

The Problem of Evil - Philosophy A Level

38–48 minutes

The problem of evil says God's existence is in some sense incompatible with the existence of pain, suffering, and evil. The argument is that if an omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (perfectly good) God *did* exist, then evil would *not* exist. But since evil *does* exist in our world – people get stolen from, struck down with disease, etc. – the argument is that God *does not*.

Like many ideas in philosophy, the problem of evil can be traced back at least to the ancient Greeks – in particular, Epicurus:

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. 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?

– David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

This question has been the subject of theological debate for millennia – so much so that it even has its own vocabulary. The word *theodicy* means a theological response to the problem of evil – an explanation of why an all-loving and all-powerful God allows evil.

Broadly, there are two *versions* of the problem of evil: The logical formulation and the evidential formulation. This post covers both versions and covers how various theodicies might respond. If you're looking for a specific argument or objection you can jump straight to it using the links below:

- **Versions of the problem of evil:**
- [The logical problem of evil](#)

- [The *evidential* problem of evil](#)
 - **Theodicies** (i.e. responses to the problem of evil):
 - [The free will theodicy](#)
 - [Why does God allow *natural* evil?](#)
 - [Couldn't we have free will *and* no evil?](#)
 - [Transworld depravity](#)
 - [The soul-making theodicy](#)
 - [Why does God allow animal suffering?](#)
 - [Why does God allow such terrible evils?](#)
 - [Why does God allow pointless evils?](#)
 - [The best of all worlds theodicy](#)
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The *logical* problem of evil

The Abrahamic, Monotheistic concept of God includes the attributes of [omnipotence](#) (maximal power) and [omnibenevolence](#) (maximal goodness). But the logical problem of evil argues that the existence of such a being is **logically incompatible** with the existence of evil.

The argument is that God's omnipotence would mean He would be *powerful* enough to eliminate all evil, and His omnibenevolence would mean He would *desire* to eliminate all evil. And so, if God *did* exist, He would just get rid of all evil and evil wouldn't exist. But since evil does exist – people get robbed and their houses get destroyed by hurricanes – this being – an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God – does not exist.

“The problem of evil, in the sense in which I shall be using the phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good. And it is a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs... In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions,

so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three.”

– J.L. Mackie, *Evil and Omnipotence*



J.L. Mackie frames this as a *logical inconsistency* and this argument has come to be known as the inconsistent triad. He says it's logically possible for any 2 of the following claims to be true simultaneously but for all 3 to be true would result in a contradiction:

- God exists and is omnipotent
- God exists and is omnibenevolent
- Evil exists.

For example, you could have an omnipotent but not omnibenevolent God alongside evil, say, because such a being wouldn't necessarily desire to get rid of the evil, which would explain why evil exists. Or, you could have an omnibenevolent God who wants to get rid of evil but isn't powerful enough to get rid of evil – not omnipotent – which would also explain why evil exists. But you couldn't have an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being in a world containing evil, such as ours, because, again, such a being would just get rid of evil and evil wouldn't exist.

The logical problem of evil is the stronger claim compared to the [evidential problem of evil \(below\)](#). Mackie is essentially saying – *a priori* – that there is

no possible scenario and no possible world where all three claims could be true simultaneously, in the same way that there is no possible world where you could have a triangle that has 4 sides. In other words, the logical problem of evil says God's existence is as *logically incompatible* with the existence of evil as 4-sidedness is incompatible with a triangle. This is an example of a [deductive](#) argument.

The *evidential* problem of evil

Unlike the [logical problem of evil \(above\)](#), the evidential version allows that it *is* logically possible that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would allow evil – that there's not necessarily a *logical* contradiction there.

But the evidential problem of evil argues that just because it's *possible* for God to exist, that doesn't make it *reasonable* to believe God exists. It's logically possible that you could jump on to the moon from Earth, for example – there's no contradiction in that idea – but that idea doesn't tell you much about how things work in the actual world.

“There remains, however, what we may call the *evidential* form – as opposed to the *logical* form – of the problem of evil: the view that the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, *rational support* for atheism.”

