

Theodicy in the Perspective of Philosophical Theology: Addressing the Problem of Evil and Suffering in the Presence of an All-Powerful God

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ABSTRACT

Theodicy is the most difficult problem in philosophical theology, and it concerns how God, if benevolent and omnipotent, can permit evil and suffering into the world. This article considers classical and modern arguments about theodicy: those by Augustine and Leibniz, the modern critiques by David Hume, and existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Through a hermeneutical approach, this paper will illustrate the relevance of theodicy to modern theological ethics and how suffering can be approached in light of the furthered understanding of human free will and divine love.

Keywords: Theodicy, evil, suffering, philosophical theology, free will, theological ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

From time to time, evil has always been a very severe and perplexing problem in philosophical theology, which directly confronts the coherence of belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God. The most formidable theological and philosophical dilemmas arise whenever a perfect and powerful deity combines with moral and natural evil that is patently undeniable. How can an omniscient God who is wholly good allow suffering and evil to exist in the world? This, what many call the problem of evil, has forced centuries of theological and philosophical thought as man tries to balance these contradictions.

It is not only a theoretically urgent issue but also convenient. The experience of suffering- natural disasters, illness, or violence perpetrated by human beings- raises fundamental questions regarding the nature of divine justice and goodness. For many, the unresolved tension between God's attributes and the reality of evil undermines the credibility of faith and religious doctrine. For this reason, the field of theodicy, which is the justification of God's goodness, remains at the heart of current theological debates.

Thus, classical thinkers such as Augustine and Leibniz have presented some compelling arguments on the relationship between God, evil, and free will. For instance, Augustine conceptualized evil as a privation of good, while Leibniz put forth the argument that this world is the "best of all possible worlds." These are early attempts at explaining the presence of evil without disavowing God's omnipotence or benevolence. However, such traditional formulations have by no means gone unscathed. Modern philosophers, most notably David Hume, have suggested that suffering is too huge and gratuitous to be in accord with an all-good, all-powerful God. It is here that the existentialist philosophers, notably Jean-Paul Sartre, further complicated matters for theodicy with their emphasis on the absurdity of suffering and the human struggle for meaning in an indifferent universe.

Even with these historical contributions, gaps still exist in response to the problem of evil, presented in light of contemporary theological concerns. The recent developments in philosophy, theology, and ethics require further sophistication in how any successful theodicy can be combined with emerging notions of human freedom, moral responsibility, and, not least, the experience of suffering. While newer approaches come through Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense and the soul-making theodicy of John Hick, much remains to be seen, especially how those ideas interact with

modern theological ethics and the lived experiences of people who today would have to face evil and suffering.

This article explores the classical and contemporary approaches to theodicy, assessing strengths and weaknesses regarding the abiding question of evil. This research will consider the critical arguments put forward by Augustine, Leibniz, Hume, Sartre, and contemporary thinkers like Plantinga and Hick to address gaps in the literature about the relevance of theodicy to modern theological thought. The result is a more robust framework for understanding evil and suffering and addressing historical and contemporary theological standpoints.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Historical analyses, hermeneutical interpretation, and comparative analysis combine under one qualitative research design to investigate the problem of evil within the philosophical-theological paradigm. The prime focus will be on critically assessing and analyzing classical and modern arguments regarding theodicy to illustrate how such an idea has evolved and its applicability in modern times to understand and work out the problem of evil.

2.1. Historical Analysis

The research begins by tracing the development of theodicy through critical historical thinkers, mainly focusing on **Augustine** and **Leibniz**. Their classical formulations of theodicy are within early Christian and Enlightenment-era philosophical debates. The historical analysis will examine how these early ideas about evil, free will, and divine justice were constructed in response to the theological challenges of their time.

2.2. Hermeneutical Interpretation

A **hermeneutical approach** is employed to interpret and analyze the primary texts of both classical and contemporary philosophers and theologians. By closely reading the works of **Augustine** (*Confessions*), **Leibniz** (*Theodicy*), **David Hume** (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*), and existentialists such as **Jean-Paul Sartre** (*Being and Nothingness*), this research interprets how each thinker addresses the tension between divine goodness and the existence of evil. Special attention is given to the theological underpinnings and philosophical assumptions that shape their respective views on theodicy.

