

# Candidate 3

## To what extent is God responsible for evil and suffering?

The word evil brings connotations of pain and torture. Suffering is experienced by all of humanity and so has led many to ask deep questions about the origins of evil, something philosophers and theologians have done for centuries leading to much debate on the subject. Questions such as why does evil exist? Who or what is responsible for it? Can it be stopped?<sup>1</sup> For religious thinkers and philosophers, the debate leads to these conclusions: either God is responsible for evil and suffering, or the blame rests with humanity, or both have a role. The existence of evil and suffering have turned many away from God because for them, a god cannot exist when evil and suffering does on such an unimaginable scale. Hume believed that the God of Classical Theism cannot be omnipotent and omnibenevolent while evil exists in the world.<sup>2</sup> For others, it does not quite diminish their acceptance of God, but rather leads them to question what kind of God is he to allow such pain and suffering? Even if God did intend for evil and suffering to be experienced, why couldn't it have been the 'minimum dosage of necessary evil to achieve the goal'?<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this dissertation is to discuss how God is responsible for evil and suffering but that there is a legitimate reason for this. It is for the ultimate good of humanity. God allows humanity the ability to cause evil through our use of free will<sup>4</sup> which leads to suffering in order to show us what true goodness is. This is part of God's plan for us. Exploring this understanding, I will explore religious and philosophical arguments, analyse, and evaluate them to demonstrate that God's intentions for allowing evil and suffering to continue to exist are justifiable. It is essential for humanity to be exposed to evil and experience suffering to develop an understanding of true goodness. Only then can humanity better themselves.

To first understand the suffering experienced in the world we must identify types of evil in which it stems from. Moral evil is caused by humans, such as war and terrorism, and natural evil is natural disasters with events such as hurricanes being included.<sup>5</sup> Natural evil isn't always viewed to be a complete evil as it is unavoidable as it part of our natural world. It is a widely believed that evil exists in the world for us to be able to experience the good that also exists, just as you would not enjoy and be grateful for the feeling of warmth if you had never experienced cold. The world has been created in such a way that good and evil cannot exist without the other. Although it can easily be criticised that the evil and suffering experienced is very extreme, which was to create a contrast to allow for good. Both evils can be seen to go to the extreme end of the scale and therefore have aroused questions on why God should allow such suffering if they just wanted to give humanity something to be fearful of. To have children experience life threatening illness, or for whole communities to be torn apart by forest fire can see to evil to the furthest degree and ultimately not allow for much learning.

**Logical and evidential problems of evil:**

The logical problem of evil is a philosophical argument that questions God's role in the existence of evil and suffering by challenge his traditional attributes. According to traditional understanding of the God of Classical Theism based on the Bible, God has three main qualities. He is omnipotent (all-powerful), omnibenevolent (all-loving) and omniscient (all-knowing). In *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie presented his idea in the form of the Inconsistent Triad using three statements:

1. God is all powerful, wholly good and all-knowing creator of the universe.
2. Evil exists in the universe.
3. A wholly good being eliminates evil as far as it can.<sup>6</sup>

Mackie did not believe that these three statements could simultaneously be true because it is logically impossible. If God were to be omnipotent, then he would have the power to stop evil and suffering in the world. If God was omnibenevolent, then surely, he would have the love and care for humanity to want to stop the suffering. Mackie understood that evil does exist and is evident throughout the world and so the second statement must be true, therefore we are left in denial of one of God's attributes. Either God is not all-powerful to prevent evil and suffering or God does not care enough to stop this suffering. Additionally, Mackie believed that not all evil was bad, it can help us grow and push humanity towards development along with shaping our emotions as we experience different feelings. Mackie could see that evil may have some benefits, it allowed for God to push humanity through the emotions they experienced and therefore showed that although God may be the cause of evil and suffering, it was for a further goal of allowing humanity the experience of different emotions and outcomes. God allows evil because it gives humanity a reason to improve for the better.