– William Rowe, *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism*

So the evidential problem of evil argues, [a posteriori](#), that it's **highly unlikely** that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would create our actual world with the amount of evil and unfair ways it is distributed.

For example, we might ask:

- If God exists, why do good, charitable, kind people sometimes get cancer or die in freak accidents? And why do bad, exploitative, selfish people sometimes live long happy lives despite being evil?
- Why would God allow innocent babies to be born with painful congenital

diseases?

- Why would God allow such extreme examples of evil, like natural disasters that wipe out entire villages of people?

Or the following example from William Rowe:

“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.”

– William Rowe, *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism*

The point is that although we might accept that God would allow *some* evils, there are many examples of evils that seem completely pointless, random, and unfair.

The evidential problem of evil asks: *How likely is it that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God couldn’t have prevented a single one of these without sacrificing some greater good?*

The evidential problem of evil says: It's *possible*, but not *likely*.

Yes, we can always come up with *logically possible* reasons why God couldn't get rid of these evils without sacrificing a greater good – so the logical problem of evil fails. But this is the evidential problem of evil. The question is not “is it *possible* that God would allow such evils?”, the question is “how *likely* is it that God – omnipotent and omnibenevolent – would allow every one of these seemingly pointless and random evils?”

So where the logical problem of evil was a **deductive** argument, claiming that the existence of God and evil are impossible *a priori*, the evidential problem is **inductive**: It says the amount and apparent pointlessness of evil makes God's existence improbable. It's strong *evidence* that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

Logical problem of evil	Evidential problem of evil
<i>A priori</i>	<i>A posteriori</i>
Deductive	Inductive
God's existence is <i>logically impossible</i> given the existence of evil	The excessive amount and unfair distribution of evil in our actual world is <i>good evidence</i> that God <i>probably does not exist</i>

The free will theodicy



The **free will theodicy** has its roots in the theology of St. Augustine. Augustine wrote that evil is not something *created* by God but is instead a privation – a *lack* – of good. God originally created a perfect world

without evil (the Garden of Eden) but evil entered the world due to the misuse of free will by angels and humans.

“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

– Genesis 2:17 (KJV)

From a *philosophical* perspective, the argument is that free will is a *higher-order* good that is incomparable to any evil that results from its misuse. In fact, the argument goes, without free will there could be no genuine good at all – because without free will ‘good’ actions would just be programmed behaviours (like a robot) and not have any actual moral value.

So, **the free will theodicy says an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God allows evil for the *greater good* of free will.** That a world containing evil + *free will* is better and more morally valuable than a world containing only good and no evil but without free will.

What about *natural* evils?

Moral evil is evil that results from the choices of agents exercising their free will – things like thefts and murders and so on. The free will theodicy (above) says that, although these acts are *bad*, their negative impact is outweighed by the inherent value of free will itself. To eliminate theft or murder entirely, God would have to remove free will, which would reduce overall goodness in the world.



But a potential issue is that this explanation only covers these *moral* evils and not **natural evils** such as:

- Earthquakes
- Hurricanes
- Tsunamis
- Drought
- Disease

People suffer as a result of natural evils – they could be described as a form of ‘evil’ – but there’s no greater good of free will here. Unlike moral evil, natural evil isn’t caused by human choices, so appealing to free will doesn’t help explain why it exists. If someone dies in a hurricane or a disease, no one exercised free will to make that happen.

And so the argument that God allows evil because it’s necessary for free will doesn’t cover these kinds of suffering. Free will can’t explain why God would allow natural disasters, disease, or other forms of suffering that seem entirely independent of human choice.

Natural evil as moral evil committed by nonhuman agents

In response to this objection, Alvin Plantinga argues that natural evil could be another form of moral evil – but committed by the free will of non-human agents like Satan or demons:

“But a more traditional line of thought is indicated by St. Augustine..., who attributes much of the evil we find to Satan or to Satan and his cohorts... Satan rebelled against God and has since been wreaking whatever havoc he can. The result is natural evil. So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of nonhuman spirits.

– Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*

In this extract, Plantinga is talking about the [logical problem of evil \(see above\)](#) specifically. He isn’t arguing this is the *actual* explanation of natural evils, only that it is a *possible* explanation:

Augustine is presenting what I earlier called a *theodicy*, as opposed to a *defense*. He believes that in fact natural evil (except for what can be attributed to God’s punishment) is to be ascribed to the activity of beings that are free and rational but nonhuman. The Free Will Defender, of course, does not assert that this is true; he says only that it is *possible*... He points to the possibility that natural evil is due to the actions of significantly free but nonhuman persons. We have noted that there is no inconsistency in the idea that God could not have created a world with a better balance of moral good over moral evil than this one displays. Something similar holds here; possibly natural evil is due to the free activity of nonhuman persons; and possibly it wasn’t within God’s power to create a set of such persons whose free actions produced a greater balance of good over evil.”

– Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*

As mentioned above, to defeat the logical problem of evil just requires a conceivable and *logically possible* explanation of evils. And so, with that standard in mind, this response seems successful: It *could* be the case that natural evil is the result of the free will of nonhuman agents like demons and Satan. Plantinga’s free will defence gives a logically consistent explanation of why God might permit both moral and natural evils.

However, when faced with the [evidential problem of evil \(above\)](#), critics would argue it seems unlikely that every instance of suffering as the result of natural evil is tied to some necessary greater good of the free will of

nonhuman agents.

Why can't God create a world with free will *and* no evil?

Another potential response to the free will theodicy is to argue that, even if free will is a higher-order good, it's possible to have free will but without evil.

Mackie argues that if it's logically possible to freely choose good on *one* occasion, then it's logically possible to freely choose good on *every* occasion:

“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*

If this is the case, then the [free will theodicy](#) fails and the logical problem of evil re-emerges:

- It's logically possible that there is a world with both free will and no evil
- If God is omnipotent, then God is *powerful* enough to create any logically possible world
- And if God is omnibenevolent, then God would *desire* to create the best logically possible world

So the question re-emerges: *How can evil exist alongside an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God?*

Transworld depravity

Alvin Plantinga argues that, [contrary to what Mackie says \(above\)](#), it could

be *logically impossible* for God to create this 'best of both worlds' scenario that has both free will and no evil.

Firstly, Plantinga rejects Mackie's characterisation of free will. He says that being genuinely free – what he calls 'significant freedom' – means having the real possibility of choosing evil as well as good. If God were to create creatures who always and only chose good, then they wouldn't truly be free in any meaningful sense.

“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.”

– Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*

In other words, there's a contradiction between being significantly free and being causally determined by God to always choose good. If God forced us never to sin, we would no longer have genuine freedom at all.

Secondly, Plantinga develops this idea further with the concept of **transworld depravity**. This is the possibility that for every free creature God could create, there would always be at least some situation in which that creature freely chooses evil. If that's the case, then God couldn't create a world containing significantly free creatures who always and only do what is right.

“I shall call the malady [...] transworld depravity [...] By way of explicit definition:

(33) A person P suffers from transworld depravity if and only if the following holds: for every world W such that P is significantly free in W and P does only what is right in W, there is an action A and a maximal world segment S' such that

S' includes A's being morally significant for P

S' includes P's being free with respect to A

S' is included in W and includes neither P's performing A nor P's refraining from performing A

and

(4) If S' were actual, P would go wrong with respect to A.

(In thinking about this definition, remember that (4) is to be true in fact, in the actual world—not in that world W.)

What is important about the idea of transworld depravity is that if a person suffers from it, then it wasn't within God's power to actualize any world in which that person is significantly free but does no wrong—that is, a world in which he produces moral good but no moral evil.”

– Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*

So Plantinga's answer to Mackie is that because of transworld depravity his 'best of both worlds' scenario with significant freedom and no evil may simply be *logically impossible*. And, since [omnipotence](#) is often understood to mean God can do anything *logically* possible, this wouldn't diminish God's power and undermine His omnipotence.

This doesn't prove that such a world is actually impossible – but it shows that it *might* be, which is enough to defeat the logical problem of evil. If every possible free creature suffers from transworld depravity, then it would be logically impossible for God to have created a world with free will *and no evil*.

