

A RESPONSE TO EVIL AND SUFFERING: AUGUSTINIAN THEODICY

AUGUSTINIAN THEODICY

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) – also known as St Augustine – developed what has become known as the Augustinian theodicy. He believed that God is good, that God created the world and that the reason we have evil and suffering in the world is as a result of original sin.

Like Irenaeus, St Augustine references Genesis to support this theodicy. Augustine believed that God is perfect, therefore as He created the world, He must have created a perfect world.

'God saw that He had made was very good.'

(Genesis 1:31)

There was no natural or moral evil within the world that God created. As God did not create evil, Augustine postulated that evil was a *'privation of good'*: an absence of good (*'The Enchiridion'*, 135 AD).

ORIGINAL SIN

When God created Adam and Eve He gave them free will. When they chose to misuse their free will, they established an 'absence of good' within themselves. As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, The Fall occurred. They were thrown out of Eden and from then on had to fend for themselves in a broken world, one which they had created.

Original sin springs from this event. It encompasses the idea that all humans are born essentially sinful and disobedient in nature. This is where evil and suffering occurs; when humans give into their sinful nature and commit evil acts. The consequence is suffering across the world.

Therefore, it is not God who is responsible for evil and suffering, but humans. In fact, He is a just and fair God. He allows humans to suffer the consequence of their sins, to do otherwise would go against the laws He created at the beginning of time.

To make humans behave perfectly is not possible for God either. If we were all created to behave perfectly, without free will, it would make us all robots. Rather, God gives us the choice. Hoping we make the right decisions. Permitting us to suffer if we don't, enabling us to learn from mistakes.

Augustine argued that the penalty of sin corrected the dishonour of sin.

THEODICY

The defence of God in view of the existence of evil and suffering.

JESUS

At the end of time we will all face judgement; with good and bad people being punished in the afterlife according to how they have chosen to live their lives.

However, God is loving and has given us an opportunity to reject evil once and for all and gain redemption through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. In a dark world, full of evil and suffering through our own creation, God sent Jesus to enable us to have eternal life in heaven, so that through His death we can be saved; this is known as atonement. Through accepting Jesus, we can be *'at one'* with God again and assured of a place.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST

Over the years there have been a number of objections to Augustinian theodicy. The main problems are:

1. How can something so perfect go so wrong? Schleiermacher (1768-1835) claimed that this is a *'logical contradiction'*; the world was either not perfect or God allowed it to go wrong.
2. If Adam and Eve were created essentially good at the start, why would they have chosen evil?
3. Where do modern theories of creation, including evolution, fit with Augustine's theodicy, which includes God having created a perfect world? Science has shown us that the world isn't perfect.
4. If God was omniscient - all-knowing - He would know that the Fall would happen, so how can He be omnibenevolent if He knew this would happen and allowed it to?
5. Surely evil is a real thing, not just an *'absence of good'*?

TASKS

1. If you've never 'met' St Augustine before, research his life and make a note of the key points.
2. What is free will? Explain this in your own words.
3. Read through Genesis chapter 3. Explain *'the Fall'* in your own words.
4. Define the following:
 - Original sin
 - Redemption
 - Atonement
5. Explain the key ideas at the centre of Augustinian theodicy.
6. What role has Jesus played in God's love and compassion for humanity?
7. Re-read the arguments against Augustinian theodicy. How would Augustine address each of them; give a counter-argument.
8. Which of the arguments against do you find the most convincing? Explain your answer.
9. *'Augustinian theodicy offers a good defense of God in the face of evil and suffering.'*

Do you agree? In your answer, refer to:

- Augustinian theodicy
- Arguments against it
- A judgement on the statement