the boyfriend and leaving him passed out and slumped over a table. The brother left. Later, the boyfriend attacked the woman again and this time she knocked him unconscious. After checking on the children, she went to bed.

Later, the woman's five-year-old daughter went downstairs to go to the bathroom. The unemployed man testified that when he returned from the party at 3:45 a.m. he found the five-year-old dead. At his trial, the boyfriend was acquitted of the crime because his lawyer cast doubt on the innocence of the unemployed man. But the little girl was raped, severely beaten over most of her body, and strangled by one of those men that night.

God. We will next explore two different types of problem – theoretical and existential – followed up by various objections and responses to them.

## THEORETICAL PROBLEMS OF EVIL

### The logical problem of evil

As the title of the chapter indicates, there isn't simply one problem of evil; the problems are many and multifarious. Most of the problems stem from the following two beliefs: (1) God – an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being – exists and (2) evil – in its many manifestations – exists.

In one way or another, there seems to be an inconsistency with affirming both of these beliefs. One form of the problem claims that propositions 1 and 2 in the "Logical problem of evil" box are logically inconsistent. This claim itself has taken a variety of forms, but the general structure of the argument can be put as follows:

In response, theists have generally attempted to demonstrate that either premise 2, 4, or 5 is not necessarily true. For conclusion 7 to follow logically from premises 1–6, each one of them would need to be true. If one or more of them is false, however, or if there is good reason to doubt the truth of one or more of them, this causes the entire argument to be suspect.

#### Reply 1: the "impossible to prove otherwise" argument

One reply is that the logical problem of evil doesn't work because, in order for it to succeed, it must be demonstrated that God has no morally good reason to allow any particular evil to exist. But establishing that the existence of a particular evil and the

## THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

- 1 If God exists, then God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (wholly-good).
- 2 An omnipotent being would have the power to eliminate evil.
- 3 An omniscient being would have the knowledge to eliminate evil.
- 4 An omnibenevolent being would have the desire to eliminate evil.
- 5 An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being would eliminate evil.
- 6 Evil exists.
- 7 Therefore, God (an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being) does not exist.

existence of God are incompatible cannot be accomplished. Consider these words by Paul Draper (a proponent of the problem of evil and no adherent of theism):

To understand why this is so, it is crucial to understand that the inability to produce things like round circles that are logically impossible to produce or to know statements like  $2 + 3 = 10$  that are logically impossible to know does not count as a *lack* of power or a *lack* of knowledge. In other words, not even an all-powerful and all-knowing being can have more power or more knowledge than it is logically possible for a being to have. Suppose, then, that some good, G, that is worth my suffering...logically implies that I suffer (or that God permits me to suffer). This certainly seems possible (epistemically)... Such goods would be known to an all-knowing being even if they are beyond our ken. Further, if there are such goods, then not even an all-powerful and all-knowing being could produce them without allowing me to suffer and hence even an all-powerful and all-knowing being could have a good moral reason to permit my suffering.<sup>9</sup>

We can even imagine cases where some evil may be necessary for good to result. For example, showing forgiveness to one who has evilly harmed you and is repentant, or showing courage in the face of torture, both logically require that I was harmed and tortured. Whether or not these are good examples is beside the point; it is logically possible that certain goods justify certain evils, and it is impossible to prove otherwise.

#### Reply 2: The free will defense

In the literature on God and evil, a distinction is often made between a defense and a theodicy. A *defense* is a response to atheistic arguments from evil, and its aim is to demonstrate that such arguments fail. A *theodicy* is an attempt to account for why God is justified in allowing suffering and evil. Defenses are offered in response to a variety of arguments from evil, but they are typically coupled with logical arguments. We will first examine a prominent defense and then later explore several theodicies.

One important version of the free will defense is offered by Alvin Plantinga, and in truncated form it goes something like this:<sup>10</sup> It is possible that God, even being omnipotent, could not create a world with free creatures who never choose evil. Furthermore, it is possible that God, even being omnibenevolent, would desire to create a world which contains evil if moral goodness requires free moral creatures. Here is how Plantinga expresses the response in preliminary form:<sup>11</sup>

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they

aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.

