

A RESPONSE TO EVIL AND SUFFERING: IRENÆUN THEODICY

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A key theodicy which attempts to show that, an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God and the presence of evil and suffering in the world, are compatible was developed by Irenaeus.

Originally formulated by the Greek Bishop, Irenaeus (130-202 AD), it is the idea that creation is a mix of good and evil by necessity. Irenaeus wrote a number of books, central to which was his conviction of God's goodness.

His ideas around the issue evil and suffering are, arguably, amongst his most famous.

He held that evil and suffering has a purpose in the world; it enables people to develop their souls, giving them a chance to learn from suffering and become better people. With suffering came an opportunity to know God and draw close to God Him.

He bases his argument on Genesis 1:26:

| *'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.'*

He believed we are created to be like God in two ways:

| In the image of God - intelligent, conscious, autonomous beings, with a sense of morality.

| In God's likeness - we grow into God's 'likeness' as we grow up, becoming more and more like Him. We are not created perfect, but with the potential to become perfect.

There are criticisms of this idea; that we grow to be better people. Some say that God should just create us perfect, why wait? But others argue that if God did this, He would just have created a bunch of robots. Rather, He gave us free will so we can choose to become more like Him. In a world without pain there is no consequences to our poor choices.

SEEING PURPOSE

It is here where evil and suffering has its purpose, helping an individual grow into God's likeness.

As Irenaeus himself states:

| 'A world without problems, difficulties, perils and hardships would be morally static, for moral and spiritual growth comes through responses to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges.'

(*'Against Heresies'*, c. 180AD)

Further to this, Irenaeus also argues that suffering also serves the purpose of showing us things we wouldn't automatically know. For example, we have pain in our abdomen which might tell us our appendix has burst. Therefore, pain is actually a good thing.

THEODICY

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

Many philosophers and theologians have come out in support of Irenaeus' theodicy. John Hick (1922-2102) developed his '*vale of soul making*' theodicy using Irenaeus' ideas as a foundation.

Richard Swinburne (1934-) argued that without evil and suffering in the world, many of the attributes we so admire in people – compassion, kindness, generosity – wouldn't exist if we didn't have the suffering in the first place. He argues that many of the moral virtues we admire are only possible in an imperfect world.

TASKS

1. Research the life of Irenaeus. Create a short factfile about him.
2. Explain how Irenaeus uses Genesis 1:26 to argue that an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God is compatible with suffering in the world.
3. What is your view of Irenaeus' theodicy? Do you think it presents a good argument in defense of God in the face of evil and suffering? Explain your answer.