

# Divine Justice and the Problem of Evil

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## Introduction

Divine justice and the problem of evil is a fundamental question and one of the most discussed topics among theologians and philosophers in the last two thousand years. The most important reason for this attention given to the subject is that human beings have always been faced with natural and moral tragedies.

Consequently, some philosophers have doubted God's justice; others have denied the existence of God or believed in duality, because they were not able to how God, the Benevolent, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient can let these happen. [1](#)

Among the Christian thinkers, there have been two historical types of theodicy: Augustine theodicy and Irenaen theodicy. The core of Augustine theodicy is goodness of God and goodness of the created world, but because of the Original Sin, all problems associated with pain and suffering have emerged. In contrast, the Irenaen theodicy is built on the purpose of a soul-making process.

Among Muslim theologians, Abu'l Hasan Ash'ari and his followers denied objectivity of justice and injustice and maintained that whatever is done or commanded by God is good and just. On the contrary, the Mu'tazilites and Shi'ites believe in the objectivity of justice and choose divine justice as one of their principles. They believe that God does and commands only what is objectively good and just.

In what follows, we will first analyse the problem of evil and divine justice in general terms from a historical perspective. The phenomena of pain and suffering shall also be discussed. Then we will focus on the notion of divine justice and the extent to which this relates to the problem of evil from the point of view of Augustine theodicy. Finally, there will be a discussion about what I think to be an appropriate position to be held.

## Divine Justice and the Problem of Evil

In a religious context, justice of God is called *theodicy*. The word *theodicy* is derived from the Greek word for 'God' (*Theos*). The Greek word “*Dike*” for justice is the word traditionally used in theology for an argument that seeks to justify the righteousness and justice of God despite the presence of evil and suffering in the world; hence, both terms shall be used interchangeably.

Despite the fact that the irrationality of evil does not offset the theodicy notion, even if we do not understand the reason or motive behind evil, we still try to understand why God permits evil. The response to this question moves us toward the doctrine of divine justice.

The problem of evil and divine justice has a historical significance from the early Christian period to the present time. In the fifth century, St. Augustine, the great theodicy, explained the problem of evil. In addition, various schools of thought have been presented by scholars, particularly those associated with Islamic Kalam<sup>2</sup> (theology) tradition of philosophy in the Middle Ages. John Hick states:

Contrary to popular belief about the supposedly monolithic certitude of the age of faith, the challenge of evil to religious conviction seems to have been felt in the early Christian centuries and the medieval period as acutely as today.<sup>3</sup>

Divine justice is fundamentally important as it involves many problems faced by humanity, such as the existence of natural disasters, crimes and inequalities in the social order. In fact, a whole storm of objections arise under this subject. People often ask why many parts of the world are terrible places to live while others are not. Why are some people ugly and others beautiful; some healthy and others sick? The suggestion that not everyone is created equal leads to one fundamental question: if there is a just God, why do these inequalities exist?

By looking at both sides of this issue this way, by really studying it, we come to have a better appreciation about what the problem is and why its solution is so important. It is critical that a religious person should be able to give a good and informed response to the problem of evil. Your belief can only be strengthened by facing such issues head on, understanding them, and working towards their solution.

## If God is Just, why is there so much Evil?

There are many people who suffer from anxiety and pain in their daily existence, which may seem to make it implausible to argue that a loving Creator exists. One can understand that a perfectly loving God must abolish all pain. The simplified thinking is that if He cannot free mankind from their suffering, He is not perfectly loving and omnipotent.

If we assume God is omniscient, omnipotent, and has perfectly created the world, then why are there catastrophes like death, war, earthquakes, poverty, hunger, and bitter conditions of life? This therefore

implies that perhaps God is not powerful or God created evils such as catastrophes by accident, therefore implying He is not all knowing or finally God made evil on purpose and He does not want to destroy evil. Traditionally there are many different ways of addressing and responding to this dilemma:

1. God is omniscient, omnipotent and perfect, and justice is part of perfection and omniscience; hence, God is just. Injustice must therefore be from ignorance and fanaticism, or as a result of need.

