

The Story of Theodicy:
The Problem of Evil, Theodicy, and the Meaning(s) of Life
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Why do bad things happen to good people? In its strict (traditional western religious philosophical) sense, the **Problem of Evil** states that the existence of evil/suffering in the world is somehow inconsistent with the existence of a **theistic god** (omnibenevolent/all-good, omnipotent/all-powerful, omniscient/all-knowing). The first formulation^[1] of the problem of evil was by **Epicurus** (341-270 BCE):

“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?”

If you think evil is only a problem for **monotheists** (people who believe in one supreme god)^[2], the **Broad Problem of Evil** can refer to the general sense that evil/suffering is inconsistently doled out. Sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. It seems every society has to offer an explanation for that injustice, even if there is no god to blame. For example, in the secular public sphere of the United States, **meritocracy** (the idea that people are given leadership and power based solely on their ability) has influenced many to think that people’s good fortune and suffering are a result of their ability and work ethic. Meritocracy has become a theory for explaining certain kinds of suffering, such as poverty, by those who do not understand the systemic causes of such suffering. A **theodicy** is any theory that seeks to solve one of these problems of evil, whether it is the narrow (western religious) sense or the broad (secular philosophical) sense.

The term theodicy was coined by the philosopher/mathematician **Gottfried Wilhem von Leibniz** (1646-1716 CE). For Leibniz, theodicy is an attempt to reconcile the monotheistic God with the existence of evil/suffering. He came up with the theory that there exist an infinite number of possible worlds in the infinite mind of God, and God chose the **best of all possible worlds** to bring into actual existence. His theory actually includes a number of different theodicies, such as 1.) the argument that there are instances where we would prefer a greater outcome that includes some suffering to a lesser outcome that includes no suffering, and 2.) that it would disrespect human freedom if God were constantly reaching into the world to prevent human beings from messing stuff up. **Voltaire** (1694-1778) satirized this theodicy in his novel *Candide*, in which the sheltered protagonist, schooled in the “optimism” of Leibniz, becomes gradually disillusioned with this outlook as he experiences and witnesses suffering in the world.

Aspects of Leibniz’s theory are found in earlier thinkers, and these aspects have been elaborated on by those who came after him. For example, **Alvin Plantinga** (1932-present) offers a **free will defense** in which he argues that a world containing free creatures who can and do choose to do good rather than evil is more valuable than a world in which no free creatures existed. This theory is an alteration of **Augustine of Hippo**’s(354-430 CE)argument that God did not create evil, but rather made creatures with free will who then chose to use that free will for evil. **John Hick** (1922-2012) built on **Irenaeus**’ (ca. 100-202CE) idea that human beings need free will and an experience of evil in order to develop as persons. Hick argued that suffering exists as a means of spiritual development. He called this the **soul-making theodicy**. This is similar to the popular theodicy that “**everything happens for a reason**” even though that reason may not be clear to the finite minds of human beings.

This sense of the ultimate mystery of God’s reasons for allowing suffering is taken up in the Jewish **Book of Job** (ca. 6th century BCE). Up until the time of this scripture, the dominant belief of middle eastern peoples was that evil was the result of one’s sins or the sins of one’s parents. *The Book of Job* makes it clear that

suffering is not necessarily linked to sin, but that it can happen even to one who is “blameless and upright,” as the text describes Job. This theme is echoed in the Christian stories of **Jesus of Nazareth** (ca 4 BCE – 30 CE), who, despite being the sinless son of God, suffers and dies a humiliating death on a cross outside of the city of Jerusalem. These scriptures disclose a kind of God who does not dole out punishments, but who, in the case of Jesus, actually suffers as we do.

Theodicies are closely linked to one’s conception of God. If one simply changed one’s conception of God from “all-good and all-powerful” to “all-powerful and sometimes-good,” then one would have an explanation for why evil exists. So, instead of offering an explanation for why an all-good, all-powerful God would allow evil/suffering in the world, a theodicy might offer a different conception of God instead. The concept of **deism** emerged during the **Enlightenment** (beginning ca. 1500 CE) and was popular among many of the leading intellectuals of that era (e.g., **Voltaire** 1694-1778, **Thomas Jefferson** 1743-1826). Instead of the Biblical God who creates the world and then interferes in its laws in order to dispense justice through miracles, the deistic God creates the world and then leaves it and its inhabitants to play out their lives without interference. This God is sometime referred to as the “watchmaker God,” because, like a watchmaker, this God creates something and then leaves it alone. The watchmaker does not alter the movement of the watch’s hands, and neither does God perform miracles or break the laws of nature to alleviate our suffering. In the mechanistic-scientific worldview that was emerging at the time, this type of God made more sense than the biblical one. **Immanuel Kant** offered a theodicy that seemed to reconcile the demands of both Enlightenment Reason and orthodox Christianity. Everyone deserves happiness in proportion to their virtue, and, since this does not always occur in this life, we can reasonably hope there is a God who will guarantee that this justice will occur to us in a life after death.

