

A RESPONSE TO EVIL AND SUFFERING: DAVID HUME

DO THE PRESENCE OF EVIL AND SUFFERING PROVE THAT GOD DOESN'T EXIST?

There have been many people through the centuries who have argued that the presence of evil and suffering in the world proves that God doesn't exist. Even as far back as ancient Greece, philosophers were tackling this subject.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341-270 BC), said:

*'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?'*

The 18th century philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), drew heavily upon the work of Epicurus, referencing the above quote in his book, *'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion'*, 1779.

Hume firmly believed that evil and suffering offered evidence that God didn't exist. The argument as follows, led him to state that it was not reasonable to believe in God's existence:

If God is omniscient then He must know about all the suffering, so why doesn't He help?

If God is omnipresent then He must see all the suffering, so why doesn't He want to help people?

If God is omnipotent then He must be powerful enough to stop the suffering, so why does He continue to let it happen?

If God is omnibenevolent, He must love everyone enough to stop all the suffering, surely a loving God wouldn't want to see people suffering?

He argued that, as there weren't, what he considered to be, solid a priori arguments for the existence of God, humans had no choice but to refer a posteriori arguments – experience based – to determine if God exists.

Human experience shows us that evil and suffering exist. On this basis, the existence of evil led him to infer that an omnibenevolent and omnipotent cannot possibly exist. An all-loving and all-powerful God cannot co-exist with evil and suffering in the world as they are contradictory.

IS GOD RESPONSIBLE?

When discussing the idea of God being responsible for a world full of evil and suffering, he developed four hypotheses:

‘Four hypotheses may be framed concerning the first causes of the universe:

- that they are endowed with perfect goodness;
- that they have perfect malice;
- that they are opposite, and have both goodness and malice;
- that they have neither goodness nor malice.

Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles [eliminating the first and second]; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable [and the source of the universe has neither goodness nor malice].’

(‘*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*’, 1779)

In opposition to the classical arguments for the existence of God, such as the cosmological, he further developed four ideas about what God would have done if He really had created the world.

THE FOUR CIRCUMSTANCES

PAIN

If we consider that things in our body were created for a purpose, for example the eye, then as we can feel pain can we not say that this was created for a purpose? But why is pain necessary? God should have created a world with less or no pain. Or has He created us for the purpose of feeling pain?

LAWS OF NATURE

Laws of nature are perfectly valid, and absolutely necessary. However, they don’t always stick to the plan; things go terribly wrong sometimes. If God set in motion these laws, why is it that horrific events happen, e.g. floods, droughts?

NATURE IS CHEAP

There are a series of requirements for animals and humans to stay alive. If at any point these are not provided, we may become ill or even die. Why didn’t God create us to be able to fend for ourselves more effectively?

NATURE IS NOT WELL ORGANISED

Although everything seems to have a purpose and all things work together well, the world could have been created more expertly. Not everything maintains its balance, and problems arise which can cause suffering to people. Why didn’t God create a perfect world?

TASKS

1. Research David Hume. Create a factfile about him.
2. Why did Hume feel that an a *posteriori* argument was better than an a *priori* argument when considering the existence of God?
3. Why did Hume feel that the fourth hypothesis was the most probable? You can find this in the quote referenced here but may want to do some independent research to find the answer.
4. Summarise Hume's '*Four Circumstances*'.
5. Which of the '*Four Circumstances*' do you think is the most valid in arguing that God couldn't have created the world? Explain your answer.
6. Do you think Is it possible to believe in God when there is evil and suffering in the world? Explain your answer.