According to Qara'ati, the causes of injustice are as follows:

a. Ignorance: Sometimes ignorance causes injustice. But this does not apply to God, who is above all defects such as ignorance and whose knowledge is infinite.

b. Fear: Sometimes it is fear which is the cause of injustice. For example, one strong power is scared of another strong power who can become his rival or enemy. But the Almighty Allah has no one as His rival. Everything is His creation and completely dependent on him.

c. Wants: Sometimes the cause of injustice is one's sense of deprivation and thus from a psychological point of view one feels obliged to meet his needs and fulfil his wants. But God has no needs.

d. Meanness: Sometimes it is due to inner meanness that some people oppress others or when they see the deprived and oppressed people, they derive pleasure in seeing them so<sup>4</sup> But God is benevolent.

As the above characteristics cannot be attributed to God, an infinite being must therefore be free of all these characteristics, and nothing is hidden from his divine knowledge.

2. Evil is necessary for the greater good. This argument is used to justify and explain that a world with greater good and a little evil is better than a world with no good at all. Also, according to this argument, God made this world in the best and excellent manner possible.

3. Man's freedom is the cause of evil.

4. Evil is a negative thing. Man has free will and has the ability to be good or bad, humanist or tyrannical. This is the perspective of Augustine and this theodical response is known as *Augustine Theodicy*.

## **The general feature of the Augustine's theodicy**

The main response to the problem of evil traditionally in the Christian world was addressed by St. Augustine (354–430 A.D). The main idea formulated was that evil is a negativity, a lack, a loss, and a privation of good. According to John Hick:

Augustine holds firmly to the Hebrew–Christian conviction that the universe is good... that is to say, it is the creation of a good God for a good purpose. There are, according to Augustine, higher and lower, greater and lesser goods in immense abundance and variety; ...Evil—whether it be an evil, an instance

of pain, or some disorder or decay in nature—has therefore not been set there by God but represents the going wrong of something that is inherently good. Augustine points the blindness as an example. Blindness is not a “thing”. The only thing involved is the eye, which is in itself good; the evil of blindness consist of the lack of proper functioning of eye.[5](#)

According to the Augustine Theodicy, God is the source of everything which has been created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) in accordance with divine Will. Consequently, everything in the world is created perfectly. In contrast, Plotinus taught that the further one descends from goodness (the divine source), the further into evil one falls. He emphasizes on the goodness of the Supreme Being (and creation) and the chaotic nature of evil (the absence of being).

... Evil represents the dead end of the creative process in which the Supreme Being has poured out its abundance into innumerable forms of existence, descending in the degrees of being and goodness until its creativity is exhausted and the vast realm of being borders upon the empty darkness of non-being.[6](#)

As far as Augustine was concerned, *all* creation is good. So what is the notion of evil for? The notion is for the *privatio boni* ('privation of good') which occurs when a being renounces its proper role in the order and structure of creation and follows its own desires. Also, Augustine denied that sin has an independent existence apart from God and is merely the privation of the good; it seems in the end that evil does exist apart from God after all. However, it is parasitic on the good. All evil must have at least some good in it:

What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good? In animal bodies, for instance, sickness and wounds are nothing but the privation of health. When a cure is effected, the evils, which were present (i.e. the sickness and the wounds) do not retreat and go elsewhere. Rather they simply do not exist any more. For such evil is not a substance; the wound or the disease is a defect of the bodily substance which, as a substance, is good.[7](#)

Based on the above theory, if evil is a privation of good and non-being, why does it affect human lives? If it is insignificant, then what is the pain and suffering for?

These assertions are not sufficient to help explain the massive threat of evil. However, the notion of these arguments may be the answer in an attempt to preserve the duality concept, because when evil possesses the same significant existence like good, this presupposes that there are two gods. Each of these gods represents either good or evil. Therefore, theologians claim that evil is not the creation of God, but merely *represents the going wrong of something* and it is only privation of good.

Augustine believed that the world looks imperfect to us, because we look at things from a limited or distorted perspective. From the standpoint of God things are still good and even the apparent evil in the world contributes to bring about the perfection of the whole. In other words, all degrees of good and evil have a place within the divine Will. Our concerns about imperfection and evil are merely relative to our own point of view and with our own limited knowledge. As Hick puts it, “the universe with its sinister aspect is perfect.”[8](#)

Augustine's theodicy is designed to protect not only God's sovereignty but also God's perfect goodness. So, as far as the natural order is concerned, although it displays imperfection, this is because the universe is ordered in such a way that the transitory nature of things is a part of the natural process of bringing forth new life:

Since, then, in those situations where such things are appropriate, some perish to make way for others that are born in their room, and the less[er] succumb to the greater, and the things that are overcome are transformed into the quality of those that have the mastery, this is the appointed order of things transitory.