This is an extremely convincing argument however, there are weaknesses to Mackie's logic. He is very fixated on these traditional attributes of God and his Inconsistent Triad relies far too much on the fact that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. What if this has given us the wrong idea of God? The restrictions placed on God having to conform to these traditional attributes limits him to a certain bracket. It can be argued that the God we have learnt about from Christian teachings is not in fact God and he could, in fact, not possess any of these characteristics. This is shown time and time again in the Old Testament, for example, the Great Flood in Genesis 6.<sup>7</sup> God despairs over the wickedness of humanity and regrets ever creating it. He abuses his power and destroys all of his creation in order to cleanse the earth of this sin. Many regard this as none other than genocide. In this story, God's omnibenevolence is greatly challenged and God comes across more of a tyrant. For Mackie to focus totally on these attributes does not really give a comprehensive exploration of God's character, questioning the validity of his claims.

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Augustine's theodicy puts forward the idea that humanity it to blame for the evil and suffering we experience, his views on evil were comprised of Christian and Platonist views. Augustine was unwilling to believe that God created evil within humanity and so concluded that it must have existed long

before God created humans.<sup>8</sup> Augustine views were shaped by Platonism; "that all is fundamentally good, for it comes from the supreme Good, which is God."<sup>9</sup> Augustine saw that humans were created with free will, and in the eyes of God perfect, but it was humans who used their free will to turn away from God and chose to sin- which in turn is what leads to the evil we experience. Yet God understood this risk when creating humans, and so sent Jesus to try and bring humanity back to God. Augustine saw free will as the cause of evil, yet it was not God- the creator of free will - he put in the place of blame, but those who abused their ability of choice.

Despite these weaknesses, I do think that Mackie presents a coherent argument blaming God for the existence of evil and suffering. To refer to the Great Flood narrative again, rather than placing doubt on God's omnibenevolence for causing this destruction, I think that it reinforces it. The flood cleanses the earth of wicked behaviour, so God's intention is loving. God wants humanity to thrive and flourish, wickedness prevents this.

#### **The Evidential Problem of Evil**

Another philosophical argument blaming God for evil, and suffering is the evidential problem of evil. This is an a posteriori argument using experience of suffering in the natural world to support the conclusion that God is responsible.<sup>10</sup> The argument recognises that there are such horrific examples of natural evil caused by disasters. Alongside this, the natural world itself is a brutal place. If this is the work of an omnibenevolent designer, we have sufficient grounds to question the validity of such a claim. Philosopher J S Mill did just that. He noted that there was no such evidence of an all-loving creator. Instead, this creator is sadistic who actively behaves in ways that we would condemn when we see them in criminals.<sup>11</sup> For Mill, this sadistic creator is responsible for designing a world full of natural suffering, an offence that should be duly punished. Mill claimed that *'in sober truth, nearly all things which men are hanged for or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's everyday performance'*.<sup>12</sup> God has committed a crime against humanity and should face justice. Here, Mill presents a highly convincing argument criticising the role of this creator and blaming him for natural evil and the suffering that comes from it.

There are some flaws with Mill's approach. Like with Mackie's logical problem of evil, Mill has focused too much on God's apparent omnibenevolence. If we accept God's role as judge, and that natural evil is a 'fitting punishment' for humanity's abuse of free will as shown by Augustine's theodicy, then this suffering can be justified. Furthermore, Aquinas argued that the God's goodness was vastly different from our own. This goodness might include tolerating evil and suffering and might only be a temporary part of his plan. Aquinas' argument outweighs the conclusion presented by Mill because it appreciates a different understanding of God's omnibenevolence and there is sufficient reason to allowing this evil to exist.

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To account for these weaknesses, Rowe's argument can be used. Rowe claimed that 'gratuitous and pointless evil' is proof that God does not exist because it is completely incompatible.<sup>13</sup> Rather than focusing on God's existence here, it is important to address Rowe's point of gratuitous evil instead. Rowe uses the analogy of a deer suffering for six days after a forest fire.<sup>14</sup> For Rowe, this agony is avoidable. If there was an all-powerful, all-loving God, he could have created a world where this needless suffering did not exist.

From this evaluation, I do believe that the evidential problem of evil is successful in arguing that God is responsible for evil and suffering. However, it is important to recognise that God's attributes need greater insight. As Aquinas rightly argues, God tolerates evil and suffering at our expense, but it is a necessary part of his overall plan for us, and this must be respected.

