

# Theodicy Arguments

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*"In space, no one can hear you think."*

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# 1 Theodicy Arguments

## 1.1 Introduction to Theodicy

The term “theodicy” emerges from the linguistic marriage of two ancient Greek words: *theos*, meaning God, and *dike*, signifying justice or righteousness. This etymological fusion aptly encapsulates the discipline’s core purpose: the attempt to justify the ways of God to humanity, particularly in the face of the profound and pervasive reality of evil and suffering. Coined by the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his seminal 1710 work, *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal* (Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil), the term provided a formal name for a philosophical and theological preoccupation as ancient as human reflection on the divine and the nature of existence itself. Leibniz, grappling with the intellectual challenges posed by thinkers like Pierre Bayle, sought to demonstrate that the existing world, despite its evident imperfections and horrors, was indeed the “best of all possible worlds” that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent deity could actualize. His formulation gave structure and focus to centuries of prior rumination, launching theodicy as a distinct field of rigorous inquiry aimed at resolving what remains one of philosophy’s most persistent and emotionally charged conundrums.

At its heart, theodicy confronts a seemingly irreconcilable tension, often crystallized in the ancient and piercing trilemma attributed to Epicurus, the Hellenistic philosopher: “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?” This formulation, though possibly a later summary of Epicurean thought rather than his direct words, powerfully distills the logical challenge. It posits three attributes traditionally ascribed to the God of classical theism—absolute power (*omnipotence*), complete knowledge (*omniscience*), and perfect goodness (*omnibenevolence*)—and sets them in stark opposition to the undeniable reality of suffering, cruelty, and destruction observed throughout human history and the natural world. If God possesses all three attributes, the existence of evil appears not merely puzzling, but logically impossible. An all-powerful being could prevent any evil; an all-knowing being would be aware of all evil; an all-good being would desire to prevent all evil. Yet evil persists, manifesting in countless forms: the moral evil inflicted by human choices like genocide, torture, and betrayal, and the natural evil wrought by earthquakes, diseases, and famines seemingly indifferent to human virtue. This apparent contradiction forms the bedrock of what philosophers call the “problem of evil,” the central dilemma that theodicy strives to address through reasoned argumentation, theological interpretation, and metaphysical construction. It is a problem that transcends mere intellectual curiosity, striking at the foundations of faith, the coherence of religious belief systems, and the very possibility of finding meaning in a world scarred by profound suffering.

Humanity’s struggle to reconcile divine goodness with worldly suffering is not a modern invention but a thread woven deeply into the fabric of intellectual history. Ancient Greek philosophers laid crucial groundwork, moving beyond simple mythological explanations of misfortune. Plato, in dialogues like the *Republic*, grappled with the nature of goodness and the role of the divine in the cosmos, suggesting that evil stems not from God but from the inherent limitations of the material world and the imperfect choices of rational be-

ings. His student Aristotle, while less focused on a personal deity, developed a metaphysical framework where potentiality and actuality explained imperfection as a necessary byproduct of a universe striving towards fulfillment. The Stoics offered a different perspective, advocating acceptance of suffering as part of the rational, divine order (*Logos*), where adversity presented opportunities for virtue and inner tranquility. Early Christian thought inherited these philosophical currents while grappling with the radical claims of a benevolent creator God revealed in scripture. Figures like the Apostle Paul wrestled with the tension between sin and redemption, while the apocalyptic traditions sought ultimate meaning in divine judgment and the promise of a world renewed. The medieval period saw the systematization of these reflections through Scholasticism. Anselm of Canterbury, in his *Proslogion*, attempted a rational proof of God's existence while implicitly confronting the problem of evil. However, it was Augustine of Hippo who provided one of the most influential early theodicies. Drawing heavily on Neoplatonic philosophy, particularly Plotinus's concept of evil as the privation (*privatio boni*) of good rather than a positive substance, Augustine argued that evil entered the world not through God's creation, which was fundamentally good, but through the misuse of free will by angelic and human beings. The Fall of humanity, as narrated in Genesis, disrupted the perfect order, introducing moral evil and its consequences, including the corruption of nature leading to natural evil. Thomas Aquinas later synthesized Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine, developing a sophisticated metaphysical framework where evil represented a lack of due perfection in things that are, by their nature, good, emphasizing God's permission of evil for the sake of greater goods within His providential plan. The Enlightenment ushered in a period of critical scrutiny. Thinkers like Pierre Bayle, in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, relentlessly attacked traditional religious justifications for evil, arguing that reason could not reconcile the Christian God with the existence of sin and suffering. David Hume, in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, presented devastating critiques through the character of Philo, questioning the inference from the world's mix of good and evil to a perfectly benevolent deity and highlighting the problem of animal suffering. Immanuel Kant, while deeply concerned with morality and religion, famously argued in his *On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies* that traditional theodicy projects were fundamentally flawed, suggesting instead that the true response to evil lay in practical reason and the moral quest to overcome it within the limits of human understanding. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed further evolution, with figures like John Stuart Mill arguing that nature's indifference to suffering precluded belief in a benevolent God, while others like Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the "death of God" and sought alternative sources of meaning in a world devoid of divine justice. The unprecedented horrors of the 20th century, particularly the systematic industrialized murder of the Holocaust, profoundly reshaped the discourse, forcing thinkers like Martin Buber, Emil Fackenheim, and Richard Rubenstein to confront the radical challenge of seemingly gratuitous, overwhelming evil and its implications for traditional theistic belief. This historical trajectory reveals not a linear progression towards resolution, but an ongoing, dynamic conversation where each era re-engages the problem through the lens of its prevailing philosophical assumptions, scientific discoveries, and historical experiences.

The significance of theodicy within intellectual and religious life cannot be overstated. It stands as arguably the central problem in the philosophy of religion, a crucible in which the coherence of theistic belief is tested. For believers across traditions, the problem of evil is not merely an abstract philosophical puzzle but

an existential crisis that can shake faith to its core. Theodicy, therefore, serves a vital function in providing intellectual scaffolding for belief, offering frameworks that attempt to make sense of suffering within a worldview that affirms divine goodness and power. It addresses the anguished cry of the Psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1), echoing through the ages in the voices of Job, the prophets, and countless individuals confronting personal or collective tragedy. Beyond its apologetic role in defending belief against skeptical attack, theodicy also shapes theological understandings of God’s nature, human freedom, providence, and the ultimate purpose of creation. Different theodical models lead to different conceptions of the divine—a sovereign ruler permitting evil for inscrutable reasons, a fellow-sufferer limited by creaturely freedom, or a persuasive lurer working within the constraints of process. The problem also carries profound weight for skeptics and atheists; the existence and distribution of evil is frequently cited as the most powerful evidence against the existence of the God of classical theism. The evidential argument from evil, developed by philosophers like William Rowe, contends that the sheer amount and seemingly pointless nature of suffering, especially instances of intense suffering experienced by innocents (such as a fawn burned alive in a forest fire), makes God’s existence highly improbable, even if not logically impossible. This renders theodicy discussions crucial not only for believers seeking to maintain intellectual integrity but also for non-believers marshaling arguments against faith. Furthermore, theodicy transcends narrow disciplinary boundaries. It intersects deeply with ethics, raising questions about moral responsibility, justice, and the value of suffering. It engages psychology, exploring how individuals and communities cope with trauma and find meaning. It touches upon political philosophy, particularly in discussions of structural evil, oppression, and social justice. It even finds resonance in literature, art, and music, which often grapple expressively with human suffering and the search for redemption or meaning. The interdisciplinary nature of theodicy reflects the multifaceted reality of evil itself—a phenomenon that resists containment within a single academic silo. Ultimately, the enduring significance of theodicy lies in its commitment to wrestling with one of the most fundamental questions of human existence: how to understand and respond to suffering in a universe where the existence, nature, and purposes of ultimate reality remain deeply contested terrain. It is a quest for coherence that speaks to the deepest human yearning for meaning and justice in the face of life’s most inexplicable and painful realities.

This foundational exploration of theodicy—its origins, its central philosophical tension, its historical evolution, and its profound significance—sets the stage for a deeper examination of the specific arguments and responses that have characterized this enduring intellectual and spiritual quest. Having established the basic parameters of the problem and its importance, we now turn to its most rigorous logical formulation: the challenge of demonstrating a fundamental inconsistency between the existence of God and the existence of evil.

## 1.2 The Logical Problem of Evil

The logical formulation of the problem of evil represents the most stringent philosophical challenge to the coherence of classical theism, seeking not merely to question the probability of God’s existence in light of suffering, but to demonstrate a fundamental, irreconcilable contradiction between the concept of an omnipo-

tent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent deity and the undeniable reality of evil. This logical confrontation, as suggested at the conclusion of our previous discussion, moves beyond probabilistic concerns to claim that the very predicates used to define God in the Western theistic tradition cannot coexist with the fact of evil. The roots of this formidable challenge stretch back to antiquity, where the seeds of logical contradiction were first sown in the fertile intellectual soil of Greek philosophy, germinating through centuries of theological reflection before reaching their most precise and potent expression in modern analytic philosophy.

Ancient formulations of the logical problem of evil found their most powerful articulation in the Hellenistic period, particularly through the materialist philosophy of Epicurus and his followers. Though the famous trilemma—“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?”—may represent a later summary of Epicurean thought rather than the philosopher’s exact words, it perfectly captures the logical challenge presented by the Epicurean school. Epicurus, building upon the atomistic materialism of Democritus, proposed a universe governed by natural laws without divine intervention, where the gods, if they existed at all, remained blissfully detached from human affairs. His logical formulation created a seemingly unbreakable dilemma for those who maintained belief in divine benevolence and power while acknowledging the reality of suffering. This early logical challenge did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum but responded to the popular religious conceptions of capricious, anthropomorphic deities prevalent in Hellenistic culture. The Stoic philosophers, contemporaries of the Epicureans, offered a different response by redefining divine providence and the nature of evil itself. For Stoics like Zeno and Chrysippus, the universe operated according to a rational principle, the Logos, and what humans perceived as evil represented merely their limited perspective within a providentially ordered whole. Evil, in this view, was not a positive reality but a necessary component of a perfect cosmic system, a position that would later influence theological approaches to the problem.

The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus provided perhaps the most sophisticated ancient response to the logical challenge in his *Enneads*, particularly in his treatise “On the Nature and Source of Evil” (I.8 [51]). Plotinus developed the concept of evil as privation (*steresis*) of good, drawing upon Plato’s distinction between the realm of perfect Forms and the imperfect material world. For Plotinus, evil had no substantial existence but represented a lack, a deficiency, or a falling away from the perfect unity and goodness of the One, the ultimate principle of reality. The further a being descended from the perfection of the One into multiplicity and materiality, the more it participated in this privation of good. Matter itself, being the farthest from the One, constituted the principle of evil in the universe. This privation theory offered a logical solution by denying that evil existed as a positive reality that God would need to create or permit; instead, evil emerged as an inherent limitation in the structure of reality itself. Plotinus’s metaphysical framework profoundly influenced subsequent Christian thought, particularly through the writings of Augustine of Hippo, who encountered Neoplatonism before his conversion to Christianity and adapted its insights to address the problem of evil within a Christian theological context.

Augustine’s engagement with the logical problem of evil, particularly in works like his *Confessions* and *On Free Choice of the Will*, represents a pivotal moment in the development of theodicy. Drawing heavily on Plotinus but transforming Neoplatonic concepts through a Christian lens, Augustine argued that God created

all things good, and evil, having no positive existence, could only be understood as a privation or corruption of that created goodness. The origin of moral evil, according to Augustine, lay in the misuse of free will by rational creatures—first by angelic beings, then by human beings—who turned away from the higher good (God) toward lesser goods. This “fall” introduced disorder and suffering into creation, accounting for both moral evil (human wrongdoing) and natural evil (the corruption of the natural order). Augustine’s response to the logical challenge was ingenious: God did not create evil, nor did God directly will evil; rather, God created beings with genuine freedom, and the possibility of evil was an inevitable consequence of that freedom. By locating the origin of evil in creaturely freedom rather than divine causation, Augustine preserved both divine goodness and power while acknowledging the reality of evil. His formulation would dominate Western Christian thought on the problem for centuries, providing a logical framework that seemed to reconcile the apparent contradictions between divine attributes and worldly suffering.

The medieval period saw further refinements of logical approaches to the problem of evil, particularly within the Scholastic tradition. Anselm of Canterbury, in his *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, addressed the question by distinguishing between God’s absolute ability to do all things logically possible and God’s ordered ability in accordance with His nature. Anselm argued that God cannot do what is logically impossible or contradictory, such as creating a square circle or a being who is both free and unable to sin. This distinction allowed Anselm to maintain divine omnipotence while acknowledging logical constraints on what God could achieve. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, developed a more comprehensive response, synthesizing Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology. Aquinas adopted the privation theory of evil from Augustine and Plotinus but refined it within his metaphysical system, arguing that evil could only exist within a good substance as a lack of due perfection. For Aquinas, God permits evil not because He wills evil itself, but because He wills the order of the universe, which requires that some beings can fall away from their proper perfection. Furthermore, God draws greater goods from evil occurrences, demonstrating His providential wisdom. Aquinas’s sophisticated logical framework would become the standard Catholic response to the problem of evil, emphasizing the compatibility of divine perfection with the permission of evil for the sake of greater goods.

The modern logical formulation of the problem of evil reached its most precise and influential expression in the mid-20th century, particularly through the work of Australian philosopher J.L. Mackie. In his seminal 1955 essay, “Evil and Omnipotence,” published in the journal *Mind*, Mackie presented a rigorous deductive argument that aimed to demonstrate the logical inconsistency of the three central divine attributes—omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness—with the existence of any evil whatsoever. Mackie’s argument proceeded from several seemingly innocuous propositions: (1) God is omnipotent; (2) God is wholly good; (3) A good being always eliminates evil as far as it can; (4) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do; and (5) Evil exists. From these premises, Mackie derived a contradiction: If God is wholly good, He would want to eliminate all evil; if God is omnipotent, He would be able to eliminate all evil; therefore, if God exists, evil should not exist. Yet evil does exist, leading to the conclusion that the concept of God as traditionally defined is logically incoherent.

Mackie’s formulation represented a significant advancement over earlier expressions of the logical problem by translating the intuitive tension into a formal logical structure. He identified what philosophers now



call the “inconsistent triad”: the set of propositions (God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, and evil exists) cannot all be true simultaneously without contradiction. For Mackie, any successful theodicy must introduce additional premises that modify one or more of these propositions without abandoning essential elements of traditional theism. He anticipated and systematically addressed several traditional responses, including the free will defense, the argument that evil is necessary as a means to good, and the suggestion that the universe is better with some evil than with none. Mackie contended that these responses either failed to address the logical problem adequately or required abandoning a genuine conception of divine omnipotence or goodness. For instance, regarding the free will defense, Mackie argued that a truly omnipotent God should be able to create free beings who always choose good, suggesting that the defense implicitly limits divine power by claiming God cannot achieve this logically possible state of affairs. The force of Mackie’s argument lay in its deductive certainty; if successful, it would not merely make God’s existence improbable but logically impossible, rendering traditional theism fundamentally incoherent.

The philosophical landscape shifted dramatically in 1974 with the publication of Alvin Plantinga’s *God, Freedom, and Evil*, which presented a sophisticated free will defense that many philosophers believe successfully refuted Mackie’s logical formulation. Plantinga, an American analytic philosopher, did not claim to prove that God exists or that His existence is compatible with evil; rather, he argued for the more modest logical possibility that God and evil could coexist. If Plantinga could demonstrate this possibility, then Mackie’s claim of logical inconsistency would fail. Plantinga’s defense centered on the nature of libertarian free will—the capacity to choose between alternatives without being determined by prior causes. He argued that it’s possible that God could not actualize a world containing moral good without also actualizing a world containing moral evil, because the very possibility of moral good requires creatures with genuine freedom, and genuine freedom entails the possibility of choosing evil. Crucially, Plantinga introduced the concept of “transworld depravity,” the idea that it’s possible that every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity—meaning that in any possible world where that creature exists and is free, it would go wrong at least once. If transworld depravity is even possibly true (which Plantinga argued it is), then it’s possible that God, though omnipotent, could not create a world with free creatures who never choose evil, because even God cannot bring about logically impossible states of affairs, such as causing someone to freely choose good.