Of this order the beauty does not strike us because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in a part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonised with the most accurate fitness and beauty. [9](#)

St. Augustine believed that all happiness is from pious people although when we are observing imperfection in this world, it is the result of the sinner:

Since there is happiness for those who do not sin, the universe is perfect; and it is no less perfect because there is misery for sinner... the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin. [10](#)

This leads to the question of St. Augustine's theodicy concept, that is, how reasonable is it to suggest that "it is no less perfect because there is misery for sinner." Sometimes problems and difficulties are presented for the purpose of tests because God wants to test His servant for a higher stage.

The world is full of examples where people have overcome their personal difficulties and problems and are seen as examples of achievement within the wider society whereby they are used as blueprints of endeavour which inspire humanity. Hence, sometimes problems and difficulties take place within human life for the purpose of soul making and God wants to test His servant with some sort of problem. John Hick declares this fact:

According to the Irenaean theodicy, however, God's purpose was not to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. The world is seen, as a place of "soul making" or person making in which free beings, grappling with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God" and "heirs of eternal life". Our world, with all its rough edges, is the sphere in which this second and harder stage of the creative process is taking place. [11](#)

The "*soul making*" theory is good functionally but the negative theory of Augustine is originally good and solves problems such as duality. The "*soul making*" theory is sufficient for theism but is not sufficient evidence for atheism. There is also a contradiction in the idea of 'misery for sinner' and the idea that '*all creation is good*'. If all creation is good then misery for sinner is not conceivable and if misery for sinner is not conceivable, then all creation is not good, otherwise misery for sinner should be good.

Augustine's theodicy has a touchstone of orthodoxy with regard to addressing the problem of evil and suffering. But this theodicy has been criticised in the modern period. The major criticism, according to Friedrich Schleiermacher, is based on the premise that the universe is created by God, so as to be exactly as God wished, containing no evil of any kind, and cannot obviously go wrong. In other words, the notion that a perfect creation has spontaneously gone wrong and without cause seems to be self-contradicting.

However, as evil is the privation of good, this suggests that evil must stem as a result of the abuse of one's own will in order to fulfil one's own desires. Evil exists because God values free will, and free will carries with it the possibility of evil. Free will has a great value; thus, God takes the risk in the possibility of evil. Evil is not from God; it is the result of our misuse of free will.

There does not seem to be any contradiction to Augustine's Theodicy, as it is possible that a world can be perfectly created and evil is the source of mankind's actions which were initially created for the purpose of accomplishing good.

According to John Hick, Augustine's theodicy is:

...built upon two central pillars of doctrine: first that God created good; and second, that free creatures, by an inexplicably perverse misuse of God-given freedom, fell from grace and that from this fall have preceded all the other evils that we know. [12](#)

But despite this, in critiquing Augustine, John Hick argues whether an innately good creature is capable of sinning. He says: "If the angels are finitely perfect, then even though they are in some sense free to sin, they never will in fact do so." [13](#)

The Protestant theologian Jean Cadier, in an important article titled "Calvin et saint Augustine" states:

By this definition of evil as non-being St. Augustine threw into the process of theological reflection a principle which was to lead to a particular conception of grace, salvation, the Christian life and the church. In effect, if sin is a privation, the sinner is undeficient. Consequently the grace, which saves him, will fill up this deficiency, and will be an irresistible grace [un don de force]. The instrument of this infusion of supernatural life will be the sacrament. The church will have the treasury of these sanctifying graces at its disposal and will distribute it by means of its priests. Medieval theology would develop all the consequences of this principle ... [14](#)

Perhaps Jean Cadier's argument does not seem sound on Augustine's theodicy because the perspective of grace and privation of evil is different from the concepts in Augustine's themes. The aspect of grace is concerned with the theological concept and privation of evil is related to his philosophical themes. Thus, there is insufficient coherence between the two themes.