So the logical argument from evil is unsuccessful because it is at least logically possible that God (an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being) could have created a world with free creatures and yet be unable to ensure that this world would have no evil in it. Thus premises 2 and 5 may be false, and so the conclusion does not necessarily follow; the argument is flawed.<sup>12</sup>

Critics of Plantinga's argument, such as atheist philosopher J. L. Mackie, have responded by maintaining that it presupposes an incompatibilist view of free will (whereby free will is incompatible with determinism – human or divine), and that a compatibilist view is much more plausible. Given a compatibilist notion of free will, God could create "free" creatures who do no evil, for he could *determine* every one of their actions. Currently, however, most philosophers have agreed that the free will defense has defeated the logical problem of evil. For even if one grants that compatibilism is true, Plantinga offers the argument as a *logical possibility* only. As long as it is logically possible that incompatibilism is true, then the necessary conclusion of the logical problem of evil is undercut.

Another point in support of the logical problem of evil is that while Plantinga's argument may succeed in undercutting the point that *moral* evil is inconsistent with the existence of God, it does not address the problem of *natural* evil, for the evils of nature are not brought about by free creaturely choices. Plantinga's response is to suggest that it is at least logically possible (although he isn't affirming or denying the truth of the matter) that perhaps free, nonhuman persons are responsible for natural evils (e.g. rebellious spirits or fallen angels). As long as this is a logical possibility, the claim that the existence of God and natural evils are inconsistent is rebutted.

Because of these and other replies, it is now widely accepted that the logical problem of evil has been sufficiently rebutted.

### The evidential problem of evil

While the logical problem of evil has, many now believe, for all intents and purposes been rebutted, this has not left the atheist empty-handed in terms of an argument

against belief in God given the facts of evil. One further type of argument attempts to demonstrate that the existence of evil counts against rational belief in God, even though the existence of the two is not logically inconsistent. This argument, also dubbed the "probabilistic problem of evil,"<sup>13</sup> comes in many forms, but the essence of it is that if the God of theism exists, he would probably not create a world like ours – a world filled with all of the horrendous and gratuitous evil we find in it. Since our world exists, such a God probably doesn't.

### The probabilistic problem

The general structure of the argument can be put as in the box below.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the conclusion of the logical problem of evil, this argument concludes by claiming that it is *improbable* that God exists rather than that it is *necessarily true* that God doesn't exist. This argument takes on special force when reflecting on the depths of evil which exist, such as the apparently gratuitous and horrendous evils mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Isn't it more likely that God doesn't exist given the existence of these kinds of evils?

### REPLY 1: LEIBNIZ'S LAPSE

Plantinga has responded to this argument by claiming that it is unsound, for it incorporates what he calls "Leibniz's Lapse."<sup>15</sup> The objection here is that premise 2 is possibly false. Contrary to the notion of Gottfried Leibniz that our world is the best of all (logically) possible worlds, it could be that God, although omnipotent, is

## THE PROBABILISTIC PROBLEM

- 1 If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.
- 2 An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being could create any logically possible world.
- 3 If an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being were to create a world, such a being would create the best of all possible worlds.
- 4 An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being would have the power, knowledge, and desire to prevent evil and suffering in the best of all possible worlds.
- 5 It is improbable that the world which exists (i.e. our world), which is filled with large amounts of horrendous and gratuitous evil, is the best of all possible worlds.
- 6 Therefore, it is improbable that God, an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, exists.

not able to bring about just *any* logically possible world. If persons have libertarian free will, as described above, then there are certain worlds that even an all-powerful being could not create.<sup>16</sup>

Consider the following example. Suppose that the CEO of a large utility firm, we'll call him "Bob," is presented by his accountants with the fact that the company is in serious financial trouble. Suppose further that in discussions with Dave, his top accountant, Bob realizes that by shredding some documents, and making up a few white lies, he can bluff his way out of the situation and convince his stockholders that the company is doing exceptionally well. After a few years of this, he supposes, all will be well.

Now consider these two scenarios: (1) if Ron had been offered the chance by his accountant to shred documents and cover up the debt, he would have accepted the offer, and (2) if Ron had been offered the chance by his accountant to shred documents and cover up the debt, he would have rejected the offer.

