

Theodicy through the Lens of Darwin

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Any theodicy is often fraught with difficulties. The two major families identified are Augustinian theodicy and Irenaean theodicy, named after these two early church fathers. These two perspectives are widely accepted accounts of theodicy and represent a general theological approach to the problem of evil. We will explore the insufficiency of these perspectives in light of evolutionary considerations and, in the end, *disappointingly*, call for an as yet developed theodicy to be offered.

God ... either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?

Epicurus, as quoted by Lactantius¹

The presence of evil and suffering in the world has presented theists with an enduring problem. Clear tension, if not outright contradiction, stands between the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being and the existence of natural evil particularly in the case of gratuitous suffering. Moral evil we can blame on ourselves, although doctrines like original sin are not all that helpful.² Over the past two millennia, many Christian thinkers have thought it necessary to provide a logical account for evil within the Christian faith and have thus taken up the task of developing a satisfactory theodicy. From many proposed formulations, two major families identified by theologian John Hick³ have emerged and remain influential today: Augustinian theodicy and Irenaean theodicy. While both of these perspectives are born out of the writings of these two early church fathers,

both have been carried into contemporary thought and received modern treatments and formulations. These two perspectives are thought to comprise the most organized and widely accepted accounts of theodicy within the Christian schema; they represent a general theological approach to the problem of evil in modern times. We will explore the insufficiency of these perspectives in light of modern science and, in the end, they still *disappointingly* call for an as yet developed theodicy to be offered.

In the past century and a half, scientific explanation has answered more questions and its application has resolved many intractable problems. The science behind the observation of evolution, the theory of natural selection, has come to be accepted as a principal concept within this currently held

¹ The Works of Lactantius. (4th century), p28.

² Brannan, 2007.

³ Hick, 2010.

scientific view.⁴ Through intense scrutiny and study, Darwin's model of evolution by natural selection has emerged as an incredibly helpful insight into the living world and is now a foundational premise in both the natural and social sciences. Unfortunately, the development of the Darwinian worldview has met significant opposition from many Christian fundamentalists. The ideas of natural selection and modification by descent from a common ancestor complicate traditional interpretations of scripture. Among the many issues that would need to be thoroughly reexamined is the Christian approach to theodicy.

Therefore, I will examine the challenges that evolutionary thought presents for the Augustinian and Irenaean perspectives on theodicy. Each perspective will be briefly represented in its currently relevant form and then examined in light of Darwinism. The evolutionary perspective takes seriously the processes that start with a common ancestor and display increasing diversification of living organisms across successive generations through heritable changes in the genome and its expression, coupled with natural selection – the tendency for changes that prove advantageous for survival and sustainable reproduction in a given environment will be preserved. This definition is well within the widely accepted tenets of evolution as conceived by Darwin and his successors. I will strive to avoid scientific reductionism; instead, I shall look through the lens of evolution and examine an important element of Christian thought in order to observe the points of contention which require further development in hopes of resolution.

⁴ National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, National Academies. (2008). p11

⁵ Augustine *Confessions*, Book VII, p. 18

Augustinian Theodicy

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) remains one of the more prominent and influential early Christian theologians. He is credited with laying the groundwork for the first of the two considered theodicies. His magnum opus, *City of God*, lays out a sophisticated organization of reflections regarding the origin and nature of evils and their relationship to a Christian Lord and Creator. His perspective was carried on and further revised by a number of Western theists including Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. His formulation is recognizable today in a variety of versions, but is perhaps most prominent in the free will defense of Alvin Plantinga; sadly, his argument stops short and merely asserts that the argument is not logically incoherent.

Augustine's theodicy approaches the task of reconciling an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God and the existence of evil by primarily looking to the origin and nature of humanity. Augustine affirms that everything the Creator creates is good; indeed, it is perfect.⁵ However, humanity is created possessing volition, the ability to freely choose right and wrong thinking and see it through to action.⁶ Augustine posits that since all things are created good, and since it follows that their nature is good, evil does not exist as an entity in and of itself. Evil is, rather, the privation of good.⁷ Augustine holds that though all things were created good, including humanity, the free choice of Adam to disobey the will of God introduced a misuse of the created good, enacting a necessary potential in human freedom: namely, the freedom to depart from the good will of a benevolent Creator. Put another way, the onus for evil in the world does not lie with God, but with humanity. This

⁶ *Free Will*, Book III.

⁷ *Enchiridion of Augustine*, p.11

fundamental theological position has come to be known among Christians as The Fall. Augustine therefore makes allowance for the evils that we witness as just punishment for the actions taken through Adam and which affect us all. Augustine holds that through the grace of God and confession of Jesus Christ as the perfect incarnation and sacrifice, the sinner might be accounted for and the confessor, upon death, can resume his position as one who does not sin.