But it could be a question of evil being considered as the absence of good ("privatio boni"). If negative theory on evil is merely deprivation of good, why should morally free agents choose evil in preference to

good? If evil is the absence of good, what leads to malicious evil or deliberate rebellion?

However, in Augustine's theodicy, God is not the direct cause of evil; humans were created innocent, but exercised a good will badly. Our purpose is to worship and hell awaits those who succeed in rebelling. Perhaps Satan is a direct cause of evil. According to John Hick:

... In spite of such defection on its fringes the mainstream of Christianity has stood by its understanding of God as the most perfect conceivable being, and has thus insisted upon acknowledging the problem of evil as (in the Old Testament sense) the Satan that perpetually accuses faith. [15](#)

In any case, Augustine's theological themes are built upon God and creation, that God is good and the goodness of the created world, but the fall is the major problem for pain and suffering. According to him, God created an idyllic paradise with no suffering, death, or natural disasters. It was human disobedience that introduced these things into creation. Based on logic, we can say that the universe is God's creation and God is good; therefore, the universe is good. There could be some fundamental objections in Augustine's aspect of theodicy.

The concept of the fall is conceivable and an individual's sufferings are a divine punishment, so how plausible is it that general sufferings are a result of divine punishment for sins? How compatible is this with theodicy? For Augustine, evil is not created from God but it is a by-product of God's creation.

In Augustine's theodicy the fall is central, where imperfection is due to the sinner and human disobedience. Well, if imperfection is due to human disobedience and the sinner, then the question arises that as to why the innocent suffer? Because they have not committed any sin and they don't have any disobedience. Augustine's theodicy is not a sufficient answer to the question "why do the innocent suffer"? However, perhaps there is a divine hidden purpose beyond it.

Augustine's philosophical idea that evil is non-being has had some resonance in the Islamic science of Kalam. Abu Abdillah Muhammad b. al-'Arabi (560/1165) known as "the greatest master" in his *Al-Futûh al-Makkiyyah* argues that evil is non-being. [16](#) "Good" or "khayr" (in Arabic) is that which is positive, useful, profitable and beautiful. But "there is no good but God".

The opposite, "sharr," (in Arabic) is evil or *lack* of goodness. Hence, it is non-existence. Good only emerges from good. All good exists. Existence is goodness. Evil results when creatures fail *to share in existence*. God is unlimited goodness, for no creature is as good as He, and there is nothing in creation like Him. So what is the purpose of the notion of evil? Ibn al-'Arabi has a perspective similar to St. Augustine that evil is non-being and it is a privation of good.

According to the great contemporary Muslim philosopher 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, in his book *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, evil is the privation of good. He writes:

In general, ill manners (evilness) and natural disasters (evils) – earthquakes, floods, etc. are voids; and

from this aspect they do not have fundamental existence (in as much as they are evil) to be counted among that which is good. In other words, sickness is the void of health, blindness is the void of sight, oppression is the void of justice, and ugliness is void of beauty. [17](#)

## Hasty decision

In the discussions on justice of God and the problem of evil, the basic dilemma will be solved if we do not make hasty decisions in the phenomena, because it is the major cause of improper judgement. Professor Muhsin Qara'ati writes an interesting reality in his book:

An incident: A man had a pet dog. He went out to fetch something from the bazaar leaving his infant child in the care of his dog. When he returned to his house his dog welcomed him outside the house with a bloodstained mouth. He thought for a moment that the dog had devoured his child and under the heat of passion he fired his gun and killed the dog there and then and went inside hurriedly.

There he found his child hale and hearty. In fact a wolf used to visit the town and since the door of his house was wide open it went inside and wanted to devour the child. The dog jumped upon the wolf and in a grim battle he overpowered it and tore it into pieces and thereby saved the child from the wolf's clutches. But the man in his extreme haste fired at his faithful dog, which had saved the life of his child.

The man repented for his action and came to rescue his dog but it had already died. The man said that he looked into the eyes of his dog, which were lamenting over his wisdom and saying: "O man! How hasty you are! You should have first entered the house and seen for yourself the true situation. Why have you killed me?" After this tragic event the man wrote an article captioned "O man! How hasty you are in making a decision!" [18](#)

There may be some people who may have prayed for something and it was not granted, or they felt it was not fulfilled, but afterwards their thoughts changed and they thought it was better that the prayers were not granted.