So we can summarise Plantinga's free will defence like this:

- It's possible that a world with significantly free creatures who freely perform good is more valuable than a world with no free creatures at all.
- God can create significantly free creatures, but He cannot cause or determine them to always do right; if He did, they would not be significantly free.
- To be significantly free is to be capable of both moral good *and* moral evil.
- It's possible that transworld depravity is true, and if so then in every possible world with significantly free creatures, at least some of them will choose evil.
- Therefore, it's possible that God cannot create a world with significantly free creatures and no moral evil.
- Therefore, it's possible that God can only prevent moral evil by removing the

greater good of significant freedom.

- Therefore, the existence of moral evil is logically compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

The soul-making theodicy



The **soul-making theodicy** originates in the theology of St. Irenaeus, who lived in the 2nd Century AD, so it's sometimes referred to as the *Irenaeian* theodicy. From a theological perspective, the big difference between Irenaeus and [Augustine \(above\)](#) is that:

- Augustine said evil is purely humanity's fault – *turning away* from an original state of perfection because of sin – and so God didn't create evil.
- But Irenaeus said God *did* create evil – as part of His long-term plan for humanity to *progress towards* an ultimate state of perfection.

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”
– Genesis, chapter 1 verse 26 (KJV)

The Irenaeian interpretation of the verse above is that God made humanity in His *image* in the sense of giving us free will, with the long term plan that we would grow into His *likeness* by learning to freely choose good over evil.

So, from a philosophical perspective, the soul-making theodicy can be summarised as: **Evil exists for the greater good of spiritual development.** For example:

- You couldn't develop the virtue of *courage* if there wasn't the evils of pain and fear to overcome.

- You couldn't develop the virtues of compassion and sympathy for others if there wasn't the evil of suffering.

So the soul-making theodicy says God created these evils so we could develop spiritual and moral virtues like these in a process that John Hick calls '*soul-making*'.

An important part of the soul-making theodicy is [free will](#). If God just made everyone spiritually perfected from the get-go, this would get rid of all evil but it would also get rid of free will. Virtues like compassion or courage wouldn't mean anything if they weren't developed in response to genuine free choices made in the face of evil. It would be like God created an army of robots who blindly follow His rules because they've been *made* to, and not because they genuinely, freely, *want* to.

So, in short, the soul-making theodicy says that evil is necessary to allow for the greater good of developing spiritual virtues. And that these virtues are only valuable if freely chosen, rather than forced.

Epistemic distance

A big part of the soul-making theodicy is **epistemic distance**. This is the idea that giving humans *true* freedom of choice meant God had to create a world in which his existence could be *doubted*.

This epistemic distance is necessary because if God's existence were undeniable, people wouldn't act out of genuine moral concern. They would follow God's rules out of fear of His power or in hope of divine reward. And in such a world, soul-making would be impossible: virtues like kindness or compassion would not be developed for their own sake, but only to please God. Likewise, you could never cultivate *true* courage if you knew with absolute certainty that God existed because you'd never have any genuine fear – you'd know that God would always protect you and so with no real risk, there could be no real opportunity for courage.

“But how can a finite creature, dependent upon the infinite Creator for its very existence and for every power and quality of its being, possess any

significant autonomy in relation to that Creator? The only way we can conceive is that suggested by our actual situation. God must set man at a distance from Himself, from which he can then voluntarily come to God. But how can anything be set at a distance from One who is infinite and omnipresent? Clearly spatial distance means nothing in this case. The kind of distance between God and man that would make room for a degree of human autonomy is **epistemic distance**, In other words, the reality and presence of God must not be borne in upon men in the coercive way in which their natural environment forces itself upon their attention. The world must be to man, to some extent at least, *etsi deus non daretur*, 'as if there were no God'. God must be a hidden deity, veiled by His creation. He must be knowable, but only by a mode of knowledge that involves a free personal response on man's part, this response consisting in an uncompelled interpretative activity whereby we experience the world as mediating the divine presence. Such a need for a human faith-response will secure for man the only kind of freedom that is possible for him in relation to God, namely cognitive freedom, carrying with it the momentous possibility of being either aware or unaware of his Maker."

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

Why would God allow animal suffering?

