Title: Theodicy in Monotheistic Religions: Exploring Theological Responses to the Problem of Evil

Abstract

Theodicy, or the problem about evil, concerns if and how the presence of evil and suffering in the world can be reconciled with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God. This issue poses a fundamental confrontation in theology, especially in monotheistic regions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Accordingly, this article reviews the literature which has analysed theodicy and examines various theological responses that are seeking to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. The article also discusses ongoing challenges and research directions for future work in the study of the problem of evil within the context of monotheistic religions.

Introduction

The problem of evil is a cardinal concern deeply significant in theological discussions, especially in monotheistic religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. That God possesses such traits and the existence of evil and suffering raises questions about God's nature and intentions, leading to an apparent contradiction between his divine attributes and the reality of human experience. Theodicy scholars have attempted to address the problem of evil by various theological responses in various ways.
The Free Will Defence

The free will defence is a prominent and significant theological response to the problem of evil, 
*assuming* that evil is a necessary consequence of human freedom. According to this view, God allows evil to exist in order to preserve human autonomy and moral responsibility, because genuine moral goodness necessarily requires the freedom to choose between good and evil (Hick, 1966). Scholars have extensively debated and refined this defence, with some theologians arguing that it successfully reconciles the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God with the presence of evil and suffering (Plantinga 1974). Others, conversely, contend that it fails to account for the extent and severity of evil in the world (Mackie, 1955).
The Greater Good Theodicy

The greater good theodicy posits that evil and suffering serve a higher purpose such as spiritual growth, character development, or the manifestation of God’s justice (Adams, 1999). Critics of this view assume that God allows evil to occur in order to bring about a greater good that would not have been possible without the presence of evil (Hick, 1966). As with the free will defense, the greater good theodicy has been subjected to mixed critiques, with some scholars arguing that it’s not sufficient in justifying the magnitude and distribution of evil and suffering in the world (Rowe, 1979). Others argue that the moral implications of a god who permits evil for the sake of a greater good have been subjected to mixed critiques, with some scholars arguing that it’s not sufficient in justifying the magnitude and distribution of evil and suffering in the world (Rowe, 1979).

The Appeal to Divine Mystery

A final theological response to the problem of evil which this article explores is the appeal to divine mystery. According to this argument, says that our reduced human understanding is finite, limited and constrained. Human understanding and cannot therefore fully comprehend the reasons behind evil and suffering; God’s wisdom and that God’s wisdom is beyond our grasp (Swinburne, 1998). This approach is often grounded in the notion of divine transcendence and the epistemic gap between human and divine knowledge (Alston, 1991). Some scholars challenge the appeal to divine mystery has been criticized by some scholars as just simply an evasion of the problem of evil, while others argue that the appeal represents a legitimate acknowledgment of the boundaries of human reason in the face of divine mystery (Alston, 1991).

Commented [CP11]: Contractions such as “wouldn’t” are informal and so are generally inappropriate for academic writing. I have therefore expanded this and other contractions to their full form.

Commented [CP12]: Please expand on this point; I do not believe that the causative logic is currently clear here. Namely, how does the existence of a greater good? Who precisely brings about this greater good, and how and why do they do so?

What, furthermore, counts as a greater good? I think it would be helpful to spend some time expanding on the concepts here, defining them and showing clearly how they relate to one another.

As above, please also consider naming some theorists behind this view. It is not clear, for instance, whether Adams and Hick are simply defining this position, or whether they themselves believe it. By naming scholars in the text, it helps you present the field more clearly, which in turn should help you make your position more strongly.

Commented [CP13]: As with the previous paragraph, please provide some more detail on these criticisms, and then weigh in on them with your own opinion. Do you agree with the challenge to the theodicy? Do you think that it is a convincing or morally defensible position? You could introduce some other theories here to help strengthen either the theodicy or the challenges to it. For example, moral utilitarianism could be an appropriate way of examining the notion of the greater good; does the existence of evil for some outweigh the existence of a greater good for others or not, for instance?

Commented [CP14]: Please clarify understanding of what? Human understanding of morality? Human understanding of the divine?