It is possible that adopting a metaphysical concept could solve the dilemma. Some things appear good and others evil, but ultimately, evil is a very broad concept and many features within it have a different cause to understand as its origin.

Our initial understanding of unpleasant events is bound to be superficial; many times we do not possess the ultimate depths of phenomena and our limited precise knowledge is the result of improper judgement because we are not prepared to recognise any truth beyond our initial impression.

As a result, we therefore regard these issues as signs of injustice. Our observations lead us into the most illogical analysis. But if we recognise all events as they occur, with open horizons of thought, then we can realise that there isn't any injustice involved in these matters. However, our powers of judgement are not sufficiently comprehensive to deal with this problem.

For an elaborate account of Islamic view on the problem of evil, the readers are recommended to refer to *Divine Justice* (2007) by Ayatollah Mutahhari, published by the International Centre for Islamic Studies, Qum.

## Conclusion

Augustine's theodicy has been largely adopted by the Western Church and has become the touchstone of orthodoxy with regard to addressing the problem of evil and suffering. Augustine's theodicy is originally right and Irenaean theodicy is functionally correct. Both theodicies are quite powerful but with different perspectives.

John Hick, whose many concepts have been referenced from his book, represented and promoted Irenaean theodicy and he is not very sympathetic with Augustine's theodicy. The idea of Irenaean's theodicy is essentially that God has designed the world so that humans may go through a process of *soul making*. *Soul making*, according to Irenaean theodicy, is much like *character building*.

Based on the creation story told in Genesis, Augustine believed that Adam and Eve ate the apple, fell from God's grace into sin, and were punished by being thrown from the Garden of Eden into the maddening world of sin and suffering. However, Augustine supposed that they deserved it.

Not only did they deserve it, we all deserve to continue to be punished for what they did. Adam and Eve sinned and are justly punished for it, and we are the descendants of Adam and Eve and are justly punished for their sins.

I suppose that both theodicies may be adequate for the believer but they are not sufficient for atheists. Therefore, the theory of "evil is non-being" is not a complete solution to this dilemma.

- [1.](#) The problem of evil leads to the following questions: Why is there so much evil? Why is there physical pain and psychological distress? Why do the innocent suffer? If there is a just God and He is the most perfect conceivable being, why does He let suffering or bad things happen to good people?
- [2.](#) Kalam is an Arabic word that literally means speech, discussion and talk. The etymology of this term may be that any significant discussion must relate to God. Kalam, according to Abdel Haleem, is a title of that branch of knowledge in Islam that is usually translated as "speculative theology" (History of Islamic Philosophy, edited by Nasar and Leaman, Vol. 1, Ch. 5, p.71).
- [3.](#) Evil and the God of love, Ch 1, p. 3, published by the Macmillan Press Ltd, London 1985.
- [4.](#) Lessons from the Qur'an, published by Rēh-e- Haqq, Ch. "Justice," pp. 68 & 69.
- [5.](#) Philosophy of Religion, Ch. "The Problem of Evil," p. 41.
- [6.](#) Hick, J, Evil and the God of Love, Macmillan, pp. 40 & 41.
- [7.](#) Ibid. p.48.
- [8.](#) Ibid. p. 84.
- [9.](#) Ibid. p. 86.
- [10.](#) Philosophy of Religion, Ch. "The Problem of Evil," p. 41 citing from "On Free Will," III, ix. 26.
- [11.](#) Ibid. pp. 45 & 46
- [12.](#) Hick, 'Evil and the God of Love', Macmillan, p. 62.

[13.](#) Ibid. p. 63.

[14.](#) Evil and the God of Love<sup>1</sup>, Macmillan, pp. 194 & 195 citing from Communications du Congrès International Augustinien (Paris, 1954), ii, p. 1055.

[15.](#) Ibid. pp. 4 & 5.

[16.](#) For example, see Ibn-al-‘Arabi, Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyyah, II 502.21, published in Egypt by Dār al-Kitāb al-Arabi al-Kubrī.

[17.](#) Tabataba’i, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn. Al-Mizān fi Tafsir al-Qur’an, Vol. 1, p. 101.

[18.](#) Qara’ati, Muhsin. Lessons From the Qur’an, published by Rūh-e-Haqq Institute, Ch. “Justice,” pp. 77 & 78.

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