There are other conceptions of God as well. The Jewish **kabbalistic** conception of God holds that God comprises a number of aspects, and that one aspect of God is present within creation. This part of God, the **Shekinah**, is separate from God and so She suffers with us in our alienation from the wholeness of God. Restoring this wholeness is part of the **teleology** or end purpose of the universe. This notion of God as incomplete and suffering is found in other theories as well. In **Baruch Spinoza’s** (1632-1677) **pantheism**, the visible universe *is* God. **Alfred North Whitehead** (1861—1947) offered a **process theology**. The universe is not made up of discrete objects, but rather interrelated processes that are entwined and always affect one another. God, while permanent, is not unchangeable. God is forever affected and changed by the world. **Simone Weil’s kenotic theodicy** speaks of a God who has limited God’s own power in order to make room for human beings and their freedom. For her, both suffering and beauty are ways that we are led to look beyond this imperfect world and into an encounter with God. **Lucien Richard** integrates this idea of God back into a more traditional Christian theology, holding that God then emptied God’s self into creation (one of the truths disclosed in the story of Jesus) in order to be-with and suffer-with humanity until all things are made right again.

Just as the problem of evil can be used broadly, so **theodicy in the broad sense** can be used to describe any theory that explains why suffering/evil exist. This broader sense was conceived by the sociologist **Max Weber** (1864-1920 CE). He argued that every successful worldview (whether religious or secular, theistic or nontheistic, philosophical or mythological) must offer a theodicy of sorts. Every worldview must answer the question of why people don’t get what they deserve. Weber argued that the best theodicies not only explained to suffering people why they suffer unjustly (what he called “theodicies of misfortune”), but they also justify to privileged people why their privilege is deserved (“theodicies of fortune”). There are many examples of such theodicies, and not all of them include the existence of a monotheistic God. Weber said that the Indian concept of **karma** was an example of a theodicy that powerfully spoke to both fortune and misfortune.

In India, the predominant theodicy for thousands of years has been the belief in *karma*. Karma is the idea that all of one's suffering and bliss has been caused by one's actions in this or a previous life. Bad things happen to good people because these good people may be paying for past deeds, purifying themselves through the endurance of suffering in this life. In its earliest forms, karma was linked to the proper performance of rites and rituals toward the gods and goddesses. **Siddhartha Gautama**, who became known as **Buddha** ("Awakened One," 563-483 or 480-400), taught that karma was not linked to ritual but rather to one's ethical actions. This concept of karma took root in **Buddhism** and **Hinduism** and is still prevalent today. Weber called Karma (and the belief in reincarnation that it presupposes) the most complete and unassailable ethical system ever invented/discovered.

Another theodicy in the broad sense, originating in ancient China, is the **Mandate of *Tian*** (this is often translated as "Mandate of Heaven," but it must be understood that this "heaven" may refer either to a supreme God or to a more impersonal cosmic force). The Mandate of *Tian* explained the shifting fortunes of different governing warlords and dynasties. If a ruler is overthrown, it is only an outward consequence of the fact that they had ceased to rule with justice. Natural disasters often accompanied revolutions, as these tragedies were often seen as signs that a ruler was unjust and so deserved to be overthrown. If a ruler is following the right way, or ***Tao* (*Dao*)** of Nature or *Tian*, then no one will be able to usurp their power.

This concept is related to the ***Tao*** found in the writings of **Laozi** (Lao-tzu, ca. 500 BCE) and **Zhuangzi** (Chuang-tzu, 369-286 BCE), which link suffering to living in discord, out of harmony with the Way (*Tao*) of Nature. In philosophical Taoism, the way out of suffering is through finding harmony with *Tao* in one's heart-and-mind. In alchemical Taoism, the way is found through spells and potions thought to bestow eternal life. **Confucius** (551-479 BCE) also spoke of the ***Tao***, but for him the focus was less cosmic. Its cosmic sense may have existed in the background for Confucius, but he thought we couldn't know about it. All we can know and therefore all we can concern ourselves with is the societal *Tao*. Confucius taught that cultivating oneself through education and living in right relationships with everyone through ***li*** (ritual propriety) would produce a harmonious society.

The **Enlightenment Project** also developed a kind of secular theodicy that did not depend on the existence of God. There is a long line of philosophical thought rooted in **Plato's** (427-423 BCE) dialogue *Euthyphro*, in which **Socrates** asks whether the gods love the pious because it is pious, or whether it is pious because the gods love it. This question helped usher in the idea that goodness might be something that exists independently of a divine order. Enlightenment thinkers like **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) and **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) sought an ideal of goodness that is rooted in reason (Kant argued for a "categorical imperative": One ought to act in such a way that one could will it that everyone would act that way. Mill argued for a utilitarianism: Act in the way that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people.). Once we figure out what that ideal is and then follow it, we will have a good world.