A potential issue for the soul-making theodicy, however, is that of animal suffering. The argument is that animals aren't able to develop spiritually like human beings – there's no soul-making for them – and yet animals suffer the pain of evil just like human beings.

"To some, the pain suffered in the animal kingdom beneath the human level has constituted the most baffling aspect of the problem of evil. For the considerations that may lighten the problem as it affects mankind – the positive value of moral freedom despite its risks; and the necessity that a world which is to be the scene of soul-making should contain real challenges, hardships, defeats, and mysteries – do not apply in the case of the lower animals."



Again, the soul-making theodicy says that evil is necessary for the greater good of spiritual development. But there's no such greater good in the case of animal suffering, there's only the evil.

So the argument is that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would get rid of animal suffering because it would reduce the amount of evil in the world without sacrificing any greater good of soul-making.

Hick's response: Epistemic distance

Hick considers a couple of explanations for animal suffering, one of which connects back to the idea of [epistemic distance \(above\)](#). He says:

“As a possible way of doing this, the concept of epistemic distance developed in the last chapter suggests that man's embeddedness within a larger stream of organic life may be one of the conditions of his cognitive freedom in relation to the infinite Creator. Seeing himself as related to the animals and as, like them, the creature of a day, made out of the dust of the earth, man is set in a situation in which the awareness of God is not forced upon him but in which the possibility remains open to him of making his own free response to his unseen Maker. Protestant theology has generally affirmed that the animals exist for the sake of man, but has interpreted this in terms of man's rule over the lower creation. Possibly, however, another and more fundamental way in which, within the divine purpose, sentient nature supports and serves its human apex is by helping to constitute an

independent natural order to which man is organically related and within which he exists at an epistemic distance from which he may freely come to the God who has thus bestowed upon him the autonomous status of a person”

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

Hick says that if animals didn’t exist, this would remove the epistemic distance between humanity and God. The world might appear too obviously designed specifically for humans and their soul-making and so God’s existence and purpose would be too obvious, removing genuine free choice. Again, humans would act morally out of fear of punishment or hope of reward, rather than from freely chosen virtues.

By including animals in the world, God placed humans within a wider natural order that could plausibly exist without Him. [Evolution](#), for example, offers a natural explanation for life that doesn’t require divine intervention. Humans are not presented as obviously unique or separate, but as part of the same fragile, organic stream of life as other creatures.

This broader, seemingly autonomous environment preserves epistemic distance. Humans experience vulnerability to pain, death, and natural processes just as animals do. These conditions prevent the divine plan from being too apparent, ensuring that humans have the opportunity to freely choose good for its own sake rather than for reward or avoidance of punishment.

Why couldn’t God get rid of *terrible* evils?

Another issue for the soul making theodicy is the existence of particularly terrible evils – like particularly gruesome murders, torture, or mass genocide. The argument is that even if *some* evils are necessary for the greater good of spiritual development, this same spiritual development could occur with less extreme evils – without these 10 out of 10 evils. This response says we could have the same good of soul-making with just, say, the 9 out of 10s or lower.

For example, God could have prevented the most horrific acts, like serial killings or large-scale atrocities, but still allowed smaller, more everyday evils – like theft, dishonesty, or losing a job – to provide humans with opportunities to develop virtues such as courage, patience, and compassion. These lesser evils could still create challenges and moral growth without the same level of suffering and horror.

Critics argue that the existence of extreme evils seems disproportionate to the benefits of soul-making. If the goal is moral and spiritual development, it's unclear why God would need to allow events that cause such immense pain and trauma when milder challenges would suffice.

Hick's response: 'Terrible' evil is relative

Hick's response is that 'terrible' evils are *relative*. If God secretly got rid of every kind of evil worse than a broken leg, then we would still be asking: "why does God allow such terrible evils as a broken leg? Why couldn't we achieve soul-making in a world where a stubbed toe is the worst evil?"

In other words, if God kept getting rid of the 10 out of 10 evils, then the 9 out of 10s would be the new 'terrible evils'. And then we could keep repeating the process until eventually God would eliminate all evil and, with it, all free will. Hick says:

"For evils are exceptional only in relation to other evils which are routine. And therefore unless God eliminated all evils whatsoever there would always be relatively outstanding ones of which it would be said that He should have secretly prevented them... If, for example, divine providence had secretly prevented the bombing of Hiroshima we might complain instead that He could have avoided the razing of Rotterdam. Or again, if He had secretly prevented the Second World War, then what about the First World War, or the American Civil War, or the Napoleonic wars, and so through all the major wars of history to its secondary wars, about which exactly the same questions would then be in order? There would be nowhere to stop, short of a divinely arranged paradise in which human

freedom would be narrowly circumscribed, moral responsibility largely eliminated, and in which the drama of man's story would be reduced to the level of a television serial."

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

Why couldn't God get rid of *pointless* evils?

The [evidential problem of evil \(above\)](#) argues that many instances of evil seem completely pointless and unfair. Hick refers to these as 'dysteleological' evils – evils that don't seem to serve any clear purpose. This captures the core of the evidential problem: even if some suffering could be justified as necessary for a greater good, there remain countless examples of evils that seem utterly undeserved or meaningless.

For example, a child struck down by cancer at a young age appears to suffer without reason. Conversely, many people who commit serious wrongs may seem to escape punishment, living healthy and comfortable lives. [Or Rowe's example of the fawn in the forest above](#). These evils seem completely meaningless and randomly distributed – they don't seem to fit with any divine plan or order.

The soul-making theodicy says that evil exists to provide humans with opportunities for moral and spiritual growth. But evil appears to be distributed in ways that are random and disproportionate. This shows that, even if some suffering can contribute to soul-making, much of it seems gratuitous or excessive, calling into question whether all instances of evil truly serve that purpose.

"The problem of suffering remains, then, in its full force. If what has been said in this and the previous chapter is valid the problem does not consist in the occurrence of pain and suffering as such; for we can see that a world in which these exist in at least a moderate degree may well be a better environment for the development of moral personalities than would be a sphere that was sterilized of all challenges. The problem consists rather in the fact that instead of serving a constructive purpose pain and misery

seem to be distributed in random and meaningless ways, with the result that suffering is often undeserved and often falls upon men in amounts exceeding anything that could be rationally intended.”

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

Hick’s response #1: Epistemic distance

Hick acknowledges that pointless evils present a serious challenge. But he offers a couple of reasons why such apparently random evils may be necessary. His first point returns to the idea of [epistemic distance \(above\)](#): If the world worked like a moral vending machine – where sinners were immediately struck down by divine punishment and good deeds were instantly met with divine rewards – then this would remove the epistemic distance necessary for soul-making:

“Further, the systematic elimination of unjust suffering, and the consequent apportioning of suffering to desert, would entail that there would be no doing of the right simply because it is right and without any expectation of reward. For the alternative to the present apparently random incidence of misfortune would be that happiness should be the predictable result of virtue, and misery the predictable outcome of wickedness. Under such a régime virtuous action would be immediately rewarded with happiness, and wicked action with misery... Accordingly a world in which the sinner was promptly struck down by divine vengeance and in which the upright were the immediate recipients of divine reward would be incompatible with that divine purpose of soul-making that we are supposing to lie behind the arrangement of our present world.”

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

In other words, if there was an obvious cause-and-effect relationship between doing evil and getting punished and between doing good and getting rewarded, people wouldn’t learn to do what’s good *because it’s good*, they’d simply do what’s good because they got rewarded for it.

Again, the point of soul-making is to *freely* develop spiritual virtues – to learn to choose good because you actually *want* to do good and value it. But without epistemic distance, that wouldn't happen: People would just learn to do good and avoid evil for *selfish* reasons. And so there would be none of the genuine spiritual growth into God's likeness that the soul-making theodicy is all about.

Hick's response #2: Certain virtues require seemingly pointless evils

Hick's second explanation of apparently pointless evils is certain virtues could only be developed in response to suffering that appears meaningless and undeserved.

When we encounter cases of truly unjust suffering – like a baby dying of cancer – it evokes a deep compassion and sympathy that would not arise if the suffering had an obvious purpose. If we could always see God's plan behind every hardship, our response would be different. Instead of feeling genuine compassion, we would just rationalise the suffering as part of a greater good, and so never develop true and unselfish concern for others.

“To test this possibility let us employ once again the method of counterfactual hypothesis, and try to imagine a world which, although not entirely free from pain and suffering, nevertheless contained no unjust and undeserved or excessive and apparently dysteleological misery. Although there would be sufficient hardships and dangers and problems to give spice to life, there would be no utterly destructive and apparently vindictive evil. On the contrary, men's sufferings would always be seen either to be justly deserved punishments or else to serve a constructive purpose of moral training.

In such a world human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is bad for the sufferer. We do not acknowledge a moral

call to sacrificial measures to save a criminal from receiving his just punishment or a patient from receiving the painful treatment that is to cure him. But men and women often act in true compassion and massive generosity and self-giving in the face of unmerited suffering, especially when it comes in such dramatic forms as an earthquake or a mining disaster. It seems, then, that in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized. For it is precisely this feature of our common human lot that creates sympathy between man and man and evokes the unselfish kindness and goodwill which are among the highest values of personal life. No undeserved need would mean no uncalculating outpouring to meet that need.”

– John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*

The point, then, is that it is precisely the apparent pointlessness of much suffering that makes possible our deepest expressions of love, compassion, and generosity. Without undeserved evils, Hick argues, there would be no opportunity for the kind of unselfish, unconditional virtues that soul-making is meant to cultivate.

The best of all worlds theodicy

[Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#)’s ‘**best of all worlds**’ theodicy turns the question of the problem of evil around: The existence of evil is not evidence *against God*; it is evidence that this is the best possible arrangement of reality – *the best possible world*.

Leibniz argues that God – because He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent – created our particular world because it is the best possible world that could exist:

“God, having chosen the most perfect of all possible worlds, had been prompted by his wisdom to permit the evil which was bound up with it, but

which still did not prevent this world from being, all things considered, the best that could be chosen.”

– Leibniz, *Theodicy*

So, according to Leibniz, even though the world contains evils, it also contains an optimal balance of goods and evils compared to any alternative world God could have created.

The existence of evil, then, is not evidence against God’s goodness – rather, it is part of the structure of the best overall reality. For example, Leibniz points out that some apparent evils may actually contribute to greater goods that we cannot see:

” It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen this world as it is. We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good.”

– Leibniz, *Theodicy*

In other words, what we perceive as ‘pointless’ evil may in fact be necessary for a greater harmony or perfection in the universe. Leibniz suggests that evils, even severe ones, can contribute to goods that could not exist without them.

For example, consider a great story or novel. The narrative only achieves its emotional depth and impact because the characters face real challenges and hardships. Without struggle, the triumphs would feel hollow. Similarly, in the natural and moral world, some evils may be necessary to bring about virtues, resilience, or other forms of greater good that would otherwise be impossible.

So for Leibniz, the problem of evil dissolves once we realise that evil is not

random or pointless but part of the optimal order of things. Even if some individual sufferings seem gratuitous, pointless, or extreme, God sees the total picture. And that picture, from God's *infinite* perspective, is maximally good. If we think we could conceive of a better world, that's just because we're finite, limited, and can't see the full picture. This is why Leibniz asks: "*For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together?*"

Leibniz is not denying the reality of evil, but he's insisting that evil is compatible with God's perfection because no better world could have been created.

So in short: As God is perfect, He would create the best possible world. And since this is the world that exists, this must be the best possible world.

References/further reading:

- *The Puzzle of Evil* by Peter Vardy
 - [*Evil and Omnipotence* by J.L. Mackie \(Mind, New Series Vol. 64, No. 254 \(April 1955\), pp. 200–212\)](#)
 - *God, Freedom and Evil* by Alvin Plantinga
 - [*The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism* by William Rowe \(American Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 16, No. 4 \(October 1979\), pp. 335–341\)](#)
 - *Evil and the God of Love* by John Hick
 - [*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume](#)
 - [*Theodicy* by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#)
 - [Stanford page on the problem of evil](#)
 - [Stanford page on theodicies](#)
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See also:

- [Cosmological arguments](#)
- [Ontological arguments](#)
- [Teleological arguments](#)