

Question: "What is theodicy?"

Answer: Theodicy is a branch of philosophy dealing with the issue of evil in light of the existence of God. If God is just and holy and good, then how do evil and misery exist? That's the question theodicy wrestles with. History's most famous statement of the "problem of evil" comes from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus:

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?

Of course, most people have no experience with philosophers. They do, however, watch movies, and a slightly modified version of this idea came from the character of Lex Luthor in a recent action film:

"If God is all powerful, he cannot be all good. And if he's all good, then he cannot be all powerful." – Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice

The biggest hurdle in discussing theodicy is a tendency to waffle on the definitions of certain words. Or to color certain words with a meaning that is not part of the argument. So, in order to really understand the concept of theodicy, one has to carefully define his terms and then stick to those definitions.

What evil is, is "not"

The primary issue with the "Problem of Evil" is defining what evil actually is. Evil is typically seen as a force opposed to good, forming a yin and yang or two poles of a magnet. Defining evil in this way leads to a logical problem for the theist: why would God create evil? God created gravity, light, magnetism, and so forth: why would He also create evil?

The most logical answer is simply that God didn't create evil. Because evil, in and of itself, does not actually exist, except as the *absence* of goodness. Similarly, God created light, but did He also "create" darkness? No, because darkness in and of itself does not exist. *Darkness* is only a term we use to refer to a relative lack of light. It's entirely defined in terms of deprivation: the absence of something else.

The same is true of physical heat. *Heat* is a term used to describe the motion of atoms and molecules. When an object is *cold*, it simply has less molecular movement, relatively speaking. At *absolute zero* all molecular movement would completely stop, theoretically.

You cannot get any “colder” than that, because there is no way to add more *coldness*. You can only remove heat, and when all the heat is gone, that’s as far as you can go.

The same basic point applies to many descriptive words. Terms such as *short* or *thin* are all references to the relative *lack* of something else. There is no such thing as “shortness,” and one cannot “add” shortness. There are only varying measurements of length. Printer paper is not “thin” because it has more “thinness” added to it than cardboard. We use the term *thin* so we don’t have to say “less thick.”

An example from mathematics is the constant *i*, or the square root of negative one ($\sqrt{-1}$). In reality, negative numbers cannot have a “square root,” but there are places in advanced equations where it’s a handy shortcut. The term *i* has meaning, at least in theory, even though we know it’s not a literal description of some tangible thing.

Another mathematical example is the “number” 0. The term *zero* literally refers to that which *does not exist*. It is a reference to nothing, to the absence of something. This is why adding or subtracting 0 results in no change, multiplying 0 is still “nothing,” and dividing by 0 is a logical contradiction. Is zero “real”? In the sense that it’s a term we can understand and that has use, yes. But, of course, 0 does not exist in any tangible sense. It’s literally defined as the absence of something (everything) else.

Putting all of these thoughts together, then, the same can be said of *evil*. The term has meaning and use, but we don’t have to assume it’s some actual, tangible, created thing. *Evil* is a relative term used to mean anything that deviates from the will or moral perfection of God. Evil is the lack of goodness.

All by itself, this reasoning goes a long way toward forming a proper theodicy. If evil is not some “thing” God created or some force outside of God that He cannot control, then the meaning of these questions becomes very different. Any premise that requires God to have created, formed, or generated evil is immediately invalidated. All that is required, then, is for God to have “allowed” it.

Our will versus God’s will

The debate of how we define evil doesn’t stop there, however. For many critics, the objection to God being “all good” inherently means “never allowing any evil.” The first problem with this view of God’s goodness is logical. The second is personal.

Logically, if God is perfect, then anything different from Him, in any way, is no longer perfect. You cannot change absolute, complete perfection and still be absolutely and completely perfect. This means that anything God creates is, by definition, different from Him and must be less than perfect. Considering evil as a deviation from God’s goodness, this leads to two possibilities, in order for God to completely and totally avoid evil of any kind.

First, God could simply not create anything at all.

Second, God could create but allow nothing in His creation the capacity for moral free will. In other words, allow no deviation leading to “evil.” But this makes a mockery of every other emotion, ideal, and benefit that critics of God want to uphold. In short, a universe logically incapable of evil is also one logically incapable of love, nobility, sacrifice or success.

A being unable to partake in evil is also incapable of exhibiting mercy, compassion, or love. It’s not hard to see how, if God had created things with this limitation, creation would seem like a waste of time. God desires love and glory—and our approval of that desire is irrelevant to its truth—but there can be no love given by robotic, choice-less creations.

So, for God to preclude even the possibility of evil, He must either not create or create something utterly pointless. Logically, it stands to reason that God allows the *potential* for evil because such freedom is intrinsically the same that allows the *potential* for nobility and virtue. Without that potential no love or other “good” things can actually occur.

This leads to the “personal” problem with demanding that God disallow evil. Once a person accepts the idea that evil has to be *possible* in order for us to have a meaningful free will, the next step is often to criticize God for allowing “too much” evil or the “wrong kinds” of evil. Here, again, definitions and personal preferences are key.

Critics of God often make an assumption at this stage. They make statements such as “a good God might allow some evil, but He would never allow X.” Once again, the logic leading to this point shows that God does not have to *create* evil for it to exist. This question also assumes, irrationally, that there cannot be things worse than X. Logically, it’s possible there could be evils even worse than X that God *has* prevented, and, because He has prevented them, we are unaware they are even possible. To continue to criticize God on account of there being “too much” evil is to waffle between logic and emotion.