Plantinga’s argument represented a watershed moment in the philosophy of religion. By focusing on logical possibility rather than actuality, he shifted the burden of proof back onto the atheist, who would now need to demonstrate not merely that evil exists, but that it’s logically impossible for God to have a morally sufficient reason for permitting any evil. Many philosophers, including some atheists, acknowledged that Plantinga had successfully resolved the logical problem of evil as formulated by Mackie. J.L. Mackie himself, in his later work *The Miracle of Theism*, conceded that Plantinga’s defense was logically consistent, though he continued to argue against the probability of God’s existence. The impact of Plantinga’s work extended beyond the logical problem, revitalizing the philosophy of religion as a serious field within analytic philosophy and inspiring new generations of philosophers to engage with religious questions using rigorous logical tools. While Plantinga’s free will defense successfully addressed the logical challenge of moral evil, critics pointed out that it did not directly address the problem of natural evil—suffering not caused by human free



choices, such as diseases, earthquakes, and animal pain. Plantinga briefly suggested the logical possibility of non-human free agents (such as demons) causing natural evil, but this speculative extension received less philosophical support than his core argument regarding moral evil.

In the wake of Plantinga's influential contribution, philosophers developed various logical responses and counterarguments, refining the debate and exploring alternative approaches to the problem. One significant line of response involved definitional approaches—redefining either divine attributes or the nature of evil to resolve the apparent contradiction. Some philosophers questioned the traditional conception of divine omnipotence, arguing that it should be understood as the ability to do all that is logically possible rather than the ability to do absolutely anything, including the logically impossible. This approach, reminiscent of Anselm's distinction, allows that God cannot create a world with free beings who never choose evil if such a world is logically impossible. Others have suggested redefining divine goodness, perhaps by understanding it in ways that transcend human moral categories or by arguing that divine goodness permits evil for reasons beyond human comprehension. Alternatively, some thinkers have proposed redefining evil itself, perhaps by arguing that what appears evil to finite human perspectives might serve a greater good within God's providential plan or by adopting process theology's view of God as not omnipotent in the classical sense but rather as a fellow-sufferer who works within the constraints of a universe characterized by genuine freedom at all levels of existence.

Compatibilist responses to the free will defense present another significant line of counterargument. Compatibilism, the philosophical position that free will and determinism are compatible, challenges Plantinga's libertarian conception of freedom. If compatibilism is true, then God could determine that creatures always freely choose good, because free will, on this view, does not require the ability to do otherwise but merely acting in accordance with one's desires without external coercion. Philosophers like Nelson Pike and Derk Pereboom have argued that a compatibilist understanding of free will would allow God to create a world with moral good but no moral evil, thereby undermining Plantinga's defense. However, theists often respond that compatibilist freedom lacks the moral value required for genuine moral responsibility and that libertarian freedom represents a greater good that justifies the risk of moral evil. The debate between libertarians and compatibilists thus intersects crucially with the logical problem of evil, as the plausibility of Plantinga's defense depends significantly on the nature of free will.

The problem of natural evil continues to present a significant challenge within logical formulations of the problem of evil. While Plantinga's free will defense addresses moral evil effectively from a logical perspective, natural evil—suffering not caused by human choices—requires different explanations. Some philosophers, following Augustine, have argued that natural evil results from the Fall of humanity, which disrupted the perfect order of creation. Others, like Richard Swinburne, have suggested that natural evil provides necessary opportunities for soul-making and character development that would not otherwise exist. Still others have proposed that natural evil might result from the free choices of non-human spiritual beings, though this speculative solution lacks widespread acceptance. Process theologians offer a more radical redefinition, arguing that God is not omnipotent in the classical sense but rather a persuasive force who works within the constraints of a universe characterized by genuine freedom at all levels, including the natural world. On this view, natural evil results from the chaotic and sometimes destructive nature of evolutionary processes and

natural laws, which God influences but does not completely control.

Contemporary philosophical assessments of the logical problem of evil generally acknowledge that Plantinga's free will defense successfully demonstrated the logical compatibility of God and moral evil. Most philosophers now agree that the deductive argument from evil, as formulated by Mackie, does not succeed in demonstrating the logical inconsistency of theism. However, this consensus does not end the debate; instead, it shifts the focus to the evidential problem of evil—the argument that while God and evil may be logically compatible, the amount, distribution, and kinds of evil in the world make God's existence highly improbable. Furthermore, philosophers continue to explore nuances within the

### 1.3 The Evidential Problem of Evil

nuances within the debate, particularly those that acknowledge the logical possibility of God while questioning the probability of divine existence given the actual state of the world. This transition from logical impossibility to evidential improbability marks a significant evolution in philosophical approaches to the problem of evil, reflecting a more subtle and perhaps more devastating challenge to traditional theism. If the logical problem of evil asks whether God and evil can coexist in any possible world, the evidential problem confronts us with a more immediate and experientially grounded question: given the specific kinds, quantities, and distributions of evil we observe in our actual world, how probable is it that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent deity exists? This shift in focus represents not merely a change in argumentative strategy but a deeper engagement with the raw, often horrifying, reality of suffering that characterizes human experience.

The distinction between logical and evidential problems of evil fundamentally turns on the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning. While the logical problem employs deductive logic to claim an absolute inconsistency between God's existence and evil's reality, the evidential problem utilizes inductive reasoning to suggest that the patterns and particulars of suffering we observe make God's existence unlikely. This philosophical development parallels a broader movement in epistemology during the latter half of the 20th century, as philosophers increasingly recognized the limits of deductive certainty and the importance of probabilistic reasoning in evaluating complex metaphysical claims. The evidential approach acknowledges, following Plantinga's influential defense, that God might possibly have morally sufficient reasons for permitting any particular instance of evil. However, it contends that when we consider the cumulative weight of suffering—its seemingly gratuitous nature, its disproportionate impact on innocents, its apparent lack of connection to greater goods, and its astonishing variety and intensity—the existence of a benevolent deity becomes increasingly improbable. This probabilistic approach, championed by philosophers like William Rowe, Paul Draper, and Bruce Russell, represents a more modest yet potentially more powerful challenge to theism than its logical predecessor. Rather than claiming to refute God's existence with deductive certainty, it invites believers and non-believers alike to confront the evidence of suffering and assess whether it aligns more naturally with the hypothesis of indifferent natural processes or with the existence of a loving, powerful deity.

William Rowe's pioneering work on the evidential problem, particularly his 1979 article "The Problem of

Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” provided a systematic formulation that would shape philosophical discussions for decades. Rowe, an American philosopher known for his clear and rigorous approach to the philosophy of religion, constructed an inductive argument that centered on the concept of “gratuitous evil”—suffering that appears to serve no greater good or justify some outweighing benefit. Unlike deductive arguments that claim logical impossibility, Rowe’s argument proceeds from the observation of seemingly pointless suffering to the probabilistic conclusion that God likely does not exist. His argument rests on two crucial premises: first, that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse; and second, that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. From these premises, Rowe concludes that there probably exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, making it probable that God does not exist.

To illustrate his argument, Rowe introduced what has become one of the most famous examples in contemporary philosophy of religion: the case of a fawn burned in a forest fire caused by lightning, who lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. This example powerfully encapsulates the intuition behind gratuitous evil—a sentient being experiencing profound suffering with no apparent connection to moral development, free will, soul-making, or any greater good that might justify such pain. The fawn’s suffering appears isolated, purposeless, and preventable by any being with sufficient power and knowledge. Rowe emphasizes that his argument does not require certainty that such suffering is actually gratuitous; rather, it relies on the more modest claim that we have rational grounds for believing that some suffering appears gratuitous, and that this appearance provides evidence against God’s existence. The probabilistic nature of Rowe’s argument makes it particularly resistant to certain traditional theodicies, as it does not claim to know with certainty that God could not have reasons for permitting specific evils, but rather maintains that the cumulative evidence of seemingly pointless suffering makes God’s existence unlikely.

Rowe’s formulation has generated extensive philosophical debate, with critics challenging both his premises and his inference from apparent gratuitousness to actual gratuitousness. Some philosophers have questioned whether human beings are in any position to judge whether particular instances of suffering might serve greater goods beyond our comprehension. Others have argued that even if some suffering appears gratuitous, this appearance might be deceptive, and we lack sufficient evidence to conclude that God probably does not exist. Despite these challenges, Rowe’s evidential argument has profoundly influenced contemporary philosophy of religion, shifting the debate from questions of logical possibility to considerations of probability and evidence, and encouraging more nuanced engagement with the specific phenomenology of suffering.

Stephen Wykstra’s response to Rowe’s argument, developed in his 1984 article “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” introduced what has become known as the “noseeum” inference critique. Wykstra, an American philosopher with expertise in epistemology and philosophy of religion, challenged Rowe’s inference from “I see no reason for this suffering” to “There is no reason for this suffering.” Drawing an analogy between human and divine cognition, Wykstra

argued that just as a parent might have reasons for permitting a child to undergo temporary suffering that the child cannot comprehend, so too might God have reasons for permitting suffering that transcend human understanding. The epistemic gap between finite human cognition and infinite divine understanding, Wykstra contended, is so vast that we are not justified in drawing strong conclusions about the likely absence of divine reasons based on our failure to discern those reasons.

Wykstra developed what he called the “Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access” (CORNEA), which states that before we can reasonably infer “P is not the case” from “I see no evidence that P is the case,” we must have reasonable confidence that if P were the case, we would likely see evidence of it. Applied to Rowe’s argument, CORNEA suggests that before we can reasonably infer “There is no justifying reason for this suffering” from “I see no justifying reason for this suffering,” we must have reasonable confidence that if there were a justifying reason, we would likely be able to perceive it. Given the profound limitations of human cognition relative to divine understanding, Wykstra argues that we lack this confidence. The parent-child analogy powerfully illustrates this point: a young child undergoing a painful medical procedure cannot comprehend the parent’s reasons for permitting this suffering, yet the parent may have perfectly good reasons that transcend the child’s limited perspective. Similarly, Wykstra suggests, human beings may stand in an epistemic relationship to God that makes our failure to discern justifying reasons for suffering poor evidence for the actual absence of such reasons.

The “noseeum” inference critique has significantly shaped subsequent discussions of the evidential problem of evil. Critics have pointed out that Wykstra’s response, if pushed too far, might lead to radical skepticism about divine attributes and purposes, potentially undermining religious knowledge and practice. If human beings are so cognitively limited that we cannot reasonably infer anything about God’s reasons for permitting suffering, some argue, then we might equally be unable to know that God is good, loving, or worthy of worship. Furthermore, critics have questioned whether the parent-child analogy adequately captures the moral differences between human parents and a supposedly perfect divine being. While human parents operate with limited knowledge and power, an omnipotent, omniscient God would presumably have the capacity to achieve goods without permitting intense suffering, or at least to communicate sufficient reasons to creatures capable of understanding them. Despite these objections, Wykstra’s CORNEA principle and his critique of the “noseeum” inference remain central to contemporary skeptical theistic responses to the evidential problem of evil, emphasizing the epistemic humility required when making judgments about divine purposes and reasons.

Paul Draper’s argument from evolutionary naturalism offers a different, yet equally powerful, formulation of the evidential problem of evil. Draper, an American philosopher known for his work in philosophy of religion and epistemology, developed what he calls an “inductive argument from evil” that compares the explanatory power of naturalism and theism in accounting for the distribution of pleasure and pain in the world. Unlike Rowe’s argument, which focuses on apparently gratuitous instances of suffering, Draper’s approach considers broad patterns of pleasure and pain across biological organisms, arguing that these patterns are much more likely on the hypothesis of naturalism than on the hypothesis of theism.

Draper’s argument proceeds by contrasting two competing hypotheses: naturalism (N), which holds that

no supernatural beings exist, and theism (T), which affirms the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. He then considers a third proposition, P, which describes the distribution of pain and pleasure in the world—specifically, that pain and pleasure are systematically connected to biological goals such as survival and reproduction in a manner that appears random and morally arbitrary, with intense suffering often experienced by beings incapable of moral or spiritual development. Draper argues that P is much more probable on N than on T, or in probabilistic terms,  $P(N|P) > P(T|P)$ . In other words, the observed patterns of pain and pleasure provide strong evidence for naturalism over theism.

The explanatory power of naturalism regarding these patterns stems from evolutionary theory. On a naturalistic worldview, pain and pleasure evolved as biological mechanisms to promote survival and reproduction. Pain signals threats to survival (tissue damage, extreme temperatures, etc.) and motivates avoidance behaviors, while pleasure signals beneficial conditions (nutrition, safety, reproduction) and motivates approach behaviors. This evolutionary perspective predicts exactly what we observe: pain and pleasure connected to biological survival in ways that often seem cruel and arbitrary, with no apparent moral purpose. Predation, parasitism, disease, and natural disasters cause immense suffering that serves no discernible greater good but merely reflects the indifferent workings of natural selection. Furthermore, naturalism predicts that beings incapable of significant moral or spiritual development, such as non-human animals and young infants, would experience intense suffering, as their capacity for pain serves the same evolutionary purpose as in more developed beings.

In contrast, Draper argues that theism provides a much less probable explanation for these patterns. An omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God would presumably have the capacity to create a world where biologically useful sensations (which guide behavior toward survival and reproduction) are systematically separated from morally relevant suffering and pleasure. Such a God could, for instance, create beings who experience discomfort or satisfaction in response to biologically relevant stimuli without the kind of intense suffering we observe, or who experience pain and pleasure in ways that correlate with moral development rather than merely biological survival. The fact that pain and pleasure appear so closely tied to biological imperatives, with little regard for moral considerations, suggests, on Draper's view, that naturalism provides a better explanation than theism for the world we observe.

Draper's argument has prompted extensive debate, with theistic philosophers offering various responses. Some have challenged the probabilistic comparison, arguing that theism might explain certain features of the world that naturalism cannot account for, such as the existence of consciousness, moral values, or the fine-tuning of the universe for life. Others have suggested that God might have morally sufficient reasons for creating a world with evolutionary processes, including the attendant suffering, such as the value of creaturely independence or the aesthetic and intellectual richness of a gradually unfolding universe. Still others have questioned whether evolutionary naturalism can adequately ground moral reasoning, suggesting that if naturalism is true, our cognitive faculties might be unreliable, including our capacity to evaluate probabilistic arguments like Draper's. Despite these responses, Draper's formulation of the evidential problem remains influential, particularly for its focus on broad biological patterns rather than specific instances of suffering, and its rigorous application of Bayesian probability theory to the philosophy of religion.

The problem of horrendous evils represents perhaps the most emotionally potent dimension of the evidential argument from evil. Coined by Marilyn McCord Adams, an American philosopher and theologian known for her work on medieval philosophy and the problem of evil, the term “horrendous evils” refers to forms of suffering so intense, so seemingly meaningless, and so destructive of human value that they resist integration into any plausible theodicy. Examples include the systematic torture and murder of millions in the Holocaust, the suffering of children from painful terminal diseases, the agony of victims of violent crimes, and the trauma of natural disasters that destroy entire communities. What distinguishes horrendous evils from ordinary suffering, according to Adams, is their power to create what she calls “horrendous-doubt”—a profound crisis of faith that questions whether human life can have meaning, whether God can be good, and whether creation itself can be justified in the face of such horrors.

Adams’s work on horrendous evils, particularly in her books “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God” and “Christ and Horrors,” represents a significant development in contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. Unlike many philosophers who focus primarily on logical consistency or probabilistic reasoning, Adams emphasizes the existential and pastoral dimensions of suffering, arguing that traditional theodicies often fail to address the profound challenge posed by experiences that seem to crush human dignity and value. For Adams, a successful theodicy must do more than demonstrate the logical possibility of God’s existence; it must also show how God can be good to particular individuals in the midst of their horrendous suffering, and how human life can remain meaningful even after such experiences. This approach shifts the focus from abstract philosophical arguments to concrete human experiences, recognizing that the problem of evil is not merely an intellectual puzzle but a lived reality that affects people’s deepest beliefs about meaning, value, and divine goodness.