Commented [CP15]: This sentence quickly covers two quite complex and important ideas in broad terms. I recommend that you take each of these concepts and explain them in turn: please define them and explain more clearly and in more detail how they relate to the divine mystery, citing relevant scholarship in doing so.

Commented [CP16]: As with the previous two approaches to the problem of evil, please go further into explaining and assessing the merits and drawbacks of the different scholarly responses to the appeal to divine mystery. Who is advancing these claims? What evidence and arguments do they use in doing so? How convincing do you find their positions? What is your own opinion?
Having surveyed general responses to the problem of evil, this article turns now to the nature of theodicy in Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The Problem of Evil in Christianity

In the Christian tradition, the problem of evil raises questions about God’s divine attributes: Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Omnibenevolence.

Various theological responses have been proposed. Theologians have proposed various ways to assuage these doubts, including the free will defense; the concept of divine suffering; and the idea of redemptive suffering. The free will defense, cited above, argues that evil is a necessary consequence of human free will, but the concept of divine suffering posits that God shares in humanity’s pain and sorrow. The idea of redemptive suffering, finally, considers that suffering can serve a salvific purpose by bringing humanity closer to God.

The Problem of Evil in Islam

As in the Islamic tradition, scholars of Islam have posited several solutions to the problem of evil. These are addressed through sundry theological perspectives, including the conception of divine decree (Qadar) and the notion of trials and tribulation (Ibn Taymiyya, 2005). According to the Islamic idea of Qadar, the concept of divine decree provides a framework for understanding how God’s will is manifest in the world, even in the face of evil.

Commented [CP17]: This is a linking sentence to help signpost the article and ease the transition from one set of sections to the next.

Commented [CP18]: Please supply a sentence or two after this one explaining how the problem of evil challenges these attributes. That is, rather than leaving it to the reader to infer your argument, it is worth explicitly stating something about how Christians have to reconcile the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving God with the existence of evil.

Commented [CP19]: For each of these arguments, please cite some scholarship to provide evidence for and examples of scholars who advance each claim. As above, please also explain in more detail the evidence and logic behind each defence, and assess how strong or weak you find each one. You could then close this section by offering your perspective on whether Christian theologians have satisfactorily addressed the problem of evil, or whether it is still a significant concern.
everything that occurs in the world—both good and evil—is preordained by God and serves a purpose within His divine plan (Leaman, 2000). By the notion of trials and tribulation, evil and suffering are often regarded should be understood as tests of faith, patience, and perseverance. Such tests have with the ultimate aim of refining believers’ character and fostering their spiritual growth (Murad, 2009). Some Islamic scholars, furthermore, argue that the existence of evil does not contradict God’s attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. This is because these attributes are understood within the specific theological framework of Islam (Leaman, 2000).

The Problem of Evil in Judaism

In Judaism, the problem of evil is also a central concern, with various theological responses which address the issue to which theologians have again responded in various ways; the problem remains, however, deeply complex and ultimately unresolved. One very noteworthy significant early response is found in the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Job, that—which presents uses—the suffering of an innocent man as an exploration of a way to explore the nature of divine justice (Hartman, 2007). Rabbinic tradition offers several further explanations for the existence of worldly evil and suffering, including the concept of moral agency (i.e., human free will), the idea of collective responsibility (i.e., the consequences of the actions of the previous generations), and the notion of divine chastisement (i.e., suffering as a form of punishment or correction) (Kushner, 1981).

In the Jewish tradition, the problem of evil stays an unresolved and complex issue, with varied theological perspectives offering separate insights and interpretations (Hartman, 2007).
Conclusion

The problem of evil, i.e., theodicy, is a perennial issue within the field of theology, particularly for the monotheistic religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. This article has surveyed the state of the literature on theodicy, examining various theological responses to the apparent contradiction between existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God and the presence of evil and suffering in the world.

The ongoing challenge and future direction for the study of the problem of evil in the context of monotheistic religions presents both complex challenges and the rich potential for further research. Scholars could further explore the refinement of existing theodicies; and finally, research into these themes could offer refreshing, useful insights into this unending, complex, and important issue.

