PAPER 1 · TOPIC 06

The Problem of Evil

Evil challenges belief in a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good. Augustine explains evil through privation and the Fall; John Hick gives suffering a developmental role in a world designed for free soul-making.

Key Terms

Glossary

Moral evil - Wrong and suffering caused through the choices or character of moral agents.
Natural evil - Suffering arising through disease, disasters and natural processes rather than a direct human choice.
Logical problem - The claim that evil is inconsistent with the simultaneous existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God.
Evidential problem - The claim that the amount, intensity or apparent pointlessness of suffering makes such a God improbable.
Theodicy - An attempt to justify God's permission of evil as compatible with divine goodness and power.
Privation - Augustine's view that evil is a corruption or lack of due goodness, not a created substance.
Epistemic distance - Hick's distance from unmistakable divine presence that permits genuinely free moral and spiritual development.
Soul-making - Development from immature creatures into persons capable of freely formed virtue and relationship with God.

Key Scholars

Augustine of Hippo - 354-430 CE
John Hick - 1922-2012
Thomas Aquinas - 1225-1274
Charles Darwin - 1809-1882

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Logical and evidential challenges

The logical problem combines three claims: God is able to remove every evil, knows every evil and always wills the good. Evil nevertheless exists. J. L. Mackie argues that the set becomes inconsistent when joined to assumptions that goodness eliminates evil wherever possible and unlimited power has no relevant limit. A defence succeeds logically if it shows even one possible morally sufficient reason for God's permission.

The **evidential problem** is less ambitious and often stronger. Even if some evil could be compatible with God, extreme or apparently pointless suffering seems unlikely under perfect providence. A remote animal dying slowly, a child's agony or suffering distributed without regard to character may add little to freedom or growth. The issue is probability and scale, so merely showing logical compatibility does not answer it.

Augustine: creation, privation and the Fall

Augustine begins from original perfection: a good God creates every nature good. Evil is not a rival substance created by God but **privation**, as blindness is a lack of sight in a creature that should see. Created beings are mutable and have different degrees of goodness; disorder arises when a free will turns from higher goods towards lower ones.

Adam and Eve's misuse of freedom produces the Fall. Moral evil comes from disordered human willing, while natural suffering and death belong to the damaged order and just consequences of sin. Humanity is understood as involved in Adam, so responsibility and corruption pass through the race. God remains the creator of good natures, not the efficient creator of evil, and can bring good from the justly permitted disorder.

This preserves divine goodness and makes meaningful freedom valuable. Yet a perfect creation appears able to go wrong; inherited guilt seems unjust; and evolutionary history places predation, disease and extinction before human beings. Treating Genesis symbolically avoids some historical conflict but weakens Augustine's account of natural evil as punishment for a first human rebellion.

Irenaeus and Hick: from image to likeness

Irenaeus distinguishes humanity created in God's **image** from humanity growing into divine **likeness**. Ready-made perfection would lack the value of freely developed character. Hick reworks this into a soul-making theodicy: the world is not a paradise designed for comfort but an environment in which courage, compassion, responsibility and faith can emerge.

Stable natural laws are necessary for meaningful action. Fire must burn and gravity must operate reliably, even though the same regularity permits injury and disaster. God also maintains **epistemic distance**: if divine reality were overwhelmingly obvious and every harmful choice blocked, relationship and obedience could be coerced. Natural danger supplies challenges not generated solely by human wills.

Hick ultimately needs the process to achieve its purpose. If many lives are crushed rather than developed and death ends their opportunity, creation looks unsuccessful; universal fulfilment beyond this life allows every person eventually to reach the intended likeness. That solution gives suffering a wider narrative but is disputed doctrinally and may appear to minimise present victims.

Free will, natural law and innocent suffering

Alvin Plantinga's free-will defence proposes that it may be impossible even for omnipotence to guarantee significantly free creatures who always choose rightly. This undercuts Mackie's strict logical contradiction without claiming that every actual evil is necessary. It explains moral evil most directly; extending it to natural evil through non-human agents is less persuasive than a natural-law or soul-making account.