Now, consider two possible worlds, *W* and *W\**, which have Ron in them and are identical up to the point where Ron is offered the chance to shred documents and cover up the debt. Suppose that in *W* he accepts the offer and in *W\** he does not accept it. Plantinga's point then is that whether *W* or *W\** become actual is partly up to God and partly up to Ron. Given Ron's free will, if Ron accepts the offer to do wrong, then God could not have brought it about that Ron rejects the offer – God could not have brought about *W\**.

Of course, much depends here on whether one accepts or rejects the libertarian view of free will. But if libertarianism is even *possible*, then premise 2 loses its force, and so too does the conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

#### REPLY 2: THERE IS NO BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

A second reply to the probabilistic problem of evil is that it presupposes that there is, in fact, a best of all possible worlds. However, according to a number of philosophers, there cannot be a best of all possible worlds. Consider this: for any best of all possible worlds imaginable, one could always imagine just one more good thing in that world (one more good apple, for example, or more "deliriously happy sentient creatures"<sup>18</sup>). If this is the case, then there could be a better world than the alleged best of all possible worlds, which is impossible.

One response to this objection is that while it may be the case that one could conceive of such a scenario, it does not follow that it could (metaphysically) happen. There could be reasons why adding one more good thing would not make a particular world better than it is.

## ROWE'S EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

- 1 Large amounts of horrendous and gratuitous evil exist which an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being *could* have prevented without losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil.
- 2 An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being *would* have prevented the horrendous and gratuitous evils which exist, unless that being could not do so without losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil.
- 3 Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being does not exist.

#### Rowe's evidential argument

Another type of evidential/probability argument which attempts to avoid the criticisms of the probabilistic argument presented above has been offered by philosopher William Rowe. Here is his argument, offered in slightly modified form, is shown in the box above.

At first glance it appears that the theist would agree with both premises. However, since this argument is in a valid form, if one agrees with the two premises, then the conclusion necessarily follows – an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being does not exist. What is the theist to do?

#### OBJECTION 1: COGNITIVE EPISTEMIC LIMITATIONS

One objection to Rowe's argument is that since we are finite, limited human beings, we are simply not in an appropriate epistemic position to make a legitimate assessment about what an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being could or would do in any given situation, including situations where evil exists. Given our obvious temporal and spatial limitations, that is, we simply cannot justifiably make moral judgments about God.<sup>19</sup>

#### OBJECTION 2: GOD CAN USE EVIL AND SUFFERING FOR OUR GREATER GOOD

A second objection is that there may well be neither gratuitous nor horrendous evil as defined above. For example, after describing his personal journey through what seemed to him at first as gratuitous evil in his life and that of his family, philosopher John Feinberg offers ten "uses of suffering" in which a *Christian* theist might take comfort. We cannot delineate them here, but they include God's allowing pain in

order to provide an opportunity to demonstrate true or genuine faith and to promote maturity in life.<sup>20, 21</sup>

#### OBJECTION 3: GRATUITOUS EVIL IS CONSISTENT WITH THEISM

A third objection has been proposed recently by adherents of open theism (discussed in Chapter 3). On this view, the existence of gratuitous (and perhaps horrendous) evil is not incompatible with theism. Open theists maintain (as do a number of traditional theists) that free will must be of an incompatibilist sort in order to be morally significant, and so it was good for God to create human beings with free will. But this freedom entails the possibility of free agents choosing both goods and evils. Neither God's omnipotence nor omniscience could preclude the existence of evil – even gratuitous evil – since real contingency turns out to be a part of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

### THE EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The existential problem of evil (which is called by different names, including the “religious problem,” “moral problem,” “pastoral problem,” “psychological problem,” and “emotional problem”), is not easy to define or delineate. Simply put, it is the notion that the existential feel of certain kinds of evil leads to disbelief in God or religious belief in general. An example may clarify the meaning and power of the problem.