Some Enlightenment thinkers held that the reason suffering exists is not because of some deficiency in God or in ethics, but because of a deficiency in the structures of our society, particularly in our economies. **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) developed the theory that society is evolving through successive stages, and that when socialism supplants capitalism and then communism supplants socialism, a just society will finally be achieved.

How successful is each theodicy? On the one hand, each of them has endured for centuries (some for millennia). This is a powerful case for their ability to satisfy many people in their search for meaning. On the other hand, the fact that the problem of evil has continued to plague thoughtful human beings for so long, and has inspired them to come up with such a variety of solutions, points to the fact that ultimately no theodicy has been completely, or at least universally, satisfactory. This leads us to some alternate theories or critiques of theodicy.

Johann Baptist Metz (1928-present) reminded philosophers and theologians that any theodicy must seek to account for all of the suffering/evil that has ever occurred in the world, emphasizing the immensity of the problem and the hubris associated with any attempt to solve it. **Elizabeth Johnson** and other feminist thinkers critiqued theodicy and theology by asking what assumptions exist in these fields because they have been approached primarily from a male perspective. **John K. Roth** offered a **Theodicy of Protest**. He argued that an all-powerful God is responsible for the suffering in the world, and our protest and even righteous anger is an appropriate response to God. **Emmanuel Levinas** (1906-1995) took Metz's idea one step further, arguing that the very act of creating a theodicy is morally wrong. To reconcile the suffering/evil in the world is to justify the suffering of others, something that we should never do. Perhaps to try and explain one's own suffering is a task one can embark on in one's personal life, but it should never be a task we undertake for others or for humanity as a whole.

Finally, there is the option of rejecting the existence of god or of any reality outside the physical world. This is known as **atheism, material monism, scientific materialism, or metaphysical naturalism**. (Marx's theory technically comes under this heading, but it still contains a vestige of religiosity due to its belief in a *telos* or "end-purpose" of progress over time.) **Bertrand Russell** (1872-1970) said the universe may turn out to be just "brute fact." This may lead one to reject the entire project of finding meaning in the universe, a position known as **nihilism**. However, the belief that there is no underlying reality or objective set of values to be discovered in the universe does not necessitate a nihilistic worldview. **Existentialism** describes a diverse group of philosophers and artists from the late 1800's through the 20th century, who, although not always atheistic, emphasized the power of the human person to make meaning real through their thoughts and actions. Meaning is not dependent on a transcendent God or gods or *Tian* or *karma* or other divine order outside of the world, but can be constructed by persons and communities of people. Just because we "make it up" doesn't mean it is not real. A powerful example of this theory can be found in the psychologist **Viktor Frankl's** (1905-1997) book *Man's Search for Meaning*, his firsthand account of his time in a Nazi concentration camp and the resulting theory of the **meaning(s) of life** he found there: meaning in meaningful work, meaning in beauty, meaning in love and relationships, meaning even in suffering.

Life itself puts theodicies to the test on an ongoing basis. The problem of evil and suffering may turn out to be a **divergent problem** rather than a **convergent** one. According to **E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977)**, a convergent problem has an optimal solution that we can eventually arrive at together. Schumacher uses the example of the invention of human-powered transportation. At first, many different prototypes such as three- and four-wheel designs were proposed. Gradually, scientific trial and error and consensus caused us to agree on the best design, the bicycle. An example of a divergent problem is education. Schumacher asks which method—strict discipline and common curriculum, or more free and individualized student-centered creativity—leads to the best education. Schumacher concludes that in education—and in any problem that deals with living beings—the real solution involves love. Love and discipline or love and freedom will both lead to good education. A divergent problem does not have a single solution. This does not mean we shouldn't address it. On the contrary, it may be the wrestling with the problem that is the valuable part. Divergent problems, in the end, must not be solved but rather transcended. Perhaps the same is true of the problem of suffering.

[1] Plato offered an even earlier explanation for suffering in the last pages of *Republic*, what amounts to a kind of theodicy. There he offered a theory of reincarnation in which those who had lived pleasurable lives often made poor choices for their next lives, because they had not learned anything from their previous experiences. The *Book of Job* is also earlier than Epicurus, and will be mentioned later. To my knowledge, Epicurus is the first to state the problem of evil in a logical format.

[2] The problem of evil is not so much of a problem for polytheists, as evil is explained by the clash of personalities, motives, and ethics of the various gods and goddesses. Polytheism is, in itself, a kind of theodicy.