Dostoevsky's protest against purchasing harmony through innocent suffering exposes the moral cost of theodicy. Darwinian nature also contains vast suffering unrelated to recognisable human development. Defenders answer that limited observers cannot confidently identify every ultimate purpose, but sceptical theism can make moral and religious judgments difficult if used too broadly.

Augustine and Hick compared

Augustine	Hick's Irenaean approach
Humans fall from original perfection	Humans develop from immaturity towards likeness
Evil is privation and a consequence of misused freedom	Suffering supplies a law-governed setting for growth
Looks backwards to creation and Fall	Looks forwards to completed soul-making
Emphasises responsibility and justice	Emphasises development, freedom and eventual fulfilment

Logical and evidential problems make different demands

The **logical problem** claims that the existence of any evil is inconsistent with an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God. The divine attributes and "evil exists" are not formally contradictory without bridging principles, such as "a good being always eliminates every evil it can" and "an omnipotent being can eliminate every evil". A defence succeeds if it describes a possible morally sufficient reason compatible with God and evil; it need not prove that this is God's actual reason.

The **evidential problem** grants logical compatibility but argues that the amount, intensity or distribution of suffering makes God improbable. Apparently gratuitous evil is suffering for which no outweighing good or prevention of worse evil can reasonably be found. This is comparative and probabilistic. A response needs more than bare possibility: it must make the world's actual pattern reasonably expectable or challenge our ability to identify gratuitousness.

A **theodicy** attempts a true or plausible account of why God permits evil; a **defence** has the narrower task of defeating alleged inconsistency. Confusing them creates unfair judgements. Plantinga can answer Mackie's logical case even if he does not explain every disaster. Conversely, logical consistency can coexist with overwhelming evidence against theism. Essays should state which burden a proposal meets before evaluating it.

Mackie, freedom and the scope of Plantinga's defence

J. L. Mackie argues that unlimited power, perfect goodness and evil form an inconsistent set once goodness's opposition to evil and power's lack of limits are added. He considers the reply that freedom is a greater good but asks why God could not create agents who always freely choose good. If people sometimes freely choose rightly, a world in which they always do so seems at least describable.

Alvin Plantinga distinguishes **significant freedom**, freedom concerning morally important action, from programmed correctness. His free-will defence introduces the possibility of **transworld depravity**: for every feasible world in which God creates certain significantly free persons, at least one goes wrong. God can actualise a world and its circumstances, but cannot causally determine a libertarian free choice while leaving it free. If this scenario is possible, God, freedom and moral evil are logically consistent.

The defence does not show that transworld depravity is actual, that libertarian freedom exists, or that every natural evil results from creaturely freedom. Plantinga suggests fallen non-human agents as a logical possibility for natural evil, enough for strict consistency but weak as a modern theodicy. Freedom also varies in value: preventing a murder may restrict an action without destroying the agent's general moral development. The evidential critic therefore asks why divine intervention is not more frequent and why victims bear costs far beyond what perpetrators need in order to choose.

Augustine's privation theory is a metaphysics of damaged good

Augustine rejects Manichaean dualism. If God creates everything and God is good, evil cannot be a positive substance competing with good. **Privation** (*privatio boni*) is the absence or disorder of a good which ought to be present: blindness is lack of sight in a creature naturally capable of seeing; cruelty is a will's disordered relation to genuine goods. Evil depends parasitically on good powers, since even a lie requires intelligence and communication.

Creation contains different finite grades of goodness. Finitude is not itself moral evil: a worm need not possess a human intellect to be a good worm. Augustine's aesthetic principle says that contrasts and the ordering of lesser goods contribute to the whole. Moral evil begins when rational wills turn from the higher immutable good towards lower mutable goods. The Fall is therefore not creation of a new substance but corruption of right order. Natural disorder and death enter the human story as consequences of creaturely rebellion and just punishment.

This preserves divine creative goodness only if the account of willing is coherent. Schleiermacher's challenge-how can a perfect creation go wrong?-presses the origin of the first deficient choice. If the will has a defect before it chooses, God seems responsible; if it has no defect, why choose defectively? Saying free will entails risk explains why God permits a possible fall, not why a perfectly ordered will actually falls. Privation also analyses evil's ontology without measuring its felt severity: the absence of a child's life is "privation", but the label does not make the loss slight.