#### **Religious understanding of evil and suffering - the Irenaean theodicy:**

A religious argument advocating for the necessity of evil comes from the theologian Irenaeus. His soul-making theodicy (an argument that defends God) acknowledged that God bears some responsibility for evil and suffering but there is a reason for this. Irenaeus claimed that "*suffering is a necessary part of God's created universe - it is through suffering that human souls are made noble.*"<sup>115</sup> Irenaeus explained that God created the world imperfect but created humans imperfectly too. Humanity was created in perfect image but not likeness, a distinction unique to Irenaeus. In Genesis 1:27<sup>16</sup> it states, "*so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*" God never wanted us to be like him, he wanted us to resemble him and maybe to an extent mirror him. Our creation was not for the purpose of replication, it was to allow mutation, change and individuality while moving towards a more God-like being through the practice of soul making. In order to become more like God, which for Irenaeus is essential, we must have free will. Without this, humanity would not be able to make genuine choices which would prevent us from developing God-like qualities such as courage, honour and love. Free will makes us human and without it, we are controlled. Free will has the potential for disobedience and evil and this explained the Fall of humanity, a falling out of God's favour. The potential to grow into God's likeness is found in responsible, moral choices but can easily go the other way. Free will has also the potential to cause evil and suffering but this for Irenaeus, is necessary. Here, Irenaeus supports my argument that God is responsible for evil and suffering in that he created the world and humanity imperfect but, the rewards of this are immeasurable. Through imperfection and use of free will, comes perfection.

Irenaeus presents a convincing argument which supports my own but there are some issues which should be addressed. Firstly, it seems incompatible that God would create an imperfect world and humanity imperfect too. This contrasts greatly with Augustinian thought which claims that humanity was created absolutely perfect with no flaws. Another criticism is that the quantity of suffering t

humanity must endure is simply unfair just so that we can develop into God's likeness. This relates closely to the argument given by DZ Phillips who said that it can't be justifiable to hurt someone in order to help them. This is exactly what God is doing, he hurts us by allowing evil and suffering to exist, but it is for us in the end. For many, this is too much for a price to pay. Surely, suffering can never be an expression of God's love. These criticisms do justifiably question some of aspects of the Irenaean theodicy.

However, there are some considerable strengths to Irenaeus' theodicy. Hick was a philosopher who agreed greatly with Irenaeus' understanding of evil and its necessity. In his 'Vale of Soul-Making'<sup>17</sup>, Hick argued that God needed to allow humans the opportunity to develop themselves and could not intervene with this process. In line with Irenaean thought, Hick said that God must remain at an epistemic distance from humanity so that all our choices could be totally our own and not influence by God. Peter Vardy support this understanding also but using the analogy of a king falling in love with a peasant girl.<sup>18</sup> If the king wanted to, he would have the power to force the girl to love him. But then this love could never be counted as genuine. Therefore, God must allow humans to develop this love for God themselves for it to be true. For this to happen, it is inevitable that humans misuse this free will, and this is unfortunate, but again, necessary.

From analysing the Irenaean theodicy, it is clear that God is responsible for evil and suffering. Even though Irenaeus claims only partly responsible, it can be successfully argued that this responsibility rests with God. It is also clear that God needs this to happen so that humanity can achieve perfection. Once again, God's intentions are fundamentally good because humanity has the chance to understand what goodness is by being exposed to the opposite.

#### **Jewish theodicy:**

The aftermath of the Holocaust was a startling reminder of what evil humanity can be capable of. 6 million Jews were murdered at the hands of the Nazis. For many Jews, it is extremely difficult to understand where God was during this time. Should he not have cared more, intervened and stopped this atrocity? Jews abandoned faith altogether, cursing this God who would do such a thing to his chosen people. Jewish theodicy presents another explanation for evil and suffering. This is an insightful understanding and can argue that much can be learnt from suffering in the world. Jewish understanding does not specifically blame God for this suffering but does advocate that it could be test of faith, as we witness many times in the Tenakh. I am going to focus on this argument specifically.