The challenge of horrendous evils has prompted various responses within contemporary philosophy and theology. Some thinkers, following Adams, have developed what might be called “pastoral theodicies,” emphasizing God’s solidarity with sufferers through the incarnation and cross of Christ, and the promise of ultimate redemption and healing. Others have drawn on mystical traditions, suggesting that the experience of divine love in the midst of suffering can transform even horrendous evils into opportunities for deeper union with God. Still others have emphasized the importance of human community and ethical action in response to suffering, arguing that God works through human agents to alleviate suffering and bring about redemption. Critics of these approaches argue that they often fail to address the fundamental question of why an omnipotent God would permit horrendous evils in the first place, or they rely on promises of future redemption that may seem insufficient to those currently experiencing intense suffering. The problem of horrendous evils thus remains one of the most difficult challenges for traditional theism, pushing philosophers and theologians to develop more nuanced, ethically sensitive, and existentially adequate responses to the reality of profound suffering.

The evidential problem of evil, with its various formulations and responses, represents a sophisticated and philosophically rigorous challenge to traditional theism. By shifting the focus from logical possibility to probabilistic reasoning and concrete experience, this approach encourages deeper engagement with the specific phenomenology of suffering and its implications for religious belief. While philosophers continue to debate the strength of evidential arguments and the adequacy of various responses, the evidential problem has



undoubtedly enriched contemporary discussions of theodicy, pushing both believers and skeptics to confront the complex relationship between divine attributes and the reality of suffering in our world. This engagement with the evidential dimensions of evil naturally leads us to examine the major historical theodicies that have shaped philosophical and theological responses to the problem of evil throughout the centuries.

## 1.4 Classical Theodicies

The evidential problem of evil, with its focus on the probability of God's existence given the specific patterns and instances of suffering we observe, naturally leads us to examine the major historical frameworks developed to reconcile divine goodness with worldly evil. These classical theodicies, crafted by some of history's most influential philosophers and theologians, represent humanity's most sustained and systematic attempts to address the profound tension between belief in a benevolent deity and the undeniable reality of suffering. Each theodicy emerged from a particular intellectual and cultural context, drawing upon the philosophical resources available to its author while responding to the religious and existential concerns of its time. Together, they form a rich tradition of reflection on the problem of evil that continues to shape contemporary discussions, even as new challenges and perspectives emerge. By examining these classical approaches in their historical development and philosophical sophistication, we gain not only insight into the evolution of theological thought but also a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the problem itself and the various ways in which human beings have sought to make sense of suffering within a framework of divine providence.

The Augustinian theodicy, named after its architect Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), stands as perhaps the most influential framework for understanding evil within the Christian tradition, shaping Western thought on the problem for over a millennium and a half. Augustine's engagement with the problem of evil began long before his conversion to Christianity, during his period of association with the Manichaean religion, which posited a dualistic universe ruled by two equal and opposing forces—one good and one evil. This dualistic solution to the problem of evil ultimately failed to satisfy Augustine's philosophical inquiries, particularly after his exposure to Neoplatonic philosophy through the works of Plotinus and Porphyry. The Neoplatonic concept of evil as privation (*privatio boni*) rather than a positive reality provided Augustine with a crucial intellectual tool that he would later adapt and integrate into his Christian theology. Following his conversion and baptism in 387 CE, Augustine devoted considerable attention to the problem of evil in works such as his *Confessions*, *On Free Choice of the Will*, and *The City of God*, developing a comprehensive theodicy that would become the cornerstone of medieval Christian thought on the subject.

At the heart of Augustinian theodicy lies the concept of evil as privation of good (*privatio boni*). Drawing upon Plotinus's Neoplatonic philosophy but transforming it through a Christian lens, Augustine argued that evil has no positive existence or substance of its own; rather, it represents a lack, deficiency, or corruption of that which is fundamentally good. Just as darkness is not a positive entity but merely the absence of light, so too is evil not something created by God but rather the absence or distortion of the goodness that God originally established in creation. This privation theory allowed Augustine to maintain God's absolute goodness while acknowledging the reality of evil, for God did not create evil as such but rather created a



world that was entirely good, with evil emerging only as a corruption or privation of that original goodness. Augustine illustrated this concept through various analogies, such as comparing evil to disease in a body or blindness in an eye—neither disease nor blindness are positive entities created by God but rather privations of health and sight respectively.

Augustine's explanation for the origin of evil centers on the misuse of free will by rational creatures—first by angelic beings, then by human beings. According to Augustine, God created all things good, including angels and humans, whom He endowed with free will. Free will itself is a great good, as it enables rational creatures to love God freely and merit reward. However, this freedom necessarily includes the possibility of turning away from the higher good (God) toward lesser goods. Some angelic beings, led by Lucifer, abused their freedom by pridefully turning away from God, becoming demons. Subsequently, the first human beings, Adam and Eve, also abused their free will by disobeying God's command in the Garden of Eden, an event known as the Fall. This original sin had catastrophic consequences not only for humanity but for all creation. Human nature became corrupted, inheriting a condition of original sin that manifests as concupiscence—an inclination toward evil—and the loss of original righteousness. Furthermore, the natural order itself was disrupted, introducing natural evils such as disease, natural disasters, and death as consequences of human sin.

Augustine developed this narrative primarily through his interpretation of the Genesis account of creation and Fall, though he acknowledged that these biblical texts should be understood metaphorically rather than literally in all respects. In *The City of God*, Augustine contrasts the earthly city, characterized by love of self even to the contempt of God, with the heavenly city, characterized by love of God even to the contempt of self. This cosmic drama of two cities, one oriented toward God and the other turned away from Him, provides the broader context for Augustine's understanding of evil: evil results from the deviation of creatures from their proper end, which is union with God. Yet Augustine maintains that God, in His providential wisdom, can bring greater goods from even the most terrible evils, ultimately weaving all events—both good and evil—into the tapestry of His salvific plan. The suffering and evil we experience in this life, Augustine suggests, will ultimately be revealed as serving a greater purpose known to God but not fully comprehensible to finite human beings.

The Augustinian theodicy exerted enormous influence throughout the Middle Ages, shaping the thought of theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas. Its impact extended beyond the academic realm, profoundly influencing popular Christian piety and understandings of sin, salvation, and the human condition. The concepts of original sin, the Fall, and the privation of good became central to Western Christian theology, providing a framework for understanding human suffering and divine justice. Even today, elements of Augustinian thought continue to resonate in contemporary theological discussions, particularly within traditions that emphasize human depravity and divine sovereignty.

In contrast to the Augustinian focus on the Fall and original sin, the Irenaean theodicy, developed by Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 CE) in the second century, offers a different perspective on evil and human development. Irenaeus, a bishop and early Church Father, formulated his approach primarily in his major work *Against Heresies*, where he responded to Gnostic dualism while articulating a positive vision of human cre-

ation and development. Unlike Augustine, who wrote several centuries later in the context of a Christianized Roman Empire, Irenaeus wrote during a period when Christianity was still a minority religion facing persecution. This different historical context, combined with Irenaeus's distinct theological priorities, resulted in a theodicy that emphasizes human growth and development rather than the corruption of an originally perfect nature.

The core of Irenaeian theodicy rests on a distinction between the image (*imago*) and likeness (*similitudo*) of God in human beings. According to Irenaeus, God created humanity in His image, but humans are not initially fully formed in God's likeness. The image represents the raw material of human nature—our rational capacities, moral agency, and relationship with God—while the likeness represents the fully developed character that humans are meant to achieve through a process of growth and maturation. Irenaeus illustrates this concept through the analogy of a child who bears the image of its parents but has not yet achieved the full likeness that comes with adult maturity. This two-stage creation, where humans are made in God's image but must grow into God's likeness, provides the framework for understanding the role of evil and suffering in human development.

For Irenaeus, the world is not a fallen paradise but an environment designed for soul-making—a “vale of soul-making” to use the later phrase of John Hick. The challenges, obstacles, and even sufferings of this world serve as necessary conditions for human development, enabling the cultivation of virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and love that could not develop in an environment free from difficulty. Irenaeus emphasizes the concept of epistemic distance between humans and God—a cognitive and moral distance that allows for genuine freedom and development. If God's presence were immediately obvious and overwhelming, humans would be compelled to obedience rather than freely choosing relationship with God. This epistemic distance creates an environment where faith can develop as a free choice rather than an inevitable response to overwhelming evidence.

Unlike Augustine, Irenaeus does not view the Genesis story of Adam and Eve as a historical fall from perfection but rather as a  $\square\square$  (allegory) representing the inevitable immaturity of humanity in its early development. The “fall” represents not a corruption of human nature but a necessary stage in human growth, analogous to the disobedience of a child who must learn through experience the consequences of certain actions. Human sin, for Irenaeus, stems not from a corrupted nature but from immaturity and the difficulty of developing virtue in a challenging environment. Even Satan, in Irenaeus's view, is not a fallen angel in the Augustinian sense but a being who misused his freedom and now serves the providential purpose of testing and strengthening human virtue.

The Irenaeian theodicy places greater emphasis on human freedom and responsibility within a developmental framework. Suffering and evil are not punishments for sin but necessary components of an environment conducive to human growth. Natural evils, such as earthquakes and diseases, are not consequences of the Fall but part of the original created order designed to provide the challenges necessary for soul-making. This perspective offers a more optimistic view of human nature and the created order than the Augustinian approach, viewing the world as fundamentally good and oriented toward human development rather than as a corrupted version of an originally perfect creation.

Though Irenaeus's theodicy was influential in the early Church, it was largely overshadowed by the Augustinian perspective during the Middle Ages. It was not until the 20th century that Irenaean ideas experienced a significant revival, primarily through the work of British philosopher of religion John Hick. In his influential book *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), Hick distinguished between the "Augustinian" and "Irenaean" types of theodicy, arguing for the superiority of the Irenaean approach in addressing contemporary philosophical challenges. Hick developed Irenaeus's ideas into a sophisticated modern theodicy, emphasizing the concept of epistemic distance and the world as an environment for soul-making. Hick argued that a hedonistic paradise, free from suffering and challenge, would be unsuitable for the development of genuine moral and spiritual maturity. Instead, the world as we know it—with its mixture of pleasure and pain, success and failure, joy and sorrow—provides the necessary conditions for humans to develop into "children of God" through free response to challenging circumstances.

The Irenaean theodicy, particularly as developed by Hick, offers several advantages over the Augustinian approach in addressing contemporary concerns. It avoids the problematic concept of inherited guilt for Adam's sin, which many modern thinkers find morally objectionable. It also provides a more natural framework for integrating evolutionary perspectives on human origins, as it views human nature as developing over time rather than falling from an original perfection. Furthermore, the Irenaean emphasis on soul-making resonates with modern psychological understandings of character development through adversity. However, it also faces challenges, particularly in explaining the quantity and distribution of suffering in the world—questions that both Irenaeus and contemporary Irenaean thinkers continue to address.

The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the development of another significant theodicy through the work of German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Leibniz, a polymath who made fundamental contributions to mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, coined the term "theodicy" itself in his 1710 work *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil). Written in response to the skepticism of Pierre Bayle, who had argued that the problem of evil was insoluble within a Christian framework, Leibniz's theodicy represents one of the most systematic and ambitious attempts to reconcile divine perfection with the existence of evil.

At the foundation of Leibniz's theodicy lies his principle of sufficient reason, which holds that nothing happens without a reason why it is so and not otherwise. For Leibniz, this principle applies not only to events in the world but to God's choice of which world to create from among the infinite number of possible worlds that God could have actualized. According to Leibniz, God, being perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient, would necessarily choose to actualize the best of all possible worlds—the world that contains the greatest amount of perfection or the greatest surplus of good over evil. This seemingly counterintuitive claim, that our world with all its suffering and imperfection is the best possible world, forms the core of Leibniz's philosophical optimism.

Leibniz's argument proceeds from several key premises. First, God as a perfect being would necessarily choose the best possible course of action. Second, God's omnipotence and omniscience enable Him to actualize the best possible world. Third, our world is the world that God actually chose to actualize. Therefore,

our world must be the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz acknowledges that our world contains evil—both moral evil (resulting from human free will) and physical evil (suffering)—but argues that any world with less evil would also contain less good, and that God has chosen the optimal balance of good and evil that maximizes overall perfection.

To explain the presence of evil within the best of all possible worlds, Leibniz distinguishes between three types of evil: metaphysical evil, physical evil, and moral evil. Metaphysical evil, the most fundamental type, consists simply in imperfection or limitation, which is inevitable in any created world. Created beings, by their very nature, must be less perfect than their creator, so metaphysical evil represents the necessary limitation of creatures relative to God. Physical evil, or suffering, results from metaphysical evil—because creatures are limited, they can experience pain and deterioration. Moral evil, or sin, results from the misuse of free will by created beings. While God could have created a world without moral evil by creating beings without free will, such a world would contain less overall perfection, as the good of free will outweighs the evil that results from its misuse.

Leibniz illustrates his position with various analogies, the most famous of which compares the universe to a painting that appears imperfect when viewed up close but reveals its beauty when seen as a whole. What appears as a blotch or imperfection from a limited perspective contributes to the overall beauty and perfection of the complete artwork. Similarly, what appears as evil or suffering from our limited human perspective may contribute to the overall perfection of the universe in ways we cannot fully comprehend. Leibniz also employs mathematical analogies, suggesting that just as a line may contain both positive and negative values that sum to a maximum, so too may the universe contain both good and evil that together constitute the optimal balance of perfection.

Leibniz's theodicy faced immediate criticism, most famously from Voltaire, who satirized the idea of "the best of all possible worlds" in his 1759 novel *Candide*. The protagonist of the novel, Dr. Pangloss, maintains an unwavering optimism that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" despite experiencing and witnessing horrific suffering, including war, disease, natural disasters, and execution. Voltaire's satire powerfully highlights the apparent absurdity of claiming that our world, with its immense suffering and injustice, represents the best possible state of affairs. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which killed tens of thousands of people, further undermined Leibnizian optimism by providing a stark example of seemingly gratuitous natural evil that could not easily be reconciled with the concept of the best possible world.

Despite these criticisms, Leibniz's theodicy made significant contributions to philosophical discussions of the problem of evil. His distinction between types of evil, his emphasis on the necessity of metaphysical evil in any created world, and his argument that the best possible world need not be a perfect world (as perfection belongs only to God) continue to influence contemporary theodicy. Furthermore, Leibniz's concept of possible worlds has become a fundamental tool in modal logic and contemporary philosophy of religion, even among thinkers who reject his specific theodical claims.

The Thomistic synthesis, developed by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), represents one of the most comprehensive and philosophically sophisticated theodicies in the Western tradition. Building upon Aristotelian philosophy, Augustinian theology, and the insights of earlier medieval thinkers, Aquinas created a system-

atic framework for understanding evil that would become the official position of the Catholic Church and continue to influence Christian thought to the present day. Aquinas's treatment of evil appears primarily in his *Summa Theologica*, particularly in the sections dealing with God, creation, and evil, where he addresses the problem with characteristic logical rigor and metaphysical depth.

At the heart of Aquinas's approach to evil lies his adaptation of the Aristotelian metaphysical framework, particularly the concepts of act and potency, substance and accident, and the four causes. For Aquinas, following Aristotle, all beings are composed of essence (what they are) and existence (that they are). God alone is pure act, with no potency or limitation, while all created beings participate in existence to varying degrees and contain varying degrees of potency or potentiality. This metaphysical framework provides the context for Aquinas's understanding of evil as a privation of good (*privatio boni*), similar to Augustine but developed with greater philosophical precision.

Aquinas argues that evil has no positive existence or essence of its own; rather, it is a privation or lack of due perfection in a thing that

## 1.5 Free Will Theodicy

Aquinas argues that evil has no positive existence or essence of its own; rather, it is a privation or lack of due perfection in a thing that is, by its nature, good. This metaphysical framework, while philosophically robust, left certain questions unanswered—particularly regarding the origin of moral evil and the distribution of natural evil. It is within this intellectual landscape that the free will theodicy emerged as one of the most influential and enduring responses to the problem of evil, evolving from its ancient roots to become a central pillar of contemporary philosophical theology. The free will defense, as it is now known, represents not merely a single argument but a family of interconnected ideas that collectively propose that the possibility of moral evil is an inevitable consequence of the greater good of human freedom. This approach, which traces its lineage back to Augustine but found its most sophisticated modern expression in the work of Alvin Plantinga, offers a compelling explanation for why an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God might permit the existence of moral evil. Its development reflects a deepening philosophical engagement with the nature of freedom, responsibility, and divine-human relations, addressing challenges that classical theodicies struggled to resolve while raising new questions that continue to animate philosophical discourse.