We may not like the idea that God allows certain kinds of evil. And, logically, there is nothing invalid about a person choosing to say, “I reject obedience to God because I don’t agree with His morality.” But theodicy is not a question of making God agree with our whims. What we cannot say, logically, is that, if God does not act according to our *moral preferences*, then He cannot exist in moral perfection. This makes the critic the ultimate standard of morality!

To put that another way, claiming God cannot exist or cannot be perfectly moral unless He agrees with my moral preferences is to say this: “I am morally perfect, so if God and I differ on some moral issue, the only possible reason is that God is flawed, and I am not.” Once again, a person is not *logically* prevented from taking this approach. But just because it’s a possible viewpoint does not make it a reasonable one.

Does this mean there could never be a circumstance where God’s supposed morality conflicts with what we see in our experience? Not at all.

The problem—for the critic—is that many of the rules he claims God fails to live up to are simply fictional. God never promises to make everyone’s life easier or better, nor does He promise to alter cause and effect simply at our whims. There is an eternal context and a spiritual condition to what God tells us about suffering and evil in this world. This is a key part of any reasonable theodicy.

So why allow evil?

Logic says that God does not have to *create* evil in order for there to be evil. Logic says that God does not have to conform to our moral preferences in order to be perfectly good. So, then, how can a person rationalize the existence of evil in a way that’s relevant to our own experience?

The first point that must be realized is that God is consistent in His “allowance” of our free will and the natural function of His creation. As it turns out, it’s the fact that God is consistent in His moral behaviors that greatly aggravates the skeptic. This is because God’s consistency runs counter to our human preferences: we’d rather God bend or break the rules to suit our own selfish preferences.

For example, God is consistent in allowing human beings a broad use of free will. This includes allowing people the freedom to reject His will and spurn His commands. This can result in consequences for those who choose to disobey. At the same time, much of the suffering of man on earth is due to the decisions of *other people*. There, again, God is being consistent in allowing humanity the freedom to act.

This is really nothing more than a re-phrasing of the earlier argument about allowing the potential for evil, because, without it, there is no potential for good. The same natural laws that allow us to build skyscrapers and develop medicines can be abused to make bombs and illicit drugs. They are the same laws that produce earthquakes and hurricanes. Too often, we make choices knowing the risks involved or with a deliberate intent to misuse creation and then blame God when those potential problems materialize.

The second point to make is that God is not motionless, silent, and inactive in the face of evil. Here, again, is a point where the critic becomes inconsistent. The same voices who attempt to say, “God is not doing enough to stop evil” are almost always the same ones who object when God does *anything* to stop evil. The incidents most often pointed to by critics of the Bible as evidence of God’s supposed immorality (such as the destruction of Sodom) were times when God explicitly stated that His actions were a response to malevolence. They were His means of stopping and preventing more evil.

The same critic who cries, “God does nothing about evil,” is all too often the same person calling God immoral for His actions in the flood. Or against the Amalekites. Or at Jericho. God has already taken steps to neutralize and counter evil. Saying He does “nothing” is simply untrue.

Complaining that He does “too much” to stop evil is all well and good, but that makes theodicy irrelevant and the problem of evil moot.

The third point is that we have a limited perspective. This is not a very persuasive argument, especially for someone hostile to the idea of God. But, logically, it has to be said that the God under examination is posited to be omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, and omnipresent. We, of course, are not. We often hear employers, military personnel, parents, doctors, and others reminding us that there are things happening “behind the scenes” that we simply cannot understand. Our inability to understand certain decisions is not hard evidence that those decisions are wrong. It means nothing more than that we have incomplete understanding.

Finally, one has to take all criticisms of evil in the entire context of Christian teaching. If this life were all there is, then the problem of evil would be a much bigger problem. However, according to the Bible, this is not the only life we are going to live. A person can reject that belief, but he cannot criticize the God of the Bible and His morality as if the afterlife were not an intrinsic part of Christian moral understanding. Christians believe that all wrongs—every single one—will be reckoned with, someday. They believe that God is acting to restrain evil now, just as He has in the past. The Bible makes it clear that the struggles we experience now are not the purpose for which we exist, nor do they define our value. Instead, there is a point to the suffering and a plan that involves making all wrongs right.

Back to the beginning

Looking at these ideas, then, we can see that Epicurus’ version of the problem of evil suffers from a fatal flaw. This can be summed up in one simple statement: the “God” Epicurus criticizes is not the God of the Bible. In other words, Epicurus’ criticism only works against the deities of Greek polytheism and in the context of a polytheistic view of reality.

The Christian can respond to Epicurus as follows:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but unable to? Then he is not omnipotent. God is willing to limit evil and has acted to do just that. So, He is still omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. God is able, but not willing, to abolish our free will. So, He is still omnibenevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? God has acted to defeat evil. Evil comes simply when we fall short of His will.

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God? God is not willing to prevent our free will. Your disapproval does not make Him any less God.

And, to the more pop-culture-friendly Lex Luthor, Christianity can respond as follows:

“If God is all powerful, he cannot be all good. And if he’s all good, then he cannot be all powerful.” God can be all-powerful and choose not to act according to your preferences.

When you say “all good,” what you really mean is “doing things my way”; and when you say, “all powerful,” what you really mean is “capable of making us simultaneously free and robotic,” which is gibberish. An all-powerful, all-good God can allow evil in order to obtain the greater, eternal good.

Human beings will always struggle with the problem of evil. Theodicy is not an attempt to make God appear as palatable as possible. In fact, the opposite is true. A truly rational theodicy has to begin with the admission that our dislike of something does not make it false. The question is not whether God is compatible with our personal preferences. The problem of evil is simply the debate over whether or not God is logically possible. Theodicy, taking all logic and evidence together, clearly says He is—whether we like Him or not.

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