Some time ago I was with a group of friends waiting in line at a restaurant. We were engaged in a fairly sophisticated theological discussion (granted, I have unusual friends!) when a young woman standing ahead of us asked if we were talking about God. “Yes, we are,” I said. “We’re actually discussing the nature and attributes of God.” “Well,” she said, “I quit believing in God two years ago. While my dad was suffering and dying of cancer, I decided that I could no longer believe in God.” As she said these words, she became emotional. I could almost feel her pain as tears began to stream down her face in her agony over her lost father and the pain he must have went through. This, no doubt, is a clear case of the existential problem of evil.

Furthermore, when considering the horrendous and gratuitous evils noted at the beginning of this chapter (especially if one has personally gone through such experiences), it is no surprise that people claim to be unable to view the world theistically – to be unable to believe in, let alone adore and worship, a personal God.

#### Reply

A common reply to the experiential problem of evil is that the “problem” here is not really an *argument* at all, and thus is not in need of a logical, rational response.

When an individual is personally confronted with significant evil and suffering, that is to say, the main thing she needs is not a logical or theoretical response, but rather care, sympathy, and friendship. As Plantinga puts it, in those moments of pain a person needs not “philosophical enlightenment,” but “pastoral care.”<sup>23</sup> Philosopher and theologian John Feinberg clarifies:

Think of a young child who goes out to play on a playground. Sometime during her play, she falls and skins her knee. She runs to her mother for comfort. Now, her mother can do any number of things. She can tell her daughter that this has happened because she was running too fast and not watching where she was going. She must be more careful next time. The mother, if she knew them, might even explain the laws of physics and causation that were operating to make her child's scrape just the size and shape it is. The mother might even expound for a few moments on the lessons *God* is trying to teach her child from this experience.

If she then pauses and asks her daughter, “Do you understand, Sweetheart?” don't be surprised if the little girl replies, “Yes, Mommy, but it still hurts!” All the explanation at that moment doesn't stop her pain. The child doesn't need a discourse; she needs her mother's hugs and kisses. There will be a time for the discourse later; now she needs comfort.<sup>24</sup>

### THREE THEODICIES

While pastoral care may well be an important element in responding to those experiencing pain and suffering, it does nothing to address the lingering theoretical problems noted above. Are there ways of actually explaining why God would permit evil in the world? There are, indeed. There have been a number of attempts to justify God and God's ways given the reality of evil. Such responses are called theodicies, and next we will examine three important ones.

#### Augustine's free will theodicy

As noted earlier, a theodicy is different from a defense in that the aim of a theodicy is to justify God and God's ways given the existence of evil in a world created by God, whereas a defense is an attempt to demonstrate that the antitheistic arguments from evil are unsuccessful. There are different types of theodicies, and one of the most historically significant is that offered by the great theologian and Church Father, St. Augustine. It's referred to as the *free will theodicy*, and one way of delineating it is shown in the box overleaf.<sup>25</sup>

## AUGUSTINE'S FREE WILL THEODICY

- 1 God created the universe, and everything in it was good.
- 2 Some of God's creation – namely *persons* – were given the good gift of freedom of the will (having freedom of the will in the universe is better than not having it, since a moral universe requires it, and a moral universe is better than a non-moral or amoral universe).
- 3 Some of these created persons – first angels, and then human beings – freely chose to turn from God's goodness; that is, they "sinned" and fell from their state of perfection (i.e. the "Fall" of humanity).
- 4 This turning of the will, or sinning, brought moral and natural evil into the universe.
- 5 Evil, though brought about by created persons, is not a thing or entity; it is a metaphysical deprivation, or lack, or privation, of the good (a *privatio boni*).
- 6 God will finally rectify evil when he judges the world, ushering into his eternal kingdom those persons who have been saved through Christ and sending to eternal hell those persons who are wicked and disobedient.

This has been the most utilized theodicy in the West since the fifth century of the common era, and it is still widely used today.<sup>26</sup> It has also been extensively criticized. Two objections are as follows.