The basic free will argument rests on a simple yet profound intuition: moral evil results from the misuse of human free will, and this freedom constitutes a greater good that justifies the risk of its abuse. This line of reasoning, which can be traced back to Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, begins by positing that genuine moral responsibility requires libertarian free will—the capacity to choose between alternatives without being determined by prior causes. If humans were merely programmed or determined to always choose good, their actions would lack authentic moral value, much like a puppet's movements lack the significance of a dancer's deliberate performance. The value of free will, according to this view, lies in its capacity for genuine moral agency, enabling beings to form characters, develop virtues, and enter into meaningful relationships based on choice rather than compulsion. A world populated by free beings who could choose evil but often choose good would be morally richer than a world of automata incapable of

genuine goodness. Augustine articulated this insight by suggesting that God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to permit no evil at all, emphasizing that the possibility of sin was the price of creating beings capable of virtue.

The historical development of this argument reveals a gradual refinement of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. In the fourth century, Augustine faced the challenge of reconciling human responsibility with divine foreknowledge, ultimately concluding that God's eternal knowledge does not cause human choices but rather comprehends them from a timeless perspective. This temporal distinction allowed Augustine to maintain both human freedom and divine omniscience, though it raised complex questions about the nature of time and foreknowledge that would occupy medieval philosophers for centuries. Thomas Aquinas later integrated Aristotle's philosophy into this framework, arguing that God as the First Cause moves secondary causes (including human wills) in accordance with their nature, thus preserving both divine causality and creaturely freedom. For Aquinas, the compatibility of divine providence with human freedom remained a mystery beyond full human comprehension, though he maintained that both could be coherently affirmed within a Christian metaphysics.

The distinction between a "free will defense" and a "free will theodicy" marks an important nuance in contemporary discussions. A free will theodicy claims to know God's actual reasons for permitting moral evil—specifically, that free will is a great good that outweighs the evil it makes possible. In contrast, a free will defense makes the more modest claim that it is logically possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting moral evil, with free will serving as a plausible candidate for such a reason. This distinction became particularly significant in the 20th century as philosophers shifted from seeking comprehensive explanations of evil to exploring logical possibilities that might reconcile God's existence with the reality of suffering. The free will defense, in this more limited form, does not require proponents to demonstrate that free will actually justifies all instances of evil but merely to show that the coexistence of God and evil is logically coherent. This more modest approach proved strategically valuable in responding to the logical problem of evil, as we shall see in Plantinga's formalization.

The transition from ancient and medieval formulations to modern expressions of the free will argument reflects broader shifts in philosophical methodology. While earlier thinkers often operated within theological frameworks that assumed divine revelation as a starting point, modern philosophers increasingly approached the problem using the tools of analytic logic and conceptual analysis. This methodological shift did not necessarily diminish the religious significance of the problem but rather encouraged greater precision in defining terms and evaluating arguments. The free will argument, in particular, benefited from this analytical rigor, as philosophers sought to clarify the nature of free will, its relationship to moral responsibility, and its compatibility with divine attributes. These clarifications would prove essential when the logical problem of evil received its most stringent modern formulation, setting the stage for Plantinga's groundbreaking contribution.

Alvin Plantinga's formal defense of the free will argument, presented in his 1974 book *God, Freedom, and Evil*, represents a watershed moment in contemporary philosophy of religion. Plantinga, an American analytic philosopher, did not claim to prove that God exists or that free will justifies the evil we observe; rather,



he argued for the more modest logical possibility that God and evil could coexist. If successful, this demonstration would refute the claim that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, thereby resolving the logical problem of evil as formulated by philosophers like J.L. Mackie. Plantinga's approach was distinguished by its rigorous logical structure, its careful distinction between logical possibility and actuality, and its introduction of innovative concepts such as "transworld depravity" that would shape subsequent philosophical discourse.

Plantinga's argument begins by defining the logical problem of evil as a set of propositions that appear mutually inconsistent: (1) God is omnipotent; (2) God is wholly good; (3) Evil exists. To show that these propositions are not genuinely inconsistent, Plantinga introduces a fourth proposition that, if possibly true, would render the set consistent: (4) God cannot create a world containing moral good without also creating one containing moral evil. This fourth proposition, Plantinga argues, is both possibly true and compatible with divine omnipotence, because omnipotence does not include the ability to do the logically impossible. Just as God cannot create a square circle or a married bachelor, so too God cannot create a world with free creatures who always choose good if such a world is logically impossible.

The core of Plantinga's defense lies in his analysis of what it means for God to "actualize" a world containing free creatures. A possible world, in Plantinga's technical usage, is a complete state of affairs that God could actualize. The problem, as Plantinga sees it, is that God cannot directly cause free creatures to make specific choices without undermining their freedom. Instead, God must actualize a world in which free creatures exist and then allow them to make their own choices. Plantinga introduces the concept of "transworld depravity" to explain why God might be unable to actualize a world with free creatures who always choose good. A person suffers from transworld depravity if, in every possible world where that person exists and is free, they would go wrong at least once—meaning they would perform at least one morally wrong action. If it is even possible that every human suffers from transworld depravity (a possibility Plantinga defends as plausible), then it is possible that God, though omnipotent, could not actualize a world where free creatures always choose good. In such a scenario, God would face a choice between actualizing a world with no free creatures (and thus no moral good) or actualizing a world with free creatures who sometimes choose evil. Given that moral good is a great good, Plantinga argues, God would reasonably choose the latter.

Plantinga's distinction between God's strong and weak actualization power further clarifies this argument. God can strongly actualize states of affairs that do not depend on free creaturely choices—such as the existence of the universe, the laws of nature, or the circumstances in which free creatures find themselves. However, God cannot strongly actualize the free choices of creatures; He can only weakly actualize them by creating free creatures and circumstances that influence but do not determine their choices. This limitation, Plantinga emphasizes, does not compromise divine omnipotence because it reflects the logical constraints of creating genuinely free beings rather than a lack of power. A world where free creatures always choose good might be logically impossible because such a world would require God to both determine creaturely choices (undermining freedom) and not determine them (preserving freedom)—a contradiction.

The impact of Plantinga's work on contemporary philosophy of religion cannot be overstated. Many philosophers, including some atheists, acknowledged that Plantinga had successfully resolved the logical problem



of evil as formulated by Mackie. J.L. Mackie himself, in his later work *The Miracle of Theism*, conceded that Plantinga's defense was logically consistent, though he continued to argue against the probability of God's existence. Plantinga's achievement shifted the philosophical debate from questions of logical possibility to considerations of probability, effectively refuting the claim that theism is logically incoherent while leaving room for evidential arguments about God's existence given the specific patterns of evil we observe. Furthermore, Plantinga's rigorous application of possible worlds semantics to the philosophy of religion introduced new analytical tools that would prove valuable in other areas of theological discourse, from divine foreknowledge to the nature of prayer.

Despite its philosophical success, Plantinga's free will defense faced immediate objections from various quarters. Critics questioned the coherence of transworld depravity, the adequacy of libertarian conceptions of free will, and the defense's limited scope regarding natural evil. These objections would prompt further refinements and developments of the free will argument, ensuring its continued relevance in philosophical discussions of the problem of evil.

Objections to the free will defense have emerged from multiple philosophical directions, challenging its assumptions about free will, divine power, and the scope of its explanatory power. One of the most persistent criticisms questions why God could not create free beings who always choose good. If God is truly omnipotent, critics argue, He should be able to actualize a world where creatures possess genuine free will yet invariably choose the good. This objection, pressed by philosophers like J.L. Mackie and Antony Flew, suggests that the free will defense implicitly limits divine power by claiming God cannot achieve what seems logically possible—a world with free creatures and no moral evil. Proponents of the defense respond by distinguishing between logical possibility and feasibility within the constraints of creaturely freedom. They argue that while such a world might seem conceivable, it may not be feasible for God to actualize without undermining the very freedom that makes moral good valuable. This debate hinges on deep questions about the nature of freedom and the limits of divine power, questions that continue to animate philosophical discourse.

Compatibilist challenges to the free will defense present another significant line of objection. Compatibilism is the philosophical position that free will and determinism are compatible, defining freedom not as the ability to do otherwise but as acting in accordance with one's desires without external coercion. If compatibilism is true, then God could determine that creatures always freely choose good, because free will, on this view, does not require the ability to do otherwise. Philosophers like Nelson Pike and Derk Pereboom have argued that a compatibilist understanding of free would allow God to create a world with moral good but no moral evil, thereby undermining Plantinga's defense. However, theists often respond that compatibilist freedom lacks the moral value required for genuine moral responsibility and that libertarian freedom represents a greater good that justifies the risk of moral evil. The debate between libertarians and compatibilists thus intersects crucially with the free will defense, as the plausibility of Plantinga's argument depends significantly on the nature of free will. Recent developments in neuroscience and psychology, which suggest that human decision-making may be influenced by unconscious processes beyond conscious control, have further complicated this debate, raising questions about whether libertarian free will is a coherent concept at all.

The problem of natural evil—suffering not caused by human choices—represents perhaps the most significant limitation of the free will defense. Earthquakes, diseases, floods, and animal suffering cannot easily be explained as consequences of human free will, yet they constitute a substantial portion of the evil in the world. Plantinga briefly suggested that natural evil might result from the free choices of non-human spiritual beings (such as demons), but this speculative extension has received little philosophical support due to its ad hoc nature and lack of empirical evidence. Critics like William Rowe have argued that the sheer quantity and apparent pointlessness of natural evil, particularly animal suffering, provides strong evidence against the existence of a benevolent deity, evidence that the free will defense fails to address. The problem of animal suffering is particularly acute, as non-human animals do not possess the kind of moral agency that might justify their suffering within a free will framework. This limitation has prompted philosophers to develop supplementary theodicies or alternative approaches to account for natural evil, as we shall explore in subsequent sections.

The extent and intensity of moral evil present another challenge to the free will defense. Critics question whether human freedom can adequately explain the scale and horror of evils like the Holocaust, genocides, and systematic torture. If free will is such a great good, they ask, why does God permit its abuse to such monstrous extremes? Furthermore, the distribution of moral evil seems arbitrary, with some individuals experiencing horrific suffering at the hands of others while others live relatively peaceful lives. This distribution problem suggests that if God permits evil for the sake of free will, He does so in a way that appears unjust or indifferent. Proponents of the free will defense respond that the value of free will may justify even its worst abuses, and that God's reasons for permitting specific evils may be beyond human comprehension. However, these responses often fail to satisfy critics who find the moral cost of such freedom unacceptably high.

Scientific challenges to traditional conceptions of free will have further complicated the free will defense. Research in neuroscience, particularly experiments by Benjamin Libet and others, suggests that conscious decisions may be preceded by unconscious brain activity, raising questions about whether human choices are truly free in the libertarian sense required by the defense. Evolutionary psychology offers another challenge, suggesting that human moral behavior may be largely determined by genetic and environmental factors rather than conscious free choice. If human decision-making is heavily influenced by factors beyond conscious control, the libertarian conception of free will central to the defense may be scientifically untenable. Proponents respond by arguing that science cannot definitively disprove free will, as conscious agency may still play a role in decision-making even if influenced by unconscious processes. They also suggest that the moral experience of responsibility, which is universal across human cultures, provides evidence for free will that cannot be reduced to scientific explanation. This ongoing dialogue between philosophy and science continues to shape contemporary discussions of the free will defense.

In response to these objections, philosophers have developed various extensions and modifications of the free will defense. Some have emphasized the relationship between free will and other valuable human capacities, such as creativity, love, and moral growth. Others have integrated the free will defense with soul-making theodicies, suggesting that both free will and the opportunity for spiritual development justify God's permission of evil. Still others have explored the compatibility of free will with divine foreknowledge and

providence, seeking to reconcile human freedom with God's sovereign control of creation. These developments reflect the dynamic nature of philosophical engagement with the problem of evil, as thinkers seek to address objections while preserving the core insights of the free will tradition.

The challenge of extending the free will defense to natural evil has prompted various creative responses, though none has achieved universal acceptance. One approach, following Augustine, argues that natural evil results from the Fall of humanity, which disrupted the perfect order of creation. On this view, human sin introduced corruption not only into human nature but into the natural world itself, explaining phenomena like earthquakes, diseases, and death as consequences of moral evil. This theodicy, while biblically grounded, faces significant scientific challenges, particularly from evolutionary biology, which reveals that natural evil predates human existence by millions of years. The suffering of animals throughout evolutionary history cannot plausibly be explained as a consequence of human sin, raising serious questions about the adequacy of this approach.

Richard Swinburne, a British philosopher of religion, has developed a more sophisticated version of this argument in his work *The Existence of God*. Swinburne suggests that natural evil provides necessary knowledge to humans about the consequences of their actions and the seriousness of moral choices. Without experiencing pain and observing natural disasters, humans would lack the awareness needed to make informed moral decisions. Furthermore, Swinburne argues that natural evil gives humans opportunities to respond compassionately to suffering, developing virtues like empathy and generosity that would otherwise remain unexpressed. This response to natural evil integrates it with the free will defense by showing how natural evil serves the greater goods of knowledge and character development that are related to moral agency. However, critics question whether the quantity of natural evil is necessary for these purposes and whether God could not achieve these goods with less suffering, particularly the suffering of non-human animals.

The demonic agency hypothesis represents another attempt to extend the free will defense to natural evil. This view, suggested by Plantinga and developed more extensively by philosophers like Peter van Inwagen, proposes that natural disasters, diseases, and other forms of natural evil result from the free choices of non-human spiritual beings—demons or fallen angels. These beings, possessing free will but greater power than humans, use their freedom to cause suffering in the natural world. This hypothesis preserves the free will framework by attributing all evil to creaturely freedom while extending it beyond human choices. However, the demonic agency hypothesis faces significant objections, including its lack of empirical evidence, its ad hoc nature, and its failure to explain why God would permit such beings to cause so much suffering. Critics also question whether

## 1.6 Soul-Making Theodicy

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framework by attributing all evil to creaturely freedom while extending it beyond human choices. However, the demonic agency hypothesis faces significant objections, including its lack of empirical evidence, its ad hoc nature, and its failure to explain why God would permit such beings to cause so much suffering. Critics also question whether an omnipotent God would allow malevolent supernatural beings to wreak havoc on creation, particularly when their actions affect innocent creatures who have no capacity for moral choice or spiritual development. These limitations of the free will defense, particularly in addressing natural evil and the extent of human suffering, naturally lead us to consider an alternative framework that offers a more comprehensive explanation for the role of suffering in human existence: soul-making theodicy.

Soul-making theodicy presents a fundamentally different perspective on evil, arguing that suffering is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of free will but a necessary component of human development and spiritual formation. This approach shifts the focus from the origin of evil to its purpose, suggesting that the challenges and hardships of this world serve as the crucible in which human character is forged and genuine moral and spiritual growth becomes possible. Rather than viewing evil as a privation or corruption of an originally perfect state, soul-making theodicy conceives of the world as an environment designed for creaturely development, where adversity functions as a catalyst for the cultivation of virtues that could not emerge in a hedonistic paradise. This perspective finds its ancient roots in the thought of Irenaeus of Lyons but received its most sophisticated modern formulation in the work of John Hick, who systematically developed it into one of the most influential theodicies of the twentieth century.

Irenaean foundations of soul-making theodicy can be traced back to the second century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, who articulated his vision of human development primarily in his major work *Against Heresies*. Writing in a context where Gnostic dualism posed a significant challenge to early Christian theology, Irenaeus rejected the notion of an inherently evil material world and instead presented a positive understanding of creation as the arena for human growth toward God. Central to his thought is the distinction between the image (*imago*) and likeness (*similitudo*) of God in human beings. Irenaeus argued that God created humanity in His image, which constitutes the raw material of human nature—our rational capacities, moral agency, and relationship with God. However, humans are not initially fully formed in God’s likeness; rather, they must grow into this likeness through a process of maturation and spiritual development. This two-stage creation, where humans are made in God’s image but must develop into God’s likeness, provides the foundation for understanding the role of suffering in human formation.