Commented [CP26]: The conclusion is the space to bring together your various bits of evidence and argumentation to synthesise your overall position. Can you bring together the different strands of this paper, perhaps comparing and contrasting the different themes you have explored?

Here are some questions which considering would help you present some deeper analysis than just reiterating what the paper has done:
- What are some common themes across the responses to the problem of evil in the different religions?
- How far is evil presented as an unfortunate, necessary side-effect of human existence and free will, and how far is evil presented as a useful phenomenon (for instance, in punishing wrongdoing or correcting morality)?
- Are the different responses to the problem of evil persuasive or morally defensible? That is, do the responses actually convincingly or usefully solve the problem?
- What, in your opinion, generally typifies scholarly responses to the problem of evil, and scholarly responses to attempts to address the problem?

Commented [CP27]: Please go into a bit more detail about what these avenues could look like. What would be the subject and point of exploring the relationship between the divine attributes and evil, for instance? How could scholars do so? Similarly, how and why could research refine existing theodicies? What exactly do you mean by ‘existing theodicies’ in this context? I think just a bit of expansion on these points would make it clearer where you have identified future cause for research, which in turn would help you make conclusions about the merits and gaps in existing scholarship.


Ibn Taymiyya, A. I. 2005. The Decisive Criterion Between the Friends of Allah and the Friends of Shaytan. Translated by [name of translator]. [Place of publication]: Darussalam.


If possible, please cite a specific page or page range demonstrating where exactly or found this information in Plantinga's work, according to the following structure: (Smith 2006, 5-7). The same applies for your other notes; to reference thoroughly, please provide as much information as possible.

Please note in particular that Chicago style does not include a comma between the author and the date, but does include one between the date and the page number(s).

I recommend making this point more explicitly, because it is of crucial importance to the subject and hence to your paper. What kind of questions are these, for instance? What kind of tension? I believe it is worth making it clear what the problem of evil is (for instance, how and why does an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God allow suffering?) so you can go on to clearly present responses to this problem.

I have a few comments which apply to this paragraph which I believe will help strengthen your argument and analysis. First of all, I recommend elaborating on the perspectives of the two sides of this debate. How do the scholars present their views for the merits (or otherwise) of the free will defence? What evidence do they use? Is it convincing?

Secondly, and building on this previous point, what is your opinion? An essay, article or paper of any kind should ideally advance an argument. This will almost necessarily draw on primary and secondary evidence, such as the arguments of theologians. However, it is also crucial to advance your own perspective, building on these different kinds of evidence and previous arguments. By commenting on how far you agree or disagree with other scholars, and by explaining why, you go a good way towards advancing and defending your own argument, which is at the nub of a paper.

Finally, I do not think that the evidence cited (two scholars) quite defends your claim that this is an important debate which has been widely debated and refined. Please consider including a greater range of literature here, as well as preferably some scholarship which is more recent than 1974.

As with the previous paragraph, please provide some more detail to these criticisms, and then weigh in on them with your own opinion. Do you agree with the challenges to the theodicy? Do you think that it is a convincing or morally defensible position? You could introduce some other theories here to help strengthen either the theodicy or the challenges to it. For example, moral utilitarianism could be an appropriate way of examining the notion of the greater good; does the existence of evil for some outweigh the existence of a greater good for others or not, for instance?
By analysing the theory of the greater good theodicy and its challenges, rather than simply describing them, you can put together a stronger, more persuasive argument of your own.

As with the previous two approaches to the problem of evil, please go further into explaining and assessing the merits and drawbacks of the different scholarly responses to the appeal to divine mystery. Who is advancing these claims? What evidence and arguments do they use in doing so? How convincing do you find their positions? What is your own opinion?

By approaching scholarly opinions in more detail and more critically, you can articulate your own position, which helps provide a central argument or standpoint for the paper as a whole. One conclusion could be, for instance, that the problem remains fiercely debated with persuasive arguments on either side, if that is what you believe the scholarship represents. Or, you might find that the problem has been satisfactorily resolved. Whatever your opinion is, it is important, please, that you state it clearly. A reader should leave a paper with a clear position of what has been argued, and this needs to move beyond just describing what scholars have said.

Please also provide a reference for the scholars who consider the appeal to be an evasion.