This brief reflection brings to light several key elements in Augustine's theodicy. First, it is clearly of tantamount importance to Augustine that a perfect God cannot be held responsible for evil; through the sin of Adam, humanity bears full responsibility. Secondly, it is clear that free will is a necessary condition of Adam, otherwise his transgression could not be considered sin, and God would again be culpable.⁸ Thirdly, if the original sin is what ushered in evil and death, then there is a period prior to this event in which there was no evil and presumably no suffering or death.

Examined from the perspective of evolutionary thought, Augustinian theodicy seems to suffer on its own premises. When the Augustinian theologian begins with a critique of the advent of evil through an action of humans, she must account for why there appears in the natural world such suffering, pain, death and struggle even before humankind comes into existence ... some of which, at least in human eyes, seems gratuitous and unnecessary. As Arvind Sharma points out, distinct, recognizable vectors such as disease and natural disaster long preceded human existence.⁹ In truth, apart from discrete causes of suffering, pain, and what has been referred to as the natural evils, a brief

analysis of the process of natural selection elucidates a deeper incompatibility in these two views. If natural selection is indeed viewed as the mechanism by which genes are generationally transmitted (driven by the selective pressures within nature including competition for limited resources and mates, ability to avoid predation, and suitability to endure harsh conditions), then these natural evils have served as selective conditions presumably from the origin of life. Unless the action of Adam is thought to have some kind of retroactive effect upon the creation, it is not readily apparent how the free action of a man can be upheld as the cause of *natural* evils such as death and suffering, and extinction, in animals.

In addition to this difficulty, the Augustinian theodicy also assumes that a rational and volitional decision was made to rebel against the will of God through Adam. If the notion of evolutionary descent of all life from a common ancestor is upheld, and humans developed by degrees through the mammalian line to the hominids we currently are, then it becomes difficult to pin down when exactly such a monumental decision might have taken place. At what point in our development could humanity be held as a free moral agent in the mind of a Creator? Alternatively, if 'original sin' does not take the form of a single incident of a single man, but rather the collective trend of actions of a developing species, what set or trend would be considered? Could original sin be no more than any selfish action that prohibits fecundity in any other species? Evil is what interrupts new creation. Perhaps eating of the forbidden fruit was the metaphorical idea of destroying the very life processes that God had ordained as sacred. We have been given so much fruitfulness already, why do we also have to greedily

⁸ *True Religion*, Chap XIV

⁹ *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*, p85

take that from which we are asked to refrain. At what point in the evolutionary history of hominids can we settle on for the event(s) that determined when and how humanity departed from the will of God?

When these considerations are combined, it becomes clear that the Augustinian line of theodicy is faced with problems in defending the premise that humanity is clearly to blame for the presence of natural evil in the world, a central premise to the integrity of Augustine's argument.¹⁰

Irenaean Theodicy

Irenaeus, the 2nd century bishop of Lugdunum, and Origen of Alexandria are credited with the foundational principle of the second of school of theodicy considered; it bears the name of the former church father. While Augustine's theodicy was favored in the Roman Catholic Church and most of western Protestantism with medieval and renaissance theists being strongly affected by it, Irenaean thinking proved more influential in the Eastern Orthodox tradition but made a resurgence in popularity with German theists Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Leibniz borrowed from Irenaean thought to develop an *optimism* theodicy (as in optimal world). Schleiermacher and the more notable contemporary proponent, John Hick (1922-2012), organized the previous writings into the Augustinian and Irenaean families; Hick went on to formulate his own sophisticated,

Irenaean-influenced theodicy by incorporating Darwinian thought.

The Irenaean approach to theodicy differs from the Augustinian on several important points. While Augustinian thinkers attempt to argue that God is not responsible for the creation and existence of evil, the Irenaean line claims that God is indeed responsible and justified for the allowance of the existence of evil. Irenaean theodicy uses different approaches to argue that an omnipotent, benevolent Creator would create an ideal (not perfect without death and suffering) world to serve the purposes of the Creator. Thus, it follows that if evil exists, it exists to serve a purpose or multiple purposes in the ultimate designs of God, traditionally referred to as the "best of all possible worlds" argument (*optimism*). Essential to this line of thinking is the assertion that the creation of man in the image and likeness of God was not an instantaneous action in a time gone by, but a continuing process that progresses throughout the life and experiences of the individual and species as a whole. The Irenaean approach holds that mankind is not the once perfect, now broken product of a discrete creation action, but rather the continuing creation and, in the mind of some Irenaean scholars, co-contributor in the ultimate product. This retains the importance of free will for each individual and also attempts to make room for evil as a necessary condition for the continued creation of humanity into God's likeness. Origin refers to the concept as something

¹⁰ This critique is in addition to the devastating one against Augustine's illogic in his argument where Brannan (2007), referencing F. LeRon Shults (2003), asks, "If they [Adam and Eve] were perfectly wise, why were they misled? If they were created foolish (and since folly is the greatest of the vices), why is God the author of vice? We can counter that it was Satan who tempted them (as did Augustine), but this still does not get our conception of God off the hook."