### Objections

For Augustine, God is entirely sovereign and not subject to the choices and whims of fallible and finite persons. But if God is sovereign, how did evil emerge in his universe? There appears to be a conflict between Augustine's free will defense on the one hand and his view of God on the other. For it seems that God, understood this

**St. Augustine** (354–430 CE) has been one of the most influential Christian philosophers, theologians, and Church Fathers in history. His spiritual pilgrimage led him from skepticism as a young adult to Bishop of Hippo in his later years. His work on human freedom spanned his career, and virtually every medieval philosopher of renown in the Christian West interacted with Augustine's work on free will and related issues such as divine foreknowledge, predestination, and grace. His most important philosophical works include the *City of God*, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, and his autobiography, the *Confessions*.

**Theodicy:** the word "theodicy" comes from two Greek terms – *theos* (God), and *dikei* (justice). A theodicy is an attempt to vindicate the goodness and justice of God given the reality of evil.

way, could have created persons who are spiritual saints and thus always choose the good. So why did they choose to sin?

Furthermore, how could an omnibenevolent being create a hell where countless persons will spend eternity in suffering and agony? There seems to be a conflict here between God's sovereignty and God's goodness.

### Hick's Irenaean or soul-making theodicy

Based on the work of Irenaeus (c. 130–c.202 CE), an early Christian bishop, John Hick has developed a theodicy which is in stark contrast to the Augustinian type. Instead of God creating a paradise with perfect human beings who then fell into sin, the Irenaean theodicy has it the other way round. God created good but undeveloped persons, for moral maturity requires experiencing trials and hardships in life. The existence of evil, then, is not the result of perfect persons choosing to sin, but rather is a necessary element of the process of developing immature human (and perhaps other) persons into spiritually and morally mature beings, and evil is a part of God's soul-making strategy. The theodicy can be expressed as in the "An Irenaean (soul-making) theodicy" box overleaf.

### Objections

A number of objections have been offered to Hick's soul-making theodicy. One of them focuses on the apparent contrary evidence. Many people do not improve through the hardships that they endure; oftentimes the difficulties in one's life cause his life to end in utter tragedy. A quick glance at the evening news on virtually any day will provide ample demonstration of this point. A defender of the theodicy could respond that this present life isn't all there is, and God will have eons of time to work on an individual who responds poorly now. But of course this relies on the further belief in an afterlife – something not abounding with empirical evidential support.

Another objection to the soul-making theodicy is that it seems to be a rather brutish way for God to mature souls. To suggest that all of the suffering and pain – all of the horrendous evils – ever experienced throughout history was the result of God's grand cosmic intent, makes God appear somewhat less than the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being most theists take God to be.

### AN IRENAEAN (SOUL-MAKING) THEODICY

- 1 God created the world as a good place (but not paradise) for developing human persons both spiritually and morally.
- 2 Through evolutionary means, God brought about human persons with freedom of the will and the capacity to mature in love and goodness.
- 3 Evil is the result of both the creation of a good soul-making world and of human choice to sin.
- 4 By placing human persons in this challenging environment, through their own free responses they have the opportunity to choose what is right and good and thus to gradually grow into the mature persons (exhibiting the virtues of patience, courage, and generosity, for example) that God desires them to be.
- 5 God will continue to work with human persons, even in the afterlife if necessary, by allowing them opportunities to love and choose the good, such that in the eschaton everyone will be brought into a right relationship with God.

#### A process theodicy

Process theology (and philosophy) was first developed by Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). It was further developed by Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) and more recently by John Cobb, Jr. (1925–). It is based on the foundational premise that God and the world are in flux. While God is not the world (this is pantheism), God *participates* in the world (this is panentheism) – God and the world are in process together. God not only acts on the world, but is also acted on. All things, including God, are in the process of *becoming* rather than statically *being*. In this process of becoming, entities respond to each moment by making choices, and these choices are real and significant; they are never lost but are continually added to God's overall experience. God learns from such experiences, and thus is ever growing in knowledge and understanding. This view of God's knowledge is clearly in contrast to traditional theology in which God's omniscience is eternally complete and exhaustive.

Also, on the process view, God's omnipotence is rejected. God's power is not understood to be infinite, but limited as other free entities, such as human persons, also have the power to make their own choices. Furthermore, God's power is persuasive rather than coercive; God does not force creatures to do the good, but attempts to lure them in the right direction. Unfortunately, they cannot always be so lured, and sometimes they make the wrong choices; sometimes they do evil things. But all entities, including God, continue to evolve, and the hope is that eventually all evil will be eradicated as free creatures learn from prior experiences (their own and those of history) what is ultimately good and right.

