

2C Religious responses to the problem of evil (ii)

Irenaean type theodicy

Who was Irenaeus?

St Irenaeus Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyons, France) (130-202 CE), was a Greek cleric who was known for his work against heresy in particular Gnosticism. Irenaeus' theodicy maintains that evil and suffering in the world are created by God for a legitimate reason. Rather than take the responsibility away from God, Irenaeus puts it firmly in God's hands, but shows that He is justified in creating it and allowing it to remain.

Value of soul- making

Irenaeus sees the purpose of the world as a place for making souls.

- **We DID NOT FALL from perfection but were created imperfect with the potential for perfection.**
- **Genuine human perfection is developed through free choice.**
- We are placed on Earth, where we suffer and struggle.
- **Suffering allows us to develop into perfection**, as God intends, through our free choices.
- **God is like a craftsman who moulds and makes His creation beautiful.**

John Hick developed Irenaeus' theodicy and agrees with Irenaeus that if the Earth was a place for making happy lives, then it would be a poor creation.

- **This world is a vale of soul-making because suffering helps build us to become more like God.**
- As a result, **Hick called this a soul-making theodicy.**

Who was John Hick?

John Hick (1922-2012) was an English philosopher and theologian who wrote *Evil and the God of love*. He is best known for **advocating religious pluralism**.

Human beings created imperfect

- Irenaeus took his inspiration from an interpretation of scripture.
- *"Let us make mankind in our **image**, in our **likeness**".*
- Irenaeus understood this to mean that when God created humans, **He made us in His image, so with some capacity like Him**; this would include **morality, intelligence and free will**.
- However, we are not yet like Him and we must grow into the likeness of God. Hick agrees that humans did not fall from perfection, they were created imperfect. So, God has responsibility for our capacity for evil.

Notes

Epistemic distance

- If God was evident to us, then we would be forced into believing in Him and doing His will.
- **Hick makes the comparison** of having the chief of police in your car as you drive along the road.
- While you would theoretically be free to drive over the speed limit, you would not do so because you would be constrained by that person's presence.
- **God stays at an epistemic distance so that we can freely choose to develop into his likeness.**

Second- order goods

God allows natural evil in the world because it provides the opportunity for spiritual growth:

- It would be easy to be good in a perfect world.
- **If resources were plentiful and if disasters didn't happen, there would be no opportunity for growth.**
- When evil occurs, we have the **chance to demonstrate virtues like charity, altruism and compassion.**
- These would be unnecessary in a perfect world.
- **These virtues are second-order goods that rely on the existence of evil to flourish.**
- The world must contain the full range of possible evil to ensure the full range of possible good.
- The counterfactual hypothesis shows that the world in its current state gives us the impetus to improve.
- A world with no famine would contain no charity.
- In a perfect world, we would have no reason to try,

Eschatological justification

- **Irenaeus and Hick argue that our salvation lies on our choices on Earth.**
- **It has less to do with Christ's work** on the cross and more to do with whether our faith works have developed us during our lifetime.
- **We are not eternally damned if we do not achieve moral perfection in this lifetime (many of us do not) because we continue to develop in purgatory.**
- **The innocent who suffer are rewarded in heaven.**
- The person who causes harm must wait until they gain perfection to reach heaven. But all can achieve it in their own time.

Notes

Challenges to Irenaean type theodicies

Irenaean theodicies have much in their favour:

- **They are consistent with the scientific principle of simple world developing complexity.**
- God is responsible but justified in created and allowing evil because of **the long-term goal.**
- It gives **meaning to human struggles** without dismissing the reality of people's experience.
- The responsibility for our eternal life is in our own hands.

Concepts of universal salvation are unjust.

- **However, some feel that universal salvation is not consistent with God's just nature.**
- Hitlers and Stalin were responsible for killing millions of people, yet they will eventually reside in heaven with the very people they tortured.
- It might take them longer to achieve it, but they can get there.
- This seems to trivialise the sufferings of the victims of their regimes.
- **In addition, there is no incentive to try and choose the good in this life as all will be rewarded in the end.**

Evil and suffering should not be used as a tool by an omnibenevolent God.

- **Writers such as Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, challenged the idea that a loving God deliberately makes us suffer to achieve a higher goal.**
- Dostoyevsky tells numerous stories of children suffering such as a boy hunted by a general's dogs, or a small girl forced by her parents to eat her own excrement.
- Dostoyevsky claims that all the knowledge of good and evil in the world is not worth one child's tears.
- **A truly good parent or teacher would never deliberately cause suffering to teach a lesson.**

The immensity of suffering and unequal distribution of evil and suffering

If we are all created in the image but not yet the likeness of God, we surely all need to go through a similar refining process. However:

- Some people live in excessive luxury.
- Others live in extreme suffering.
- An evil doer can be rewarded with power and wealth.
- Innocent people suffer.

A good parent allows a child to be sad while bad behaviour is patiently corrected. A parent who punishes the child who was hit could be considered to show favouritism. A parent who beats their child unconscious as a punishment would be arrested as an abuser. Yet this theodicy excuses God for treating humanity this way. God could achieve His goal with less or fairer suffering.

Notes

1. Richard Swinburne argues that the extremes of suffering are necessary for our will to be free. We must be capable of a full range of evil so that our behaviour has meaning. If God intervened to prevent extreme suffering this would be a 'toy world', where our actions matter but not very much. Richard Swinburne also states, 'extreme evils' are relative. For example, if we lived in a world where the worst thing that could happen is being pricked by a needle, this would be equivalent of the worst evils thinkable. All suffering is relative.
2. John Hick gave the analogy of a gun, the bullets of which when shot at a person's head, only bounce off and never harm. God could create a world that limited the suffering caused by our actions, but in such a world you could never choose to shoot someone and so you would never really be free to choose evil. So, you could never really be good.

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