It just pushes the objection back a step or postulates that God pre-destined Satan's sinful act and Adam's disobedience; or we become victim to Manichean thought. Augustine, like so many others, begs the question with the claim that it is an incomprehensible mystery." (p. 191). Even Augustine admits his illogic with the claim of "incomprehensible mystery."

akin to a school of the soul, while John Hicks prefers the term “soul-making theodicy”¹¹. This continued creation of the soul then leads up to and is fully realized in the parousia of scripture and reunion with God. Irenaean theodicy holds that if these two considerations (purpose of evil and continuing creation) are correct, then there is no logical or evidential problem with the simultaneous existence of evil and an all powerful, all loving God.

Naturally, this position is not without criticism. Fyodor Dostoyevski portrays a withering critique of this position in his famous dialogue “Rebellion,” portraying it as a heartless and unthinkable calculation for a loving God.¹² A number of theologians and philosophers have been quick to point out that the Irenaean theodicy appears to feature a paradoxical God who, although omnibenevolent, is imposing natural pain and suffering (including, what seem to some, gratuitous ‘evils’) to achieve his own ends. Nevertheless, this theodicy has had considerable success in the modern era creating a logical account for evil. As one might suspect from a post-Darwinian writer, John Hicks makes an admirable effort in accounting for the scientific account of evolution in his writings. As a fruit of these efforts, Irenaean theodicy seems to suffer less criticism from a Darwinian perspective. However, there are still points of tension. Eleanor Stump points out that if the entire place for evil is in the continuing formation of the soul of individuals, it does not appear to account for the suffering of those with debilitating disabilities, terminal illnesses and other conditions that are very difficult to

perceive as formative.¹³ This argument can be expanded to a multitude of easily imaginable cases: an infant who has died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), an individual born with a genetic disability that severely limits her physical and mental capacity, or any number of other unnecessary maladies. While it may appear possible to account for pain, suffering, and evil in the larger, theoretical picture, the theodicy appears to have much less explanatory power against specific instances; this specificity is partially of why Dostoyevsky’s critique has such enduring strength.

Also, as Christopher Southgate notices, the Irenaean theodicy fails to account for the suffering of animals and, thus, what is called natural evil.¹⁴ While this problem is neatly avoided in the Augustinian position by attributing natural evils such as animal suffering (along with humanity’s) to the sin of mankind due to the fall, Irenaean approaches see gratuitous animal suffering and our own as an opportunity for developing the soul in the best of possible worlds where freedom is valued regardless of agony. Following this logic, if animals cannot be thought to have a soul comparable to that of humans,¹⁵ then it is not readily apparent for what purpose they suffer, unless it can be totally accounted for by some soul-making utility for humanity such as the cultivation of sympathy or compassion. If this latter position is the case, the Irenaean view is problematic from a Darwinian perspective – it fails to account for the suffering of all life past and present over billions of years when no humans had

¹¹ *Evil and the God of Love*, p289

¹² *The Brothers Karamazov*, p267

¹³ “The Problem of Evil.” *Faith and Philosophy* 2: 392-423

¹⁴ *The Groaning of Creation*, p10

¹⁵ This claim, in fact, is likely incorrect as *nepesh* (or *nepes*) in Hebrew is used for both humans and animals. One is likely to make more progress by considering the difference between God’s image versus His likeness, as Irenaeus does, but the discussion is more involved than can be had here.

even yet appeared. The rigors of natural selection and gratuitous extinctions seem to magnify suffering and death beyond what is needed for humanity to arrive and survive.

Southgate seeks denouement of this conundrum by embedding Irenaean thought into an evolutionary perspective by affirming the teleological worth of the animal life, but his argument suffers a similar flaw as does the larger Irenaean framework in addressing particular instances. For example, what possible “soul-making” telos does a non-living parasitic virus possess? Irenaean theodicy appears to be lacking explanatory power in light of the Darwinian processes of modification by descent from a common ancestor.

Conclusion

If a system of thought is to be accepted, it must not only address the problems that are readily apparent at the time of conception but also the issues that arise when newly

accepted information is applied. If there is a contradiction, the necessary logical task of those who accept the ideas must be to reexamine the position and either revise or reject it. This is the position of the theist who accepts evolution today. The purpose of this brief essay is merely to accomplish the recognition that our existing approaches to account for gratuitous natural evil and suffering do not appear sufficient in light of the evidence supplied by the theory of evolution.¹⁶ The harsh glare of Darwinian thought reveals a need for new renderings of theodicy.

Perhaps if we explore process or open theology where God empties Himself (Herself?) of power to enable sentience to evolve without interference – co-creators with the image *and likeness* of God who are expected to solve the problems of evil – perhaps then we may develop more fruitful hypotheses. I leave that for others to develop.

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¹⁶ Our concern was in making sense of natural evil, disasters and diseases that seem not to have any

features or functions other than causing gratuitous suffering in even non-human creatures.