### A PROCESS THEODICY

- 1 God is not the transcendent creator who created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but is God-in-the-world; this is panentheism in which everything is *in* God but not everything *is* God.
- 2 God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent in the traditional sense; God's power is shared with other entities and God's knowledge increases as his experiences increase.
- 3 The universe is characterized by evolution, process, and change, some of which has been brought about by the self-determined free choices of entities including God and finite persons.
- 4 Some of the choices made by human persons are good and some are evil. There is the hope that evil will continue to be engulfed as all experiences are synthesized in God's own conscious life.

We can outline the process theodicy as in the box above.<sup>27</sup>

#### Objections

Various objections and criticisms have been offered to process thought and its attending theodicy, and we will briefly note three of them. First, the typical process critique of the traditional understanding of divine power has been called into question. While one strain of Calvinistic theology includes God's power as being exclusive and entailing absolute sovereign determination of all events, this is certainly not the only, nor even the most common, understanding of divine power. So this process critique is ill-placed against most traditional notions of omnipotence. On the other hand, the process critique of traditional theology which affirms human free will, and thus a limitation of sorts on God's power, is arguably weak. For example, in response to a free will theodicy, process philosophers have claimed that such a view allows that God could eliminate any particular free-will-oriented evil that happens, but he doesn't. Thus, God could stop a rapist before raping, cause a terrorist bomb to malfunction, or make certain that a thief is caught before escaping. Since God could do such things without interrupting free will but doesn't, they argue, God is not really good on this account. However, defenders of the free will theodicy respond by arguing that a type of free will which disallows one's actions to be effectual is not truly free will after all. So their objection isn't warranted.

A second objection has to do with the process denial of creation *ex nihilo*. On the process account, the world was not created by God out of nothing. There are various explanations for the existence of the world by process thinkers, but a common one is

that it is eternal; it never began to exist. However, this view contradicts the standard big bang model of the universe which is currently widely held by cosmologists and astronomers. Of course the verdict on this issue is still out (for more on this topic, see Chapter 4).

A final objection is that the process theodicy does not really seem to be much of a theodicy. God is too impotent to eliminate the evils in the world as God has neither the knowledge nor the power to ultimately take care of the problem. Further, many see evil and suffering in the world as getting worse, not better. While God always does the best he can on the process view, it doesn't seem that he's doing very much, for evil abounds. Nor does it appear that God is improving in his ability to evolve a better world. Given this, without the eschatological hope of a final elimination of evil, the word "theodicy" here may be a misnomer.<sup>28</sup>

## SUMMARY

In this chapter we examined various aspects of the problem of evil. After describing some significant terms and concepts in discussions of evil, I noted that there are a number of "problems," not just one, and I divided them into two categories: theoretical and existential. I then delineated three theoretical problems: logical, probabilistic, and Rowe's evidential argument. We examined each of these arguments as well as objections to them and responses to many of the objections. We looked at the free will defense and the "impossible to prove otherwise" response – two responses to the logical argument, and noted that they have proven rather effective in rebutting the argument.

Next, we noted the existential problem of evil and saw that while people often disbelieve in God due to the existential angst during times of experiencing evil, this is not an argument per se against theism. Thus, what's often needed in such cases is not rational argument but pastoral care. However, while pastoral care is often helpful and necessary, this obviously does not address the theoretical aspect of the problem. So, we next examined three theodicies – attempts to justify God given the evil in the world: the Augustinian, Irenaean, and process theodicies.

