MODEL ESSAY 03 · Philosophy of Religion

Assess whether natural suffering can have a defensible purpose.

Thesis: Natural evil can have a limited developmental purpose only where suffering is proportionate, intelligibly connected to growth and not a replaceable means. Soul-making therefore explains some risk and struggle but cannot plausibly give every instance of natural evil a purpose; the strongest conclusion distinguishes a general purpose for a law-governed world from a particular purpose for each victim's suffering.

Argument map

1. Claim: A stable, challenging world can make morally significant action and character formation possible.
Counter: A general opportunity for growth does not show that each earthquake, disease or animal pain is necessary.
Interim judgement: Soul-making supplies a credible world-level purpose but overreaches if applied to every event.

2. Claim: Natural danger may be inseparable from embodied freedom, responsibility and predictable causal laws.
Counter: An omnipotent God could apparently preserve regularity while reducing the scale and unequal distribution of harm.
Interim judgement: Regularity explains why intervention cannot be constant, not why this world must contain its worst horrors.

3. Claim: Apparently gratuitous animal, infant and destructive suffering counts against universal soul-making.
Counter: Sceptical theism warns that finite minds cannot survey every divine purpose and consequence.
Interim judgement: Humility blocks certainty but does not erase the evidential weight of repeated non-developmental suffering.

4. Claim: Eschatological fulfilment could complete unfinished soul-making and defeat suffering.
Counter: Later compensation does not retroactively make a person's agony an acceptable instrument.
Interim judgement: Hope can prevent suffering from being final, but purpose must also respect the sufferer rather than merely use them.

Complete response

Introduction

The claim is stronger than the familiar observation that natural evil is difficult to reconcile with God. To say that it has no purpose rules out not only a complete theodicy but any role for pain, danger or mortality within creation. Natural evil means suffering arising principally from the natural order-disease, earthquakes, genetic conditions and predation-rather than directly from a human choice. A persuasive discussion must therefore separate three questions: whether a world containing natural risk can have a purpose; whether particular instances of suffering are necessary for that purpose; and whether a good God may use suffering as a means at all. Irenaean soul-making, developed by John Hick, gives the strongest positive answer because courage, compassion and mature freedom require real difficulty. Yet the quantity, intensity and unequal distribution of suffering make it implausible that every instance develops its victim. I will argue that a regular and vulnerable world may be purposive as the setting of finite freedom, while much natural evil within it remains apparently gratuitous. The statement is therefore too absolute at world level but substantially right about many individual cases.

Structure: Defines natural evil, exposes the ambiguity in ‘purpose’, and states a qualified thesis rather than announcing two sides.

AO2: The three-question distinction creates criteria used to weigh each theodicy.

Soul-making gives natural risk a world-level purpose

The Irenaean tradition treats humanity as created for growth rather than finished perfection. Hick argues that persons must develop from the image of God towards likeness through free responses made within an epistemic distance from their creator. A world without danger would remove many serious goods: courage needs risk, compassion needs vulnerability, and responsible action needs consequences that cannot simply be cancelled. Natural evil can therefore contribute to a purposeful environment without being individually sent as punishment. This is more convincing than claiming that an earthquake was designed to improve a named victim, because the regular possibility of harm, rather than a secret intention behind each death, produces the arena for moral development. It also explains why God cannot make virtues ready-made. An automatically brave being that had never faced fear would possess a programmed disposition, not an achieved character. However, the argument establishes only that some challenge is needed. A school may require difficult work without requiring every pupil to be crushed by it. Likewise, moderate danger might permit courage and compassion while childhood cancers and mass disasters destroy the agency through which growth was meant to occur. Soul-making therefore shows that the existence of natural evil can have a general purpose, but it does not yet justify its actual extent.

AO1: Explains Irenaean development, Hick's epistemic distance and the link between challenge and freely formed virtue.

AO2: The school comparison tests proportionality: necessary difficulty does not entail devastating excess.

Regular natural laws support agency but do not settle severity

A second purpose arises from the regularity of nature. Meaningful choices require a predictable connection between action and outcome: fire must normally burn, gravity must operate consistently and biological organisms must be vulnerable to their environment. If God suspended a law whenever harm approached, agents could neither learn about the world nor take stable responsibility within it. Hick's vale of soul-making thus needs an autonomous creation whose processes do not advertise constant divine management. Some natural evils are the reverse side of goods within that order. Tectonic movement supports a habitable planet but can produce earthquakes; cellular reproduction sustains life but can malfunction. This account avoids treating every disaster as a bespoke lesson and gives a coherent reason for divine non-intervention. Nevertheless, regularity and severity are different variables. A law-governed world could conceivably contain fewer lethal pathogens, less extreme pain or more effective natural warning systems. The defence also risks moving too quickly from ‘some harmful side effects accompany finite life’ to ‘the existing distribution is the best possible’. Omnipotence does not mean doing the logically impossible, but the critic need only identify a less destructive coherent world, not a painless fantasy. Natural law therefore gives suffering a structural explanation and protects responsible agency; it does not demonstrate that the worst natural evils are purposefully necessary.

AO1: Connects soul-making to stable natural causation rather than presenting miracles as an easy solution.

AO2: Distinguishes consistency from intensity and places the burden on the theodicy to explain avoidable excess.