Irenaeus illustrated this developmental process through the analogy of a child who bears the image of its parents but has not yet achieved the full likeness that comes with adult maturity. Just as a child must grow and learn through experience, so too must humanity develop through the challenges and choices of earthly existence. For Irenaeus, the world is not a fallen paradise but an environment deliberately designed by God to facilitate this developmental process. The difficulties, obstacles, and even sufferings of this world serve as necessary conditions for the cultivation of virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and love that could not develop in an environment free from challenge. This perspective represents a significant departure from the Augustinian emphasis on the Fall and original sin; instead of viewing human nature as corrupted and the world as a shadow of its original perfection, Irenaeus presents an optimistic vision of human potential and a world oriented toward growth and fulfillment.

A crucial element in Irenaean thought is the concept of epistemic distance between humans and God. Irenaeus recognized that if God's presence were immediately obvious and overwhelming, humans would be compelled to obedience rather than freely choosing relationship with God. This cognitive and moral distance creates an environment where faith can develop as a free choice rather than an inevitable response to overwhelming evidence. Within this framework, the Genesis account of Adam and Eve is not interpreted as a historical fall from perfection but as an allegory representing the inevitable immaturity of humanity in its early development. The "fall" symbolizes not a corruption of human nature but a necessary stage in human growth, analogous to the disobedience of a child who must learn through experience the consequences of certain actions. Even Satan, in Irenaeus's view, is not a fallen angel in the Augustinian sense but a being who misused his freedom and now serves the providential purpose of testing and strengthening human virtue. Though Irenaeus's theodicy was influential in the early Church, it was largely overshadowed by the Augustinian perspective during the Middle Ages, only to experience a significant revival in the twentieth century through the work of John Hick.

John Hick's modern development of soul-making theodicy represents one of the most significant contributions to contemporary philosophy of religion. In his influential 1966 book *Evil and the God of Love*, Hick distinguished between what he termed "Augustinian" and "Irenaean" types of theodicy, arguing for the superiority of the Irenaean approach in addressing both philosophical challenges and existential concerns. Hick systematically rehabilitated and expanded Irenaean ideas into a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between God, humanity, and suffering. Central to Hick's formulation is the concept of epistemic distance, which he develops more extensively than Irenaeus. Hick argues that God deliberately created humans at an "epistemic distance" from Himself—a cognitive and moral distance that allows for genuine freedom and development. If God's existence and nature were immediately obvious, Hick contends, humans would relate to God out of compulsion rather than love, and moral choices would be meaningless in the face of overwhelming divine presence.

Hick's famous characterization of the world as a "vale of soul-making" captures the essence of his theodicy. He argues that a hedonistic paradise, free from suffering and challenge, would be unsuitable for the development of genuine moral and spiritual maturity. In such an environment, virtues like courage, compassion, and perseverance could never emerge, as there would be no adversity to overcome. Instead, the world as we know it—with its mixture of pleasure and pain, success and failure, joy and sorrow—provides the necessary conditions for humans to develop into "children of God" through free response to challenging circumstances. Hick emphasizes that this developmental process requires not only the possibility of suffering but also the reality of human finitude and ignorance, which create the conditions for genuine growth. Unlike the Augustinian view that sees natural evil as a consequence of the Fall, Hick suggests that natural evils such as earthquakes, diseases, and floods are part of the original created order designed to provide the challenges necessary for soul-making.

Hick's engagement with evolutionary biology represents another significant aspect of his modern development of soul-making theodicy. Recognizing that the scientific account of human origins through evolution poses challenges to traditional notions of the Fall and original sin, Hick integrates evolutionary perspectives into his framework. He argues that the evolutionary process, with its inherent struggle and suffering, serves

as the mechanism through which God creates beings capable of relationship with Him. The long history of animal suffering before human emergence is not, on Hick's view, a problem to be explained away but part of the gradual unfolding of a universe oriented toward the emergence of free, conscious beings capable of spiritual development. This evolutionary perspective allows Hick to maintain a theistic worldview while acknowledging the scientific consensus about human origins, creating a bridge between religious thought and modern science that many found compelling.

Hick also addresses the problem of excessive suffering more directly than Irenaeus, acknowledging that not all suffering appears conducive to soul-making. He suggests that while much suffering can be understood as serving developmental purposes, some suffering may appear gratuitous from our limited human perspective. However, Hick maintains that we are not in a position to judge definitively whether any particular instance of suffering is truly gratuitous, as God's purposes may extend beyond human comprehension. This qualified response allows Hick to preserve the core soul-making framework while acknowledging the profound mystery of suffering that resists easy explanation. Hick's work revitalized interest in Irenaean thought and established soul-making theodicy as a major alternative to both Augustinian and free will approaches, influencing countless subsequent discussions of the problem of evil.

The value of suffering in human development has been explored not only by theologians and philosophers but also by psychologists and ethicists, who have identified numerous ways in which adversity can contribute to personal growth and moral formation. Psychological research on post-traumatic growth, for instance, has demonstrated that many individuals who experience significant trauma report positive changes in their lives, including deeper relationships, greater personal strength, enhanced appreciation for life, and a more developed sense of spirituality. These findings lend empirical support to the soul-making thesis that suffering can serve as a catalyst for positive transformation. The development of virtues like compassion often requires exposure to suffering, either in oneself or in others. It is difficult to imagine genuine compassion emerging in a world devoid of pain, as empathy fundamentally depends on the capacity to recognize and respond to the suffering of others. Similarly, courage cannot exist in the absence of danger, and perseverance has no meaning without obstacles to overcome.

The relationship between suffering and moral growth has been explored by numerous thinkers across different traditions. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, documented in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* how extreme suffering can lead to profound personal transformation and the discovery of meaning even in the most horrific circumstances. Frankl observed that those who found meaning in their suffering were more likely to survive the concentration camps, suggesting that the ability to find purpose in adversity represents a significant human strength. This insight aligns with the soul-making perspective that suffering can serve as an opportunity for the development of meaning and purpose that might otherwise remain undiscovered.

The cultivation of resilience represents another significant benefit of suffering that supports the soul-making framework. Resilience—the capacity to adapt and recover from adversity—develops through exposure to challenges that test and strengthen an individual's coping resources. Psychologists have identified numerous factors that contribute to resilience, including positive relationships, personal competence, and the ability to



find meaning in difficult experiences. These factors often develop precisely through the process of facing and overcoming hardship. A world without suffering would lack the conditions necessary for the development of resilience, leaving humans vulnerable and incapable of growth in the face of inevitable challenges.

The concept of “antifragility,” developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, offers another perspective on the value of suffering in human development. Antifragile systems are those that benefit from disorder and stress, growing stronger through exposure to volatility and uncertainty. Taleb argues that many biological systems, including human beings, exhibit antifragile properties, becoming more robust through exposure to moderate stressors. This concept aligns with the soul-making view that suffering can strengthen character and enhance human capacities, provided that the suffering is not so extreme as to destroy the individual. The challenge for soul-making theodicy lies in explaining why God would permit suffering that exceeds the bounds of what is conducive to growth, a question to which we will return.

Despite these insights into the value of suffering in human development, soul-making theodicy faces significant criticisms and challenges that must be addressed. The quantity objection questions whether there is too much suffering in the world for soul-making to be a plausible explanation. Critics like Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* argue that the sheer scale and intensity of suffering, particularly the suffering of innocent children, cannot be justified by any greater good. Fyodor Dostoevsky, through Ivan’s character, famously challenged the idea that universal harmony could justify the torture of a single child, asking whether such harmony would be worth the tears of even one tortured child. This powerful objection highlights the moral intuition that some suffering appears so disproportionate and pointless that it cannot reasonably be understood as serving developmental purposes.

The distribution objection raises questions about why suffering is distributed so arbitrarily in the world. If suffering is intended for soul-making, critics ask, why do some individuals experience horrific suffering while others live lives of relative comfort and ease? The apparent randomness of suffering—with natural disasters, diseases, and accidents affecting people regardless of their moral character or developmental needs—suggests that if suffering serves a soul-making purpose, its distribution seems unjust and inefficient. Furthermore, some individuals experience suffering so intense or prolonged that it crushes rather than builds character, leading to despair, bitterness, or psychological breakdown rather than growth. The Holocaust provides a stark example of suffering that appears to destroy rather than develop human potential, raising serious questions about whether soul-making can account for such extreme evils.

The quality objection challenges the assumption that all suffering contributes to soul development. Much of the suffering in the world appears pointless and degrading rather than character-building. The agony of a child dying from leukemia, the suffering caused by degenerative neurological diseases, or the trauma of random violence seem to have little connection to moral or spiritual growth. Critics argue that an omnipotent God could achieve soul-making through less destructive means, such as through challenges that stimulate growth without causing intense suffering. The theological challenge asks whether an omnipotent God could not achieve soul-making with less suffering by designing a world where challenges exist but are less severe or by directly strengthening human character without requiring the experience of pain.

The problem of animal suffering presents another significant challenge for soul-making theodicy. Non-



human animals experience suffering through predation, disease, natural disasters, and human cruelty, yet they lack the capacity for the kind of moral and spiritual development that soul-making theodicy emphasizes. If suffering is primarily for human development, critics ask, why do so many animals suffer? The evolutionary history of life on Earth reveals millions of years of animal suffering before human emergence, suffering that cannot plausibly be explained as serving human soul-making. This challenge has led some philosophers, such as Christopher Southgate, to develop modified versions of soul-making theodicy that attempt to account for animal suffering, though these attempts remain controversial and incomplete.

In response to these criticisms, contemporary thinkers have developed various adaptations and modifications of soul-making theodicy. Process theology, for instance, has engaged deeply with soul-making themes while offering a different metaphysical framework. Process theologians such as David Ray Griffin and Marjorie Suchocki reject the classical notion of divine omnipotence, instead conceiving of God as a persuasive force who works within the constraints of a universe characterized by genuine freedom at all levels of existence. On this view, suffering results not from God's direct will but from the chaotic and sometimes destructive nature of evolutionary processes and creaturely freedom. God does not cause suffering but lures creation toward greater harmony and intensity, working with the givenness of the world to bring about good. This perspective modifies soul-making theodicy by removing the implication that God directly intends all suffering for developmental purposes, instead presenting suffering as a byproduct of a universe where genuine freedom and creativity are possible.

The integration of evolutionary biology with soul-making theodicy represents another significant contemporary adaptation. Philosophers such as Christopher Southgate and Celia Deane-Drummond have explored how evolutionary perspectives can inform our understanding of suffering and development. They suggest that the evolutionary process, with its inherent struggle and death, represents the mechanism through which God creates beings capable of relationship and growth. While this approach acknowledges the reality of animal suffering and the long history of suffering before human emergence, it maintains that the evolutionary process ultimately serves God's purposes of bringing forth free, conscious beings capable of spiritual development. This evolutionary soul-making theodicy attempts to reconcile religious thought with modern science while preserving the core insight that suffering can serve developmental purposes.

Feminist perspectives have also contributed significantly to contemporary adaptations of soul-making theodicy. Thinkers such as Daphne Hampson, Sarah Pinnock, and Grace Jantzen have criticized traditional theodicies for their abstract and often patriarchal nature, emphasizing instead the concrete experiences of suffering, particularly of women. Feminist soul-making theodicies tend to focus on relational dimensions of development and the importance of community in responding to suffering. They often emphasize solidarity with sufferers rather than intellectual explanations of suffering, highlighting the ways in which communities can support growth through shared experience and mutual care. This relational approach to

## 1.7 Process Theodicy

This relational approach to suffering and development, while offering valuable insights into the communal dimensions of spiritual growth, still operates largely within the framework of classical theism with its em-

phasis on divine omnipotence. However, a fundamentally different approach to the problem of evil emerges from process philosophy and theology, which challenges the very conception of divine power that underpins most traditional theodicies. Process theodicy offers a radical reconception of God's relationship to the world, proposing that the divine is not an omnipotent monarch controlling creation from outside but rather a participant in the cosmic process, working persuasive rather than coercive power. This alternative vision, developed in the early twentieth century but drawing on much older philosophical traditions, provides a distinctive response to the problem of evil that has gained increasing attention as traditional theodicies have struggled to address the scale and apparent randomness of suffering in the world.

The foundations of process philosophy can be traced to the work of mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), who developed his metaphysical system in collaboration with his student Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). Whitehead, originally a mathematician and logicist who co-authored the monumental *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell, turned to philosophy later in life, seeking to develop a comprehensive metaphysical system that could reconcile the insights of modern science with human experience. His major works in this area, particularly *Process and Reality* (1929), represent a revolutionary departure from the substance metaphysics that had dominated Western philosophy since Aristotle. Instead of conceiving reality as composed of static substances with fixed properties, Whitehead proposed a metaphysics of process and becoming, where the fundamental units of reality are "actual entities" or "actual occasions"—momentary events of experience that come into being, perish, and contribute to subsequent events.

The concept of concrescence is central to Whitehead's process metaphysics. Each actual entity, according to Whitehead, undergoes a process of concrescence—literally "growing together"—in which it synthesizes the data provided by past actual entities into a unified, subjective experience before perishing and becoming objective data for future entities. This dynamic, event-oriented ontology stands in stark contrast to the static substance metaphysics of classical theism, where God and creatures are conceived as unchanging substances. Whitehead's rejection of substance metaphysics was influenced by several philosophical predecessors, including Henri Bergson with his emphasis on creative evolution and the duration of consciousness, and William James with his radical empiricism and pragmatic approach to religious experience. Bergson's notion of *élan vital* (vital force) as the creative impulse driving evolution resonated with Whitehead's vision of a dynamic, creative universe, while James's emphasis on the concrete, lived character of experience influenced Whitehead's understanding of actual entities as drops of experience rather than inert matter.

Process philosophy developed as an alternative not only to substance metaphysics but also to the mechanistic worldview that emerged from the scientific revolution. Whitehead recognized that the classical Newtonian view of nature as a machine composed of inert particles pushed and pulled by external forces was inadequate to explain the organic character of living organisms and the creative novelty evident in cosmic evolution. In its place, he proposed an organic philosophy where all reality is composed of events of experience, from the most elementary physical occasions to the most complex human experiences. This philosophical shift has profound implications for the concept of God and the problem of evil, as it rejects the notion of divine omnipotence understood as the ability to unilaterally control events from outside the cosmic process.

The process conception of God represents perhaps the most distinctive and revolutionary aspect of process theodicy. Unlike classical theism, which conceives God as an immutable, impassible, and omnipotent being existing outside of time and space, process theology understands God as dipolar, possessing both primordial and consequent natures that together constitute the divine reality. The primordial nature of God represents the abstract, eternal aspect of divinity—God’s envisagement of all pure possibilities and ideal forms. This primordial nature corresponds roughly to the classical understanding of God as perfect, unchanging, and complete in knowledge of all possibilities. However, process theologians argue that this conception of God is incomplete without the consequent nature, which represents God’s concrete, temporal aspect—God’s actual experience of the world and sympathetic participation in the joys and sufferings of creatures. The consequent nature is not static but constantly growing as God incorporates the experiences of creatures into the divine life.

This dipolar conception of God fundamentally alters the traditional understanding of divine power. In process theology, God does not possess coercive omnipotence—the ability to unilaterally determine events—but rather persuasive power, the ability to influence creatures through the presentation of possibilities or “initial aims.” God, in this view, is the supreme poet of the world, offering each actual entity an ideal possibility for its concrescence, but respecting the freedom of each entity to actualize its own experience. God’s power is thus the power of love and persuasion rather than coercion and control. This reconception of divine power has profound implications for the problem of evil, as it means that God cannot simply prevent evil by divine fiat, even if God desires to do so. God’s relationship to the world is not that of a monarch to subjects or a craftsman to inert materials but rather that of a fellow-sufferer who participates in the cosmic process and works within its constraints to maximize value and minimize suffering.

Process theologians often describe God as “the fellow-sufferer who understands” or “the poet of the world” to emphasize this participatory conception of divinity. God does not remain aloof from creaturely suffering but experiences it sympathetically in the divine consequent nature. This understanding of divine empathy stands in sharp contrast to the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, which holds that God cannot be affected by creaturely experiences. For process theologians, divine impassibility is not a perfection but a limitation, as it would make God incapable of genuine relationship with creatures who experience joy and suffering. The dipolar God of process theology is both transcendent and immanent—transcendent as the source of ideal possibilities and immanent as the participant in cosmic becoming.