The problem of evil has been around for a very long time, and many people have put much thought into accounting for its (apparent) reality. No one has yet provided a solution that is universally satisfactory. Perhaps requiring such is to expect more than is within the realm of human possibility.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. What is the problem of evil? Why is it a problem, and who is it a problem for?
2. Explain the logical problem of evil. Does the free will defense answer the theistic burden satisfactorily? Why or why not?
3. What is horrendous evil? What is its relevance to the problem of evil?
4. What is gratuitous evil? What is its relevance to the problem of evil?
5. Which of the theoretical problems of evil do you find most compelling? Are the solutions offered satisfactory? Explain.
6. Some Christian philosophers, including Marilyn Adams, have argued that an adequate response to evil should include a discussion of God becoming human (the incarnation of Christ) and suffering horrendous evil (through Christ's crucifixion), thus identifying with human pain and suffering. Do you think this idea would provide solace to one experiencing terrible evil? Why or why not?
7. What is the difference between a defense and a theodicy?
8. Explain the difference between Augustine's and Hick's theodicies. Can they both be consistently affirmed? Explain.
9. Is evil a problem for the atheist? Why or why not?
10. Explore the way a particular non-theistic worldview accounts for evil and suffering. What are some similarities with this way of understanding evil and suffering and theistic descriptions? What are some differences?

## FURTHER READING

- Adams, Marilyn M. (1999) *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (A comprehensive analysis of the problem of horrendous evil by a careful thinker.)
- Adams, Marilyn M. and Robert M. Adams (1990) *The Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford University Press. (A scholarly collection of essays from a variety of perspectives by leading philosophers.)
- Bowker, John (1970) *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (An accessible and well-researched study on suffering in the major world religions.)
- Davis, Stephen T., ed. (2001) *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*. New edn. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. (A revised edition of a classic work in theodicy from different philosophical and theological perspectives; includes essays, critiques, and rejoinders.)
- Feinberg, John S. (2004) *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*. 3rd edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. (Presents a philosophical/theological framework of theodicy.)
- Hick, John (1978) *Evil and the God of Love*. 2nd edition. New York: Harper & Row. (Presents the soul-making theodicy discussed in this chapter; a classic in philosophy of religion.)

- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, ed. (1996) *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (Includes sixteen essays on evil by eminent philosophers and theologians.)
- Hume, David (1955) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Parts 10 and 11. Ed. H. D. Aiken. New York: Hafner Publishing. (A classic work in philosophy of religion; includes a discussion among three fictional characters concerning the nature of God, and raises the issue of evil and suffering.)
- Lewis, C. S. (1962) *The Problem of Pain*. New York: Macmillan. (Lewis focuses on the value of pain and suffering as God's "megaphone" to rouse a morally deaf world.)
- Ling, Trevor (1977) *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil: A Study in Theravada Buddhism*. Oxford: Oneworld. (Examines myths of evil in Buddhist depictions of human existence and flourishing.)
- Mackie, J. L. (1982) *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (See especially his chapter on the problem of evil.)
- Martin, Michael (1990) *Atheism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. (Includes a wide-ranging critique of theistic responses to the problem of evil; note especially Chapters 14–17.)
- Peterson, Michael L. (1998) *God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issues*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. (The best general introduction to the topic in print.)
- Pike, Nelson (1963) "Hume on Evil," *Philosophical Review* 72 (2): 180–97. (An important examination of Hume's remarks on the problem of evil.)
- Plantinga, Alvin (1977) *God, Freedom and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. (A classic account of the free will defense.)
- Shankara ([8th century] 1975) *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press. (The clearest exposition of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism; the introduction contains a section on evil.)

## WEBSITES

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/>

A helpful and concise entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on the problem of evil written by atheist Michael Tooley.

<http://www.infidels.org>

A website operated by the Internet Infidels, an organization dedicated to defending and promoting a naturalistic worldview; contains a number of articles on the problem of evil.

<http://www.leaderu.com>

Leadership University is a web-based organization that contains a number of articles in support of the theistic worldview, including articles on the problem of evil.

[http://www.qsmithwmu.com/an\\_atheological\\_argument\\_from\\_evil\\_natural\\_laws\\_\(1991\).htm](http://www.qsmithwmu.com/an_atheological_argument_from_evil_natural_laws_(1991).htm)

A preprint of an article by atheist philosopher Quentin Smith from the *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 29 (1991): 159–74.

<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~howardd/god,evil,andsuffering.pdf>

A preprint of an article by Christian theist philosopher Daniel Howard-Snyder from *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael Murray, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, 76–115.