To understand the context behind the relationship between the Jewish people and God, we must look at Abraham. Abraham is a pivotal figure in the book of Genesis and is traditionally believed to have been the founding father of monotheism - the belief in one God. Abraham establishes a

unique relationship with God which was symbolised by the covenant. This central belief in Judaism is the agreement made between God and Abraham. Abraham promises to worship only God and in return

for this loyalty, God promises Abraham the land of Canaan where his descendants would live, and he would have as many descendants as the stars. The covenant cements the relationship between Jews and God, and they become his chosen people. In times of suffering, the chosen people are left questioning why God would allow this to happen. In Elie Wiesel's *God on Trial*, Wiesel engages with this question. The BBC adaptation of the play was set in Auschwitz and God is put on trial by the Jewish prisoners and God is charged with breaking his covenant with the Jewish people.

Whilst

, hearing both sides of the trial, one point is made which is that this terrible suffering is a test of faith as written in the Book of Job.

The Book of Job is a well-known story which supports this Jewish understanding that suffering is a test, something which humanity must overcome as it is part of God's plan.<sup>19</sup> The book attempts to discuss the understanding of God's justice and why suffering could be an example of this justice. A good and devoted man, Job who even God describes as his most faithful servant begins to question God due to his sudden suffering. After a conversation takes place between God and Satan, Satan believes that Job's righteousness and faith should be tested.<sup>20</sup> Job's family and livelihood are abruptly taken away and he is left destitute and helpless. The narrative emphasises that questioning God in times of crisis is important and leads to a greater understanding of the creator. Job desperately questions why his God to whom he has been so loyal has caused him to suffer so greatly. In his poetic dialogues, Job is angry at God, confused as to why he would do such a thing and why it is the wicked people who prosper. In Job 27:2, he proclaims, *"why has God denied me justice and made my life bitter?"* Job demands that God make him an answer. In the final section of the book, God and Job have a conversation why God asks Job several questions. In this questioning, God requires Job to understand that the universe is vast and complex and that God sees all of it. In contrast, Job has only his own lived experience of this universe and that is small. At the end of this conversation, God explains to Job that he is not in a position to question God's justice or power.

Ultimately, God asks Job to have complete trust in God and Job responds with repentance, *"So I am ashamed of all I have said and repent in dust and ashes."* What this story shows is that faith in God should remain steadfast when facing suffering. Here, God is not the direct cause of evil and suffering, but it does show how God does nothing to prevent it. Despite this, there is reasoning behind this lack of action in that followers experience this test of faith which undoubtedly reinforces this faith in God, something demonstrated in Job's story.

This Jewish understanding of suffering being a test does have flaws, especially in light of the severity of suffering experienced by Jews for centuries as a result of anti-Semitism. To refer back to the Holocaust where 6 million Jews perished, it is difficult and somewhat troubling to consider

this a test of faith. This is not right for God to allow such an atrocity to occur only to see the loyalty shown by his followers. It is difficult not to agree with Job's questions in 7:20, *"If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?"* In this case, why could not God have made the Nazis suffer instead? This would have shown God's true justice. Testing faith is not a legitimate reason to allow such unspeakable pain. In some cases, too, this test of faith did not work as many survivors of the Holocaust abandoned faith altogether, so this test of faith was unreasonable and unnecessary.

Despite these weaknesses, the Book of Job does emphasise the complexity of faith and that it is not meant to be easy. Loyalty cannot always be rewarded, and we cannot make demands on God. During times of suffering, faith faces the ultimate test because of doubt in God. But through perseverance, suffering can be overcome, and God will continue to be there for his subject, as shown in the conclusion of Job's narrative. Suffering leads us to a greater understanding of God, so it is necessary, despite the hardship faced by followers.

Even though it is difficult to rectify brutal suffering, the argument stands firm that it is necessary in order for humanity to understand true goodness so that free will can be used wisely when making moral decisions.

**Conclusion:**

After researching and analysing both sides of the argument, the many theodicies that surround ideas of evil and suffering as well as the religious theories on the reasons for evil and suffering I can conclude that evil was created by God to allow for humans to have more fulfilment and experience in life. Just as in Mackie's Inconsistent Triad, the fact that evil is experienced already creates doubt in the existence of God as it goes against his supposed all-loving and all-knowing aspects. For evil to be experienced God must know it's happening and not put anything in place to prevent it. Evil however is key to humans' existence, it is an example of their free will and allows contrast to allow good and love to also be experienced. And so, God is responsible for evil and suffering, but it is to further humanity and ensure free will.

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