The process explanation of evil flows naturally from this reconception of God and the world. In process thought, evil is not a privation of good (as in Augustinian theodicy) nor primarily the result of creaturely freedom (as in free will theodicy) nor a means for soul-making (as in Irenaean theodicy). Instead, evil emerges as an inevitable consequence of the structured freedom that characterizes reality at all levels. The world, according to process metaphysics, is composed of actual entities that possess a degree of spontaneity and self-determination in their concrescence. This freedom is not limited to human beings but extends to all levels of reality, from elementary particles to complex organisms. While the freedom of simpler entities is highly constrained by physical laws, it is never completely determined, allowing for genuine novelty and creativity in cosmic evolution.

This structured freedom at all levels of reality makes conflict and suffering inevitable in a world of becoming. Actual entities must balance competing possibilities in their concrescence, and the resolution of these conflicts sometimes results in the destruction of possibilities that could have contributed to greater value. Natural evil, in this view, results not from divine punishment or the Fall but from the chaotic and sometimes destructive nature of evolutionary processes. The same evolutionary mechanisms that have produced the remarkable diversity and complexity of life on Earth have also involved predation, disease, and extinction—forms of suffering that are byproducts of the creative process itself. Process theologians argue that a world without the possibility of natural evil would also be a world without the possibility of genuine novelty, creativity, and organic development. The structured freedom that makes evolution possible also makes suffering inevitable.

Moral evil, according to process theodicy, results from the misuse of creaturely freedom, particularly the freedom of human beings who possess a high degree of self-determination. When human actualities reject God's persuasive lure toward greater harmony and intensity, choosing instead to actualize possibilities that destroy value and create suffering, moral evil occurs. Unlike classical theodicy, which often portrays God as permitting evil for some greater good, process theology suggests that God actively works to prevent evil by presenting creatures with initial aims that would maximize value. However, God cannot guarantee that creatures will follow these aims, as that would undermine the very freedom that makes genuine moral responsibility possible.

In process thought, God is not the cause of evil but rather the fellow-sufferer who works continually to redeem evil and transform it into greater good. God's consequent nature incorporates all creaturely experiences, including the most horrific suffering, and transforms them through the divine love into elements of a richer cosmic harmony. This understanding of God as the "fellow-sufferer who understands" provides a powerful response to the existential challenge of evil, as it affirms that no suffering is meaningless or unknown to God. Even when God cannot prevent evil, God shares in the suffering and works to bring good from it, not through coercive power but through the persuasive lure of love and the transformative power of the divine consequent nature.

Several key process theologians have developed these ideas in distinctive ways, contributing to a rich and diverse tradition of process theodicy. Charles Hartshorne, Whitehead's student and perhaps the most influential process philosopher of the twentieth century, developed the concept of dipolar theism more systematically than Whitehead himself. In works such as *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984), Hartshorne argued that the classical doctrine of divine omnipotence is not only philosophically incoherent but religiously harmful, as it makes God responsible for evil and undermines genuine human responsibility. Hartshorne's "neoclassical theism" reconceives God as the most influential being in the universe but not as the absolute controller of all events. His concept of "surpassable greatness" suggests that God grows in concrete experience through interaction with creatures, while remaining unsurpassable in the perfection of the divine character. Hartshorne's contributions to process theodicy include his analysis of the logical problems with classical omnipotence and his development of a positive conception of divine power as persuasive rather than coercive.

David Ray Griffin, a contemporary process theologian, has made significant contributions to process theodicy through works such as *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (1976) and *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (2001). Griffin addresses what he calls the “problem of gratuitous evil”—suffering that appears to serve no greater good—by arguing that while all evil is gratuitous in the sense that God does not directly will it, much suffering can be understood as an inevitable byproduct of a world with the kind of freedom necessary for genuine value. Griffin distinguishes between “determining power” and “influencing power,” arguing that God possesses the latter but not the former, and that this limitation is not a defect in divine power but a necessary condition for creating a world with genuine freedom and creativity. Griffin also addresses the problem of natural evil by suggesting that the same natural laws that make life possible also make suffering inevitable, and that God works within these constraints to minimize suffering and maximize value.

John B. Cobb Jr., another leading process theologian, has applied process thought to a wide range of contemporary issues, including ecology, economics, and interreligious dialogue. In works such as *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1975) and *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (co-authored with David Ray Griffin, 1976), Cobb has developed a distinctly Christian version of process theology that retains traditional Christological insights while reconceiving them in process categories. Cobb’s contributions to process theodicy include his emphasis on the practical implications of process thought for addressing contemporary evils such as environmental degradation and social injustice. For Cobb, process theology is not merely an abstract metaphysical system but a resource for transforming the world in more just and sustainable directions. His work demonstrates how process theodicy can move beyond theoretical explanations of evil to provide practical guidance for responding to suffering in the world.

Marjorie Suchocki has made significant contributions to process theodicy from a feminist perspective, particularly in works such as *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (1994) and *In God’s Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (2006). Suchocki critiques traditional theodicies for their reliance on patriarchal and hierarchical models of divine power, arguing that process theology offers a more adequate understanding of God’s relationship to the world. Her concept of “relational power” emphasizes the mutual influence between God and creatures, rejecting the top-down power structures implicit in classical theism. Suchocki’s feminist process theology also emphasizes the importance of community in responding to evil, suggesting that God works primarily through human communities to alleviate suffering and create more just social structures. Her work represents an important bridge between process theodicy and the relational approaches to suffering discussed in the previous section.

The influence of process thought extends beyond Christian theology to other religious traditions as well. Process categories have been used to reinterpret concepts in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and various indigenous traditions, suggesting that process philosophy offers resources for interreligious dialogue on the problem of evil. For example, Jewish process thinkers such as Harold Kushner have drawn on process ideas to develop alternative understandings of God’s power and presence in the face of suffering, while Islamic process theologians have explored the compatibility of process thought with Quranic concepts of divine attributes. This cross-religious engagement with process philosophy demonstrates its potential to contribute to a global conversation about the problem of evil that transcends the boundaries of any single tradition.

Despite its innovative approach to the problem of evil, process theodicy has faced significant critiques from various philosophical and theological perspectives. Theological objections often focus on whether process theology adequately represents the God of biblical and classical theistic traditions. Critics such as Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Wolfhart Pannenberg have argued that process theology's rejection of divine omnipotence, immutability, and impassibility represents a radical departure from traditional Christian understandings of God. These critics suggest that the process God is not "God" in the full sense but merely a cosmic factor among others, lacking the sovereignty and transcendence characteristic of classical theism. From this perspective, process theodicy solves the problem of evil only by redefining God in ways that compromise divine perfection and transcendence.

Philosophical challenges to process theodicy often focus on the coherence of process metaphysics itself. Critics such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston have questioned whether process philosophy can provide an adequate account of causation, identity, and persistence through time. The concept of actual entities as momentary events of experience raises questions about how enduring objects and personal identity can be maintained across time. If each human experience is a distinct actual entity that perishes almost immediately, what accounts for the continuity of personal identity? Process theologians respond with complex accounts of "societies" of actual entities that inherit characteristics from predecessors, but critics argue that these accounts remain problematic. Additionally, some philosophers question whether process metaphysics can adequately account for the objectivity of values and moral truths, which seem necessary for any meaningful discussion of evil.

The problem of divine goodness in a world of suffering presents another significant challenge for process theodicy. If God is genuinely unable to prevent horrific evils such as the Holocaust or childhood cancers, critics ask, can God still be considered perfectly good? Traditional theism maintains that God's goodness is demonstrated in part by God's ability to prevent evil, but process theology's rejection of divine omnipotence means that God may be unable to prevent even the most horrific atrocities. Process theologians respond by arguing that divine goodness should be measured not by the ability to control events but by the quality of God's persuasive influence and sympathetic participation in creaturely

## 1.8 Skeptical Theism

Process theodicy, with its radical reconception of divine power and its emphasis on God's participation in cosmic suffering, offers a compelling alternative to traditional theistic frameworks. Yet even as it addresses the problem of evil by limiting divine omnipotence, it raises profound questions about the nature and scope of human understanding when confronting the mystery of suffering. This brings us to another significant approach to the problem of evil—one that does not seek to provide specific explanations for why God permits particular evils but rather challenges our capacity to make reliable judgments about divine reasons altogether. This approach, known as skeptical theism, argues that human cognitive limitations are so profound that we cannot confidently infer from our inability to discern God's reasons for permitting evil to the conclusion that no such reasons exist. Rather than constructing elaborate metaphysical systems to explain evil, skeptical theism suggests that the appropriate response to the problem of evil is intellectual humility—a recognition of



the vast epistemic chasm that separates finite human minds from the infinite understanding of an omniscient deity.

The core argument of skeptical theism was pioneered by Stephen Wykstra in his groundbreaking 1984 article, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance.’” Wykstra, an American philosopher with expertise in epistemology and philosophy of religion, developed this approach in response to William Rowe’s evidential argument from evil, which we explored in section three. Recall that Rowe had argued that certain instances of intense suffering, such as a fawn burned in a forest fire, appear to serve no greater good, suggesting that God probably does not exist. Wykstra challenged this inference by questioning whether human beings are in any position to judge whether particular instances of suffering might serve greater goods beyond our comprehension.

At the heart of Wykstra’s argument lies what he calls the “noseeum” inference—the logical leap from “I see no reason for this suffering” to “There is no reason for this suffering.” This inference, Wykstra suggests, is analogous to someone concluding that there are no microscopic organisms in a drop of water simply because they cannot see any with the naked eye. In both cases, the inference fails because it does not account for the limitations of the observer’s cognitive or perceptual faculties. Just as microscopes reveal a world of invisible organisms, so too might a vastly expanded cognitive capacity reveal reasons for suffering that remain imperceptible to human minds. Wykstra’s challenge to the noseeum inference represents a fundamental shift in the debate about evil, moving the focus from constructing explanations for suffering to questioning our capacity to recognize such explanations even if they exist.

To illustrate this epistemic limitation, Wykstra employs the parent-child analogy, which has become one of the most powerful and widely discussed metaphors in contemporary philosophy of religion. A young child undergoing a painful medical procedure cannot comprehend the parent’s reasons for permitting this suffering, yet the parent may have perfectly good reasons that transcend the child’s limited perspective. The child, lacking the parent’s knowledge and experience, might conclude that the parent is cruel or indifferent, while in reality the parent’s actions are motivated by love and a concern for the child’s long-term wellbeing. Similarly, Wykstra suggests, human beings may stand in an epistemic relationship to God that makes our failure to discern justifying reasons for suffering poor evidence for the actual absence of such reasons. If the cognitive gap between child and parent is significant, the gap between finite human cognition and infinite divine understanding is incomprehensibly greater.

The cognitive limitations of humans compared to an omniscient being extend far beyond mere differences in knowledge quantity. Human cognition is shaped by evolutionary pressures that favor survival and reproduction rather than metaphysical truth. Our cognitive faculties are adapted to navigate a middle-sized world of medium-sized objects moving at medium speeds, not to grasp the ultimate purposes of a cosmic creator. Furthermore, human reasoning is subject to numerous biases and limitations—heuristic thinking, confirmation bias, availability bias, and many others—that systematically distort our judgment in ways we often fail to recognize. These limitations suggest that human beings are poorly positioned to make reliable judgments about the kinds of reasons an omniscient being might have for permitting particular instances of suffering.



The idea that God's reasons might be beyond human comprehension is not new in religious thought. It echoes themes found in biblical literature, such as the Book of Job, where God responds to Job's questions about suffering not with explanations but with a display of cosmic grandeur that underscores the limitations of human understanding. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah declares, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). These religious affirmations of divine mystery find philosophical expression in skeptical theism, which suggests that the apparent senselessness of suffering may reflect not the actual absence of divine reasons but rather the limitations of human cognition.

Wykstra's formulation of skeptical theism includes what he calls the "Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access" (CORNEA), which states that before we can reasonably infer "P is not the case" from "I see no evidence that P is the case," we must have reasonable confidence that if P were the case, we would likely see evidence of it. Applied to Rowe's argument, CORNEA suggests that before we can reasonably infer "There is no justifying reason for this suffering" from "I see no justifying reason for this suffering," we must have reasonable confidence that if there were a justifying reason, we would likely be able to perceive it. Given the profound limitations of human cognition relative to divine understanding, Wykstra argues that we lack this confidence. The parent-child analogy powerfully illustrates this point: a young child undergoing a painful medical procedure cannot comprehend the parent's reasons for permitting this suffering, yet the parent may have perfectly good reasons that transcend the child's limited perspective. Similarly, human beings may stand in an epistemic relationship to God that makes our failure to discern justifying reasons for suffering poor evidence for the actual absence of such reasons.

The epistemological foundations of skeptical theism extend beyond Wykstra's CORNEA principle to encompass a broader understanding of the relationship between human and divine cognition. Skeptical theists distinguish between "God-justifying reasons" and "God-justifying goods"—the former being the specific reasons God might have for permitting a particular evil, and the latter being the goods that justify God's permission of that evil. They argue that even if we can identify goods that might justify various evils, we cannot know whether these are the actual goods that justify God's permission of evil in particular cases. Furthermore, skeptical theists emphasize the complexity of the causal and moral networks in which evils are embedded. A particular instance of suffering might be necessary to prevent a greater evil, to bring about a greater good, or to maintain the possibility of other goods, and these connections might be so complex and far-reaching that they exceed human computational capacity.

The relationship between skeptical theism and Reformed epistemology represents another significant epistemological dimension of this approach. Reformed epistemology, associated with philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, argues that belief in God can be properly basic—justified without inference from other beliefs—when grounded in appropriate circumstances such as religious experience. Skeptical theism complements this view by suggesting that the failure to find evidential support for belief in God through arguments from natural theology does not undermine rational theistic belief, as the evidence for God's existence (or non-existence) may lie beyond our cognitive grasp. This alignment with Reformed epistemology strengthens skeptical theism's position within contemporary philosophy of religion, providing a broader epistemological framework that supports its claims about the limitations of human reasoning in

religious matters.

The impact of skeptical theism on natural theology has been profound. Traditional natural theology attempts to construct arguments for God's existence based on publicly accessible evidence and reasoning. However, skeptical theism suggests that the evidence for God's existence may be systematically obscured by human cognitive limitations, making traditional natural theological projects problematic. This does not necessarily lead to fideism—the view that religious belief is based on faith rather than reason—but rather to a more humble approach to natural theology that acknowledges the limits of human reasoning in matters of ultimate concern. Skeptical theism thus encourages a posture of epistemic humility in religious inquiry, recognizing that the evidence for or against God's existence may lie beyond our current cognitive capacities.

The connection between skeptical theism and divine hiddenness represents another significant epistemological dimension of this approach. The problem of divine hiddenness asks why an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly loving God would not make His existence more obvious, thereby providing greater evidence for belief and potentially preventing disbelief. Skeptical theism responds by suggesting that divine hiddenness itself may serve goods that transcend human understanding, or that the apparent hiddenness of God may reflect human cognitive limitations rather than actual divine absence. This response aligns with skeptical theism's broader emphasis on the limitations of human cognition in matters of divine purpose and action. Just as we cannot confidently judge God's reasons for permitting particular evils, so too we cannot confidently judge God's reasons for remaining hidden or for making His existence less obvious than it might be.

Several major skeptical theists have contributed to the development and refinement of this approach, each bringing distinctive insights and arguments to the discussion. Stephen Wykstra's pioneering work, as we have seen, established the core skeptical theistic response to evidential arguments from evil. His CORNEA principle and parent-child analogy have become standard elements in the philosophical toolkit of skeptical theists, providing a systematic framework for challenging inferences from apparent gratuitousness to actual gratuitousness. Wykstra's emphasis on the importance of epistemic access—our ability to detect reasons or goods if they exist—has shaped subsequent discussions of the problem of evil, shifting the focus from constructing theodicies to examining the conditions under which we can reasonably make inferences about divine reasons.

Michael Bergmann has made significant contributions to skeptical theism through his defense against Rowe's evidential argument and his development of what he calls "skeptical theistic skepticism." In his 2001 article, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," Bergmann argues that Rowe's inference from apparent gratuitousness to actual gratuitousness is defeated by skeptical theistic considerations. Bergmann distinguishes between "noseeum inferences" that are reasonable and those that are not, suggesting that inferences about divine reasons for permitting evil fall into the latter category due to the vast difference between human and cognitive capacities. In subsequent work, Bergmann has explored the implications of skeptical theism for other areas of philosophy, arguing that if skeptical theism is true, we should be skeptical about our ability to detect morally sufficient reasons for many actions, not just divine permission of evil. This "skeptical theistic skepticism" has generated extensive debate about the broader implications of

skeptical theism for moral knowledge and religious practice.