Apparently gratuitous suffering is the decisive objection

William Rowe's evidential argument focuses not on a formal contradiction but on suffering for which no outweighing good is visible. His example of an animal dying slowly after a forest fire is powerful because it removes the common reply that suffering always improves a rational human agent. Long before humans existed, predation, disease and extinction characterised sentient life; today infants may die before character can develop and disasters often reduce rather than enlarge a person's freedom. The scale matters. A brief pain that warns of injury is readily purposive, whereas prolonged agony after rescue is impossible serves no comparable biological function. A defender may answer with sceptical theism: finite minds should not expect to see every reason available to an omniscient God. Yet this weakens moral reasoning. If apparently pointless torment might conceal an adequate divine reason, confidence that love and justice resemble what humans ordinarily mean by those terms becomes unstable. It may also discourage action, since preventing the suffering could obstruct its unknown purpose. The better response is not to declare every case purposeful but to admit epistemic limits in both directions. Human beings cannot prove that no divine reason exists, but repeated patterns of destructive, non-developmental pain provide evidence against universal purpose. Rowe therefore does not show that natural evil can never contribute to good; he shows why the claim that all of it does so is less probable than theism's defenders often assume.

AO1: Explains Rowe as an evidential rather than logical argument and applies it beyond human soul-making.

AO2: Tests sceptical theism by tracing consequences for moral language and the duty to prevent harm.

Free will explains human responses better than natural causes

The free-will defence initially appears better suited to moral evil, since earthquakes do not choose to kill. Alvin Plantinga's narrower achievement is to show that God and evil are not logically inconsistent if significantly free creatures sometimes misuse freedom. One could extend this indirectly: people choose whether buildings are safe, medicine is shared and disaster victims are protected, so a natural hazard becomes a catastrophe partly through moral and political failure. This insight is important because natural suffering is often intensified by poverty, corruption and indifference. Such cases can become opportunities for solidarity or evidence of unjust choice. Yet the extension cannot cover the underlying hazard, congenital disease or pre-human animal pain. Appeals to fallen angels merely relocate the unexplained wrongdoing and lack independent plausibility. Nor should a victim's suffering be called purposeful because another person receives an opportunity to help; that risks using the victim as a tool for someone else's virtue. Free will therefore explains why a purposeful world permits responsible human responses to nature and why God does not prevent every harmful consequence. It contributes little to showing that natural evil itself has a purpose.

AO1: Keeps Plantinga's logical free-will defence distinct from a full explanation of natural evil.

AO2: Recognises the social production of disasters, then identifies what that still leaves unexplained.

Eschatological hope can defeat suffering without making it a means

Hick completes soul-making eschatologically: if development is unfinished at death, divine love must provide further life in which every person can reach fulfilment. This strengthens the theodicy because earthly outcomes are radically unequal, and a good creator would not abandon those whose agency was destroyed before it matured. Marilyn McCord Adams similarly argues that horrific evils must be defeated within the life of the sufferer through an incommensurate relationship with God, not merely balanced by a larger total of happiness elsewhere. The distinction between compensation and defeat is crucial. Giving someone future joy does not make their earlier torture a necessary educational technique; rather, redemption can integrate a life without calling the evil good. This preserves the religious claim that natural evil is genuinely evil while denying that it has the final word. The weakness is evidential: an afterlife cannot be independently inspected and may seem introduced precisely where the earthly explanation fails. More importantly, eschatology changes the answer to the question. It can show that suffering will be overcome and that no person is finally lost, but not that each natural evil possessed an instrumental purpose when it occurred. At most, it supports the purpose of creation as a whole while allowing many of its tragedies to remain unintended consequences of finite existence.

Scholar use: Adams sharpens the distinction between defeating an evil for its sufferer and merely compensating for it.

AO2: Grants eschatology its strongest role, then shows that redemption is not the same as original purpose.

Conclusion

Natural evil does not have one undifferentiated purpose. Hick persuasively shows why a created world fit for free, embodied and morally developing persons cannot be a consequence-free paradise. Regular laws, vulnerability and genuine risk make responsible agency possible, so the absolute statement that natural evil has no purpose should be rejected. However, this is a purpose of the world's general conditions, not a licence to describe every disease or disaster as divinely required. Rowe's apparently gratuitous cases, animal suffering and harms that destroy agency expose the gap between necessary challenge and excessive misery. Free will explains many human amplifications of natural danger but not nature's underlying processes, while eschatological hope may defeat suffering without turning it into a good means. The most defensible judgement is therefore asymmetrical: theism can identify why some natural risk belongs within a purposeful creation, but it carries the harder burden of explaining excess. Unless that burden is met, many particular natural evils should be regarded as lacking a discernible purpose even if the vulnerable world in which they occur does not.

AO2: Ranks the arguments and makes the world-level versus event-level distinction decisive.

Structure: No new scholar appears; the conclusion refines the thesis in light of the completed argument.

Transfer these moves

- Distinguish a purpose for stable natural risk from a purpose for every individual tragedy.
- Use proportionality and replaceability to test whether suffering is genuinely needed for a claimed good.
- Keep Plantinga's logical defence separate from a theodicy of natural suffering.
- Eschatological redemption may overcome an evil without proving that God intended it as a means.