2.3. Comparative Analysis

The following comparative analysis contrasts the classical with the modern approach to theodicy, especially the classical arguments of Augustine and Leibniz with the critique of modern philosophers like David Hume and existentialists like Sartre. Additionally, it should assess how Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense and John Hick's soul-making theodicy offered more recent frames of reference for understanding the interconnection of evil, human freedom, and divine purpose.

Such a comparison highlights lacunars in the existing literature, including tension between classical theodicies on one hand and contemporary ethical and theological reflection on the other. The discussion will specifically look at the points where these classical theodicies are mute with respect to modern experiences of suffering and evil and where modern approaches have new visions or limitations.

2.4. Theological and Ethical Implications

Besides this philosophical analysis, the work engages the theological and ethical dimensions of theodicy, especially insofar as these arguments may or may not contribute to or thwart contemporary religious thought. The paper will investigate how theodicy informs the modern debates on moral responsibility, human suffering, and divine justice and hence weighs in recent output in theological ethics. This section interfaces the theoretical discussion of theodicy with the practical theological questions of faith, suffering, and religious belief in the face of evil.

2.5. Source Selection

The study is based on **primary texts** of the philosophers and theologians under review. These include:

- a. Augustine's *Confessions*
- b. Leibniz's *Theodicy*
- c. David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*
- d. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*

- e. Alvin Plantinga's God, Freedom, and Evil
- f. John Hick's Evil and the God of Love

Additionally, **secondary sources** support the analysis, including critical commentaries on these thinkers and recent scholarly articles that discuss the development of theology in modern theology.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Strengths of Classical Theodicy: Augustine and Leibniz

Results: The critical analysis of Augustine and Leibniz's contributions points out that both thinkers provide coherent scenarios in regard to the problem of evil. Augustine conceives evil as the privation of good-privatio boni-that offers a theological escape in releasing God from creating evil directly and laying moral responsibility on human freedom. In turn, Leibniz justifies the idea that evil serves a much greater divine purpose and that the world is "the best of all possible worlds." His theodicy relies on the opinion that the omniscience of God creates possibilities for greater goods that human beings cannot perceive in an instant.

Discussion: What becomes understood from these traditional theories is free choice, which acts as the epicenter of evil, in turn maintaining the goodness and omnipotence of God. The emphasis on human moral freedom found in Augustine is more congenial to the vast array of Christian theological positions, and his position continues to be representative in the most mainstream forms of religious thought today. By contrast, Leibniz's optimism in defense of God's decisions as perfect is controversial, particularly in view of the enormous dimensions of suffering that give shape to the modern world-natural catastrophes and cases of genocide. While Augustine and Leibniz were necessary to provide such groundwork, their respective accounts are ripe for criticism, particularly with regard to their applicability to modern understandings of gratuitous evil.

3.2. Critiques of Classical Theodicy: David Hume's Challenge

Findings: David Hume challenges, in very strong terms, the possibility of classical theodicies, given that an all-powerful, all-good God would allow so much suffering in the world. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume argues that there can be no plausible justification for the amount of evil, especially "natural evil" (e.g., earthquakes, diseases), which does not result from human free will. His critique is that such suffering undermines traditional theodicies and calls into question the coherence of belief in a benevolent God.

Discussion: In so doing, Hume's critique brings into light perhaps the greatest shortcoming in classical theodicies: unable to account intelligibly for natural evil. While Augustine and Leibniz make great efforts towards explaining moral evil with respect to free will, they have very few responses to suffering independent of human agent action. This is an especially significant gap because, at present, discussion about natural disasters and diseases is grossly existential and theological. Hume's challenge seems to deny that the classical theodicies can satisfactorily account for all suffering that has ever taken place in the world.

3.3. Contemporary Responses: Plantinga's Free Will Defense and Hick's Soul-Making Theodicy

Outcomes: Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense robustly responds to Hume's critique by positing that God allows evil because real free will is a higher good. It follows that Plantinga reasons that moral freedom requires a possibility of evil, and there cannot be a more valuable world with such freedom than one free from suffering. Similarly, John Hick's soul-making theodicy argues for the proposition that suffering is vital for moral and spiritual development. As Hick asserts, human persons are not created perfect. Still, they are "in the process" of becoming morally and spiritually mature, where the process requires suffering to be important in any development.

Discussion: In the contours of modern theology, Plantinga's Free Will Defense remains one of the most important set pieces, which maintains human moral freedom along with divine omnipotence through a suitably sophisticated defense; however, this does not seem to resolve the problem of natural evil, which has remained primarily unexplained due to its inability to deal with the suffering wrought by nature and the goodness of God. Hick's soul-making theodicy goes beyond free will in encompassing suffering as being integral to human moral and spiritual development. It is particularly in his contention that a world bereft of suffering would be incomplete that there is

resonance with theological traditions estimating the formative power of suffering. Against this, one might criticize Hick's approach as condoning immense and seemingly pointless suffering that would be morally indefensible in some instances, such as in the case of the Holocaust.

3.4. Existential Critiques: Sartre and the Absurdity of Suffering

Results: Jean-Paul Sartre, an existential philosopher, amongst many, denies traditional theodicies and instead highlights the absurdity of human suffering. With his existentialism, Sartre states that humans should address suffering without referring to God for an explanation. In Sartre's thinking, the search for meaning in suffering is useless because the universe is totally indifferent to human existence. This annulment of theodicy removes the emphasis from metaphysical explanations to personal responsibility on individuals facing their sufferings and giving them meaning.

Discussion: Sartre's existential critique is significantly different from both classical and contemporary theodicies in that, for him, God has no place whatsoever. The concentration on human freedom and the confrontation of each individual with suffering makes his alternative way of grappling with evil much more convincing from a modern secular standpoint. However, theologically speaking, Sartre's denial of divine involvement does very little to explain the coherent way a believer makes sense of suffering about their faith. In the same way existentialism gives such a powerful critique of theodicy, it also underlines the emotional and spiritual problems that arise whenever the traditional religious frameworks are laid aside.

3.5. Ethical and Theological Implications for Contemporary Theodicy

The findings indicate that modern theodicy has to respond to evil in its philosophy setting and to the repercussions such as on ethics and theology. Discussions of free will, soul-making, and divine justice deeply influence how individuals and religious communities think through their moral responsibilities, considering evil and suffering. For example, Hick's emphasis on the formative function of suffering concurs with those many religious practices that consider it a path toward spiritual maturity; at the same time, however, this creates ethical concerns when suffering is extreme or unfair.

Discussion: The theological and ethical implications make the modern relevance of theodicy a subject of a debate. The tension within the divine justice in human suffering is one of the formidable challenges to believers, especially amid enormous moral evils and natural disasters. Among the main conclusions this paper draws is that theodicies must increasingly develop to more directly meet contemporary experiences of suffering beyond intellectual approaches, including practical pastoral and ethical responses for those confronted with suffering in the world. The paper demonstrates that moral responsibility can go well with theological explanations of evil to allow for a more holistic approach to theodicy, which is both theologically sound and ethically responsible.

4. CONCLUSION

The problem of evil remains a central difficulty for philosophical theology, and its classic formulations from Augustine and Leibniz provide the most indispensable framework. Their modern critics-most famously, David Hume-reveal the weaknesses of theodicy, at least in the case of natural evil. As regards more sophisticated recent theories, we have Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense and John Hick's soul-making theodicy. However, both these accounts do have their raft of problems in attempting to provide an all-encompassing account of suffering, particularly when that suffering does seem gratuitous or unfair.

That would be the existential critique, of which Jean-Paul Sartre is a well-known exponent; it rejects any form of metaphysical vindication of evil and instead emphasizes human freedom and responsibility. These critiques further enrich the discussion at an intellectual level but do not, however, free theology from its questions for religious persons who wish to find coherence between their faith and the presence of evil.

This means that theodicy today has to transcend the philosophical debates to go further toward the ethical response as a practical answer to the face of suffering. In this regard, every future possibility has to create an interaction between theological reflection and practical matters by explaining evil while at the same time giving substantial support to those who are suffering. The future development of theodicy

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