Michael Rea has contributed to skeptical theistic epistemology through his work on divine hiddenness and the problem of evil. In articles such as “Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence” (2009), Rea develops a skeptical theistic response to the problem of divine hiddenness, suggesting that God’s hiddenness may serve goods that we cannot comprehend. Rea emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of hiddenness—epistemic hiddenness (where evidence for God’s existence is lacking) and experiential hiddenness (where God’s presence is not felt in circumstances where it might be expected). He argues that skeptical theism provides resources for addressing both kinds of hiddenness by emphasizing the limitations of human cognition in matters of divine purpose and action. Rea’s work has helped to integrate discussions of divine hiddenness with the broader skeptical theistic response to the problem of evil, creating a more comprehensive approach to the epistemic challenges facing religious belief.

Daniel Howard-Snyder has developed what he calls “skeptical theistic theism,” a version of skeptical theism that attempts to balance skeptical considerations with positive theistic commitments. In his article “The God Who Exists and the God Who Does Not” (1996), Howard-Snyder argues that skeptical theism does not necessarily lead to skepticism about all religious claims but can be combined with a robust theism that affirms God’s existence and goodness while acknowledging the limitations of human understanding. Howard-Snyder emphasizes that skeptical theism is primarily a response to atheistic arguments from evil rather than a comprehensive account of divine-human epistemic relations. His work has helped to address concerns that skeptical theism might undermine religious knowledge and practice by showing how skeptical considerations can be integrated with a vibrant religious faith.

The diversity within skeptical theistic approaches reflects the richness and complexity of this philosophical tradition. While all skeptical theists share the core conviction that human cognitive limitations prevent us from making reliable judgments about God’s reasons for permitting evil, they differ in their specific arguments, their philosophical influences, and their broader theological commitments. This diversity has strengthened skeptical theism by allowing for multiple lines of defense against evidential arguments from evil and by encouraging ongoing refinement and development of skeptical theistic positions.

Despite its philosophical sophistication, skeptical theism has faced numerous objections from critics who argue that it leads to unacceptable consequences for religious belief and practice. One of the most significant objections is the “moral paralysis” objection, which suggests that if we cannot know God’s reasons for permitting evil, we cannot know whether we ought to prevent particular evils, since preventing them might frustrate God’s purposes. If, for instance, God permits a child’s suffering for some greater good that we cannot comprehend, then our attempts to alleviate that suffering might actually thwart God’s plan. This objection, pressed by philosophers such as Richard Gale and Bruce Russell, suggests that skeptical theism undermines moral motivation and responsibility by creating uncertainty about whether we ought to prevent evils that God might have good reasons to permit.

Skeptical theists have responded to the moral paralysis objection by distinguishing between first-order and second-order judgments about evil. While we may be unable to make reliable second-order judgments about whether God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting particular evils, we can still make reliable first-

order judgments about whether evils ought to be prevented based on their apparent nature. The apparent badness of an evil provides *prima facie* reason to prevent it, and this reason is not defeated by the mere possibility that God has unknown reasons for permitting it. Furthermore, skeptical theists argue that God's reasons for permitting evil are likely to include the good of creaturely response to evil—meaning that God often permits evil precisely so that creatures will work to prevent it. In this view, our efforts to alleviate suffering do not frustrate God's purposes but rather participate in them.

The “religious epistemology” objection challenges skeptical theism by suggesting that if human cognitive limitations are so profound that we cannot know God's reasons for permitting evil, then we cannot know much of anything about God, including God's existence, nature, and purposes. If we cannot distinguish between evils that God permits for good reasons and those that God does not permit (or permits for no reason), then we lose the basis for religious knowledge and practice. This objection, developed by philosophers such as J.L. Schellenberg, suggests that skeptical theism undermines the very religious beliefs it seeks to defend by making God essentially unknowable.

In response, skeptical theists distinguish between different kinds of religious knowledge and argue that while we may not be able to know God's specific reasons for permitting particular evils, we can still know God through general revelation, religious experience, and scripture. They suggest that God's general character and purposes may be knowable even when specific divine reasons remain inscrutable. Furthermore, some skeptical theists embrace a form of mysticism that emphasizes the limits of human understanding in religious matters, arguing that not knowing God's reasons for permitting evil is compatible with a robust religious faith centered on trust rather than comprehension.

The “great goods” objection challenges skeptical theism by suggesting that we can identify goods that might justify various evils, thereby undermining the claim that God's reasons are necessarily beyond human comprehension. For instance, the goods of soul-making, free will, and the development of virtues like compassion and courage are widely recognized as valuable and might justify God's permission of various evils. If we can identify these goods, critics ask, why can we not identify the specific goods that justify particular evils? This objection, pressed by philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, suggests that skeptical theism is unnecessarily pessimistic about human capacity to understand divine purposes.

Skeptical theists respond by distinguishing between identifying goods that might justify evils in general and knowing whether these are the actual goods that justify God's permission of particular evils. While we can identify various goods that might justify evils, we cannot know whether these are the actual goods that justify God's permission of specific instances of suffering. Furthermore, skeptical theists argue that the complexity of moral and causal networks means that even if we can identify goods that might justify evils, we cannot know whether permitting a particular evil is necessary to achieve those goods or whether those goods could be achieved through less destructive means.

The “coherence” objection challenges skeptical theism by suggesting that if God's reasons are beyond human comprehension, then religious language about God's goodness and purposes becomes meaningless. If we cannot understand God's reasons for permitting evil, how can we meaningfully affirm that God is good or that God has purposes for creation? This objection, developed by philosophers such as D.Z. Phillips, suggests that

skeptical theism leads to incoherence in religious language by disconnecting claims about God's goodness from any understandable content.

In response, skeptical theists argue that religious language about God's goodness need not require comprehension of God's specific reasons for permitting particular evils. They suggest that we can meaningfully affirm God's goodness based on general revelation, religious experience, and the overall pattern of creation, even when we cannot understand God's specific purposes in permitting particular evils. Furthermore, some skeptical theists embrace a form of apophatic theology that emphasizes the limits of human language in describing God, arguing that religious language is necessarily analogical and symbolic rather than univocal and literal.

The "practical implications" objection challenges skeptical theism by suggesting that if we cannot know God's reasons for permitting evil, then religious practices such as prayer and worship become problematic. If we do not know whether God has good reasons for permitting particular evils, how can we confidently pray for God to intervene or praise God for God's goodness? This objection, pressed by philosophers such as John Hick, suggests that skeptical theism undermines the practical dimension of religious life by creating uncertainty about God's responsiveness to prayer and God's involvement in human affairs.

Skeptical theists respond by distinguishing between knowing God's specific reasons for permitting particular evils and knowing God's general character and promises. They suggest that religious practices such as prayer and worship are based on general knowledge of God's character and God's promises to be present with sufferers, rather than on specific knowledge of God's reasons for permitting particular evils. Furthermore, some skeptical theists argue that prayer is not primarily about changing God's mind or obtaining specific outcomes but about aligning human will with divine will and opening oneself to God's presence and guidance.

Contemporary developments and debates in skeptical theism reflect the

## 1.9 Anti-Theodicy

Contemporary developments and debates in skeptical theism reflect the ongoing refinement of this epistemological approach to the problem of evil. Yet even as skeptical theism continues to evolve within analytic philosophy of religion, a fundamentally different perspective has emerged that challenges not merely specific theistic explanations of evil but the entire project of theodicy itself. This perspective, known as anti-theodicy, represents a radical departure from all previous approaches we have examined, rejecting the very attempt to justify God's ways to humans as morally, intellectually, and religiously problematic. Where skeptical theism questions our capacity to discern God's reasons for permitting evil, anti-theodicy questions the moral legitimacy of even seeking such reasons. This shift from epistemological humility to moral protest marks a profound reorientation in religious and philosophical responses to suffering, one that has gained increasing prominence in the wake of catastrophic events like the Holocaust and in reaction against what some perceive as the abstract, often heartless rationalizations of traditional theodicy.

The nature of anti-theodicy can best be understood through a sharp contrast with traditional theodicy. Whereas theodicy seeks to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of God by providing explanations or jus-

tifications for suffering, anti-theodicy argues that such attempts are fundamentally misguided and morally objectionable. Anti-theodicy does not offer alternative explanations for evil; rather, it rejects the explanatory project altogether, suggesting that the attempt to intellectually justify suffering constitutes a form of moral failure. As articulated by thinkers like Kenneth Surin and Terence Tilley, anti-theodicy begins with the recognition that certain forms of suffering—particularly horrendous evils like genocide, torture, and the suffering of innocent children—defy rational explanation and that any attempt to explain them risks trivializing the suffering of victims and excusing the perpetrators. The anti-theodic stance is not primarily an intellectual position but a moral and existential one, rooted in solidarity with those who suffer rather than in abstract philosophical reasoning.

The moral protest against explaining away suffering lies at the heart of anti-theodicy. This protest arises from the conviction that when confronted with extreme suffering, the appropriate response is not intellectual explanation but compassionate presence and moral outrage. The attempt to justify God's permission of horrific evils, anti-theodacists argue, often serves to soothe the conscience of the privileged while abandoning the suffering to their fate. As the Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim suggested after the Holocaust, any attempt to explain the murder of six million Jews as part of a divine plan risks making God complicit in genocide and reducing human suffering to a mere instrument in a cosmic drama. This moral intuition—that some evils are so horrific that they ought not to be explained but rather protested—finds expression in various religious and philosophical traditions, from the biblical Book of Job to the writings of contemporary ethicists who emphasize the primacy of practical response over theoretical explanation.

The refusal to accept intellectual resolutions to existential problems represents another core dimension of anti-theodicy. Whereas traditional theodicies seek to resolve the tension between divine goodness and the reality of evil through rational argumentation, anti-theodicy embraces the irreducible mystery of suffering and the limitations of human understanding in the face of profound evil. This refusal is not a surrender to irrationality but rather a recognition that some human experiences exceed the capacity of reason to comprehend. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, though not religious, captured this sentiment in his reflections on the absurd, suggesting that the only authentic response to suffering is not philosophical justification but rebellion against the unjustifiable nature of suffering itself. Religious anti-theodacists echo this sentiment, arguing that faith does not require the resolution of all intellectual difficulties but rather the courage to trust in the midst of mystery and to stand in solidarity with those who suffer.

The emphasis on solidarity with sufferers rather than explanation distinguishes anti-theodicy from all previous approaches to the problem of evil. Where traditional theodicies often adopt a detached, analytical perspective on suffering, anti-theodicy insists on the primacy of relationship and presence in responding to evil. This emphasis on solidarity finds powerful expression in the work of liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, who argue that God is revealed not in abstract explanations of suffering but in concrete solidarity with the poor and oppressed. For these thinkers, the proper Christian response to suffering is not to explain why God permits it but to join God in working to alleviate it. This practical orientation transforms the problem of evil from a theoretical puzzle to a call to action, redirecting intellectual energy toward the transformation of unjust social structures that cause suffering.



The relationship between anti-theodicy and religious skepticism is complex and multifaceted. While some anti-theodacists reject religious belief altogether, others remain deeply committed to their faith traditions while rejecting traditional theodicies. This latter position—sometimes called “faithful protest”—maintains that authentic religious faith does not require intellectual resolution of the problem of evil but rather involves honest questioning, lament, and protest in the face of suffering. The Christian theologian Dorothee Sölle, for instance, developed a concept of “Christmysticism” that emphasizes solidarity with the suffering Christ rather than intellectual comprehension of divine purposes. Similarly, Jewish thinkers like David Blumenthal have articulated a “facing God” theology that combines profound faith with honest protest against God’s perceived absence or complicity in suffering. For these thinkers, anti-theodicy does not lead to atheism but to a more honest, authentic faith that embraces the tension between trust and protest.

The biblical and theological roots of anti-theodicy run deep, challenging the notion that this perspective is merely a modern reaction against traditional theodicy. The Book of Job, perhaps the most profound exploration of suffering in the Hebrew Bible, models an anti-theodic stance through its portrayal of Job’s refusal to accept his friends’ attempts to explain his suffering as punishment for sin. When God finally speaks from the whirlwind, God does not provide Job with an explanation for his suffering but rather confronts him with the mystery of creation, effectively rejecting the entire theodic project of Job’s friends. This biblical text suggests that authentic faith may sometimes require protest rather than intellectual submission, a theme echoed throughout the prophetic tradition.

The prophetic tradition of protest against injustice provides another important foundation for anti-theodicy. Prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah did not explain suffering as part of a divine plan but rather protested against the human injustice that caused suffering and called for social transformation. Their message was not one of passive acceptance of suffering but of active resistance to its causes, a stance that resonates with contemporary anti-theodic emphasis on solidarity and social action. This prophetic tradition challenges the notion that religious faith requires acceptance of suffering as part of a larger divine plan, suggesting instead that authentic faith demands resistance to unjust suffering wherever it occurs.

The laments and complaints found throughout the Psalms represent yet another biblical foundation for anti-theodicy. Psalms like 22, 44, and 88 give voice to profound expressions of doubt, anger, and protest against God in the face of suffering, yet they remain within the context of faith and prayer. These psalms model a form of religious faith that includes honest questioning and protest rather than requiring intellectual resolution of all difficulties. The presence of such laments in the canon of scripture suggests that the anti-theodic stance of protest and questioning has a legitimate place within religious tradition, challenging the notion that faith requires uncritical acceptance of traditional theodicies.

Jesus’s cry of dereliction on the cross—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)—provides a particularly powerful biblical foundation for anti-theodicy. This cry, which echoes the opening of Psalm 22, represents the ultimate expression of solidarity with human suffering and the profound mystery of God’s apparent absence in the midst of evil. For Christian anti-theodacists, this cry suggests that even Jesus experienced the apparent absence of God in suffering and that authentic faith may sometimes require embracing this sense of abandonment rather than seeking intellectual explanations. The cross thus becomes

not a solution to the problem of evil but a profound expression of God's solidarity with those who suffer, a mystery that defies rational explanation but invites compassionate response.

The development of anti-theodicy within theological tradition can be traced through various historical figures who challenged the theodic project. The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, in his *Life of Moses*, suggested that true knowledge of God comes not through rational explanation but through mystical experience that transcends intellectual comprehension. Similarly, the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart emphasized the limits of human language and concepts in describing God, suggesting that authentic religious experience moves beyond rational explanation into the darkness of unknowing. These historical precedents demonstrate that the anti-theodic emphasis on the limits of human understanding and the primacy of experience over explanation has deep roots within Christian tradition.

The Holocaust represented a catastrophic rupture in traditional religious approaches to suffering, compelling a fundamental reevaluation of theodicy and giving rise to what might be called "Holocaust theology"—a form of reflection that often adopts an explicitly anti-theodic stance. The impact of the Holocaust on religious thought cannot be overstated, as the systematic murder of six million Jews, including one and a half million children, challenged traditional explanations of suffering in unprecedented ways. For many Jewish thinkers and survivors, the Holocaust represented not merely another instance of evil to be explained but an event that shattered previous religious frameworks and demanded a fundamentally new response.

Jewish responses to the Holocaust often took the form of profound questioning rather than traditional theodicy. The question "Where was God at Auschwitz?" became a central concern, reflecting not merely intellectual curiosity but a crisis of faith that touched the deepest levels of religious identity. Some Jewish thinkers, like Richard Rubenstein, argued that the Holocaust demonstrated the "death of God" in any meaningful sense, suggesting that traditional conceptions of an omnipotent, benevolent deity could no longer be maintained in the face of such horror. Others, like Emil Fackenheim, rejected this conclusion but insisted that authentic Jewish faith after the Holocaust must include protest against God and resistance to any attempt to explain or justify the murder of millions. Fackenheim famously articulated what he called the "614th commandment"—the commandment not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory by despairing of God or abandoning Jewish identity. This commandment, while affirming faith, explicitly rejects any theodic attempt to find meaning or justification in the Holocaust.

Christian responses to the Holocaust also revealed a crisis in traditional theodicy. For many Christian thinkers, the Holocaust raised profound questions about the relationship between Christian anti-Judaism and Nazi anti-Semitism, suggesting that centuries of Christian theological hostility toward Jews had created conditions that made the Holocaust possible. This recognition led to a profound reevaluation of Christian teachings about Judaism and a rejection of any theodic framework that might suggest God used the Holocaust for some greater purpose. Christian theologians like Johann Baptist Metz developed what he called a "theology after Auschwitz" that emphasized solidarity with suffering and resistance to any attempt to explain away evil. Metz argued that authentic Christian faith after the Holocaust must include a "dangerous memory" of the victims and a commitment to resist all forms of dehumanization and oppression.

The development of Holocaust theology as anti-theodicy can be seen in the work of thinkers like Elie Wiesel,

whose writings bear witness to the horror of the Holocaust while rejecting any attempt to explain it. In his book *Night*, Wiesel describes witnessing the hanging of a child in a concentration camp and hearing someone ask, “Where is God?” Wiesel writes that he heard a voice within him answer, “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.” This powerful image captures both the apparent absence of God in the Holocaust and the identification of God with the suffering of victims, a perspective that defies traditional theodicy while affirming a form of faith that embraces solidarity rather than explanation.

The impact of the Holocaust extended beyond Jewish and Christian thought to influence broader philosophical and cultural reflections on evil. The philosopher Theodor Adorno, writing after the Holocaust, famously declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” suggesting that traditional cultural and aesthetic responses to suffering had become impossible in the face of such horror. Adorno’s statement reflects the anti-theodic intuition that some evils are so profound that they resist incorporation into any meaningful narrative or framework of explanation. Similarly, the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas developed a concept of God after Auschwitz that emphasizes divine self-limitation and suffering with creation rather than omnipotent control, a perspective that shares anti-theodic suspicions about traditional theodicy while maintaining a form of religious faith.

Philosophical anti-theodicy has developed through the work of several contemporary thinkers who have challenged the theodic project on conceptual, moral, and existential grounds. D.Z. Phillips, a Welsh philosopher influenced by Wittgenstein, argued in his book *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* that traditional theodicy is conceptually confused because it misunderstands the nature of religious language. Phillips suggested that attempts to explain evil within a theistic framework often treat God as a hypothesis within a causal explanatory system, fundamentally misunderstanding the kind of reality God is supposed to be. For Phillips, religious belief is not a scientific theory that requires verification through explanation of suffering but rather a form of life that involves practices, attitudes, and commitments that cannot be reduced to intellectual propositions. The attempt to reconcile God and evil through theodicy, he argued, represents a category mistake that distorts both religious belief and the reality of suffering.

Kenneth Surin, in his book *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, developed a powerful critique of theodicy as an ideological practice that serves to maintain existing power structures. Surin argued that traditional theodicies often function to legitimize suffering by presenting it as necessary for some greater good, thereby discouraging resistance to unjust social arrangements. Drawing on Marxist critical theory, Surin suggested that theodicy can become a tool of oppression that encourages the poor and marginalized to accept their suffering as part of a divine plan rather than working to transform the conditions that cause it. This ideological critique of theodicy represents a significant dimension of philosophical anti-theodicy, linking the rejection of explanatory frameworks to a commitment to social justice and liberation.

Terence Tilley, in his work *The Evils of Theodicy*, offered a practical critique of theodicy, arguing that the attempt to explain evil often distracts from the more important task of responding to it. Tilley suggested that theodic language typically serves the needs of the privileged rather than the suffering, providing intellectual comfort to those who are not immediately affected by evil while doing nothing to alleviate the suffering of victims. He proposed replacing theodic explanation with what he called “practical wisdom”—a form of

reflection that focuses on how to respond to evil rather than how to explain it. This practical approach to evil represents a significant shift in philosophical orientation, redirecting attention from abstract speculation to concrete action in the face of suffering.

Sarah Pinnock has developed what she calls “protest atheism” as a form of anti-theodicy that maintains religious faith while rejecting traditional explanations of suffering. In her book *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Responses to the Problem of Suffering*, Pinnock argues that authentic faith after the Holocaust must include honest protest against God and rejection of any attempt to explain or justify horrific evils. This “protest atheism” is not a rejection of God but a rejection of particular conceptions of God that seem incompatible with the reality of extreme suffering. Pinnock’s work demonstrates how anti-theodicy can be integrated with a vibrant religious faith that embraces the tension between trust and protest.

The continental philosophical tradition has also contributed significantly to anti-theodic thought, particularly through the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his emphasis on the ethical demand of the face of the other. Levinas argued that the suffering of another person makes an infinite ethical demand that cannot be subsumed under any theoretical framework or explanation. For Levinas, the face of the suffering other commands “thou shalt not kill” in a way that overrides any theoretical attempt to justify suffering, including theodic explanations. Similarly, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly in the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, challenged the Enlightenment project of explaining and controlling nature, suggesting that this project had contributed to the dehumanization

### 1.10 Theodicy in World Religions

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While anti-theodicy represents a powerful critique of traditional approaches to the problem of evil, it is important to recognize that religious responses to suffering are not limited to the Western monotheistic traditions we have examined so far. The world’s religions offer diverse perspectives on evil and suffering that reflect different cultural contexts, metaphysical frameworks, and spiritual orientations. These non-Western approaches to the problem of evil provide valuable alternatives to the theodic and anti-theodic positions we have explored, expanding our understanding of how human beings have grappled with the reality of suffering throughout history and across cultures. By examining Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish perspectives on

evil and suffering, we can gain a more comprehensive view of the religious resources available for addressing one of humanity's most persistent and challenging concerns.

Hindu perspectives on evil and suffering emerge from one of the world's oldest and most diverse religious traditions, characterized by a complex tapestry of texts, practices, and philosophical schools that span over four thousand years. Unlike the Western monotheistic traditions that typically conceive of God as a personal, omnipotent being who stands outside creation, Hinduism presents a more varied landscape of divine conceptions, ranging from the impersonal Brahman of Advaita Vedanta to the personal deities of devotional traditions like Vaishnavism and Shaivism. This diversity is reflected in Hindu approaches to evil and suffering, which draw upon several key concepts that provide distinctive frameworks for understanding the nature and purpose of suffering in human life.

The concept of karma stands at the heart of Hindu explanations for suffering, offering a comprehensive framework that connects present experiences to past actions. Derived from the Sanskrit root *kri* (to do, to make), karma refers to the universal law of moral causation whereby every action—thought, word, or deed—produces consequences that shape future experiences. In the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most revered texts, Krishna explains to Arjuna that no one can remain without action even for a moment, as the qualities of nature compel everyone to act. This universal activity generates karma that determines the circumstances of one's present life and future rebirths. Suffering, from this perspective, is not arbitrary or meaningless but represents the ripening of past actions, either in this life or in previous existences. The law of karma operates across lifetimes, creating a complex web of cause and effect that extends beyond individual mortality and explains the apparent injustices and inequalities of human experience. A child born into poverty or suffering from a congenital disease, according to karmic theory, is experiencing the consequences of actions performed in previous lives, even though those actions cannot be remembered.

The concept of *maya* adds another layer to Hindu understanding of evil and suffering. *Maya* is often translated as "illusion," though this translation fails to capture the full complexity of the concept. In Advaita Vedanta, *maya* refers to the cosmic force that veils the true nature of reality (Brahman) and creates the appearance of multiplicity, separation, and suffering. The world as we ordinarily experience it, according to this perspective, is *maya*—a projection of the mind that appears real but is ultimately unreal from the standpoint of absolute truth. Evil and suffering, in this view, belong to the realm of *maya*; they are part of the illusory world of duality but have no place in the ultimate reality of Brahman. The famous Advaitin philosopher Adi Shankara (8th century CE) taught that liberation (*moksha*) comes from realizing the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and recognizing one's identity with Brahman. From this perspective, the problem of evil dissolves when one transcends the illusion of separate existence and realizes the underlying unity of all reality.

The Bhagavad Gita offers a distinctive response to the problem of suffering that has influenced Hindu thought for centuries. Set in the context of the Mahabharata war, the Gita presents a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna, who is paralyzed by grief and moral confusion at the prospect of killing his relatives in battle, and Krishna, who serves as his charioteer and spiritual guide. Arjuna's dilemma represents a profound confrontation with the problem of evil—how can one participate in a world that requires violence and causes

suffering? Krishna's response addresses this question on multiple levels, emphasizing the performance of one's duty (dharma) without attachment to results. Krishna teaches Arjuna that the embodied self cannot completely avoid action, but one can perform actions without attachment to their fruits, dedicating all actions to the divine. This path of selfless action (karma yoga) offers a way to engage with the world without being bound by its suffering and evil. Furthermore, Krishna reveals his universal form to Arjuna, showing himself as the destroyer of worlds who devours all beings and brings them forth again, suggesting that from the cosmic perspective, individual suffering and death are part of a larger divine drama.

Different schools of Hindu thought offer nuanced variations on these themes. Advaita Vedanta, as noted, emphasizes the illusory nature of evil and suffering from the standpoint of absolute reality. Dvaita Vedanta, founded by the philosopher Madhva (13th century CE), maintains a strict dualism between God and the world, explaining evil as the result of the inherent limitations of created beings and their misuse of free will. Samkhya, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, presents a dualistic metaphysics that distinguishes between purusha (consciousness) and prakriti (matter), explaining suffering as arising from the mistaken identification of consciousness with material existence. Yoga, as articulated in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, offers a practical path to liberation through the cessation of mental modifications that create the illusion of separate existence and suffering. These diverse schools demonstrate the rich variety of Hindu approaches to the problem of evil, each offering distinctive philosophical frameworks and practical paths for liberation from suffering.

The relationship between dharma and the acceptance of suffering represents another important dimension of Hindu thought. Dharma, often translated as "duty," "righteousness," or "cosmic order," refers to the universal law that upholds the cosmos and the specific duties appropriate to each individual based on their nature, stage of life, and social position. In the Mahabharata, the concept of dharma is central to understanding the problem of evil, as characters struggle to discern their proper duty in complex moral situations. The acceptance of suffering as part of one's dharma is illustrated in the story of Harishchandra, a king who, despite enduring extreme suffering and the loss of his kingdom, family, and even his freedom, remained steadfast in his commitment to truth and dharma. This ideal of patient endurance of suffering as fulfillment of dharma contrasts sharply with Western approaches that often seek to explain or eliminate suffering. For many Hindus, suffering is not necessarily something to be explained away but rather something to be endured with faith and courage as part of one's spiritual path.

The devotional (bhakti) traditions of Hinduism offer yet another perspective on suffering, emphasizing love and surrender to the divine as the path to liberation. In these traditions, which include Vaishnavism (devotion to Vishnu and his avatars like Krishna and Rama) and Shaivism (devotion to Shiva), suffering is understood as an opportunity to deepen one's relationship with the divine through love and surrender. The 15th-century poet-saint Mirabai, for instance, expressed her devotion to Krishna through songs that described her suffering in separation from him as a form of spiritual ecstasy. Similarly, the Alvars and Nayanars, poet-saints of the Tamil devotional tradition, often described their suffering as a means of purifying the heart and drawing closer to the divine. In these traditions, the problem of evil is not solved through philosophical explanation but transformed through loving relationship with the divine, who shares in the suffering of devotees and ultimately redeems it.



Buddhist responses to suffering represent a fundamentally different approach from both Western theism and Hinduism, centering on the Four Noble Truths as the foundation of Buddhist teaching. According to tradition, the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, c. 563–483 BCE) formulated these truths after his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, offering a diagnosis of the human condition and a prescription for liberation from suffering. The First Noble Truth states the fact of suffering (*dukkha*), the Second identifies its origin in craving (*tanha*), the Third declares the possibility of its cessation (*nirodha*), and the Fourth outlines the path to that cessation (*magga*). This framework provides a comprehensive analysis of suffering and a practical path for its elimination without reference to divine creation or providence.

The concept of *dukkha*, the First Noble Truth, encompasses a broad range of experiences beyond what is typically meant by “suffering” in English. *Dukkha* includes obvious forms of physical and mental pain, as well as the suffering caused by change (*viparinama-dukkha*), the suffering of conditioned existence (*sankhara-dukkha*), and the subtle suffering inherent in the very fact of being born into a world of impermanence. The Buddha’s first sermon after his enlightenment, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma), begins with the declaration that birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are *dukkha*, association with the unpleasant is *dukkha*, dissociation from the pleasant is *dukkha*, not to get what one wants is *dukkha*—in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*. This comprehensive analysis of suffering as pervasive in human experience establishes the starting point for Buddhist reflections on evil and suffering.

The Second Noble Truth identifies the origin of suffering in craving or thirst (*tanha*)—specifically, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. Unlike Hindu karma, which explains suffering as the consequence of past actions, Buddhist teaching emphasizes the psychological mechanisms that produce suffering in the present moment. The Buddha taught that suffering arises not from external events themselves but from our clinging, aversion, and ignorance regarding those events. This psychological analysis shifts the focus from explaining why suffering exists to understanding how it arises in our own minds and hearts. The famous simile of the two arrows illustrates this point: when a person is struck by an arrow (the unavoidable pain of existence), a second arrow follows immediately—the mental suffering caused by resistance, aversion, and craving. While the first arrow may be inevitable, the second arrow is optional, created by our own minds.

The Third Noble Truth declares the possibility of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*), offering hope that liberation from suffering is attainable. This cessation is not merely a temporary alleviation of symptoms but the complete ending of craving and the realization of *Nibbana* (*Nirvana*)—the unconditioned state beyond birth, death, and suffering. *Nibbana* is not a place or a heavenly reward but the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion that cause suffering. The Buddha described *Nibbana* as the highest happiness, though this happiness transcends ordinary pleasure and pain. The possibility of complete liberation from suffering distinguishes Buddhist thought from many religious traditions that accept suffering as an inevitable part of existence to be endured or explained rather than eliminated.

The Fourth Noble Truth outlines the Eightfold Path as the way to the cessation of suffering. This path consists of eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort,

right mindfulness, and right concentration. Unlike Hindu paths that emphasize devotion, knowledge, or ritual action, the Eightfold Path offers a practical method for transforming consciousness through ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The path is often divided into three categories: *sila* (ethical conduct), *samadhi* (mental discipline), and *panna* (wisdom). This comprehensive approach addresses suffering at multiple levels—through ethical behavior that reduces harm to oneself and others, through meditation practices that calm and clarify the mind, and through wisdom that penetrates the true nature of reality.

The rejection of cosmic justice or divine purpose in suffering represents a significant departure from theistic approaches to the problem of evil. Buddhism does not explain suffering as part of a divine plan, as punishment for sin, or as a means for soul-making. Instead, it analyzes suffering as a natural consequence of ignorance and craving, without reference to supernatural causes or purposes. This naturalistic approach to suffering is evident in the Buddha's response to questions about the origin of the universe, the nature of the self after death, and other metaphysical questions. When asked such questions, the Buddha often remained silent, comparing them to a man struck by a poisoned arrow who refuses treatment until he knows the identity of his attacker, his caste, his appearance, and so on. The point, the Buddha explained, is that the arrow of suffering must be removed immediately, regardless of its ultimate origin. This pragmatic focus on the elimination of suffering rather than its explanation distinguishes Buddhist thought from theodic approaches that seek to reconcile suffering with divine purpose.

The role of attachment and desire in creating suffering receives particular emphasis in Buddhist teachings. The Second Noble Truth identifies craving (*tanha*) as the origin of suffering, and Buddhist psychology elaborates on how attachment (*upadana*) to pleasant experiences and aversion (*patigha*) to unpleasant experiences create mental suffering. The Buddha taught that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*), without essence or self (*anatta*), and ultimately unsatisfying (*dukkha*). Suffering arises when we cling to impermanent things as if they were permanent, seek permanent satisfaction in what is inherently unsatisfying, and identify with what is essentially selfless. The recognition of these three marks of existence—impermanence, not-self, and unsatisfactoriness—forms the basis of wisdom (*panna*) that leads to liberation from suffering.

The path to liberation from suffering through the Eightfold Path offers a systematic method for transforming consciousness and ending suffering. Unlike Hindu paths that may take many lifetimes to complete, Buddhism emphasizes the possibility of liberation in this very life through dedicated practice. The path begins with right view—understanding the Four Noble Truths and the nature of reality—which informs right intention—the cultivation of renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion. These wisdom factors are supported by ethical conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood) that creates the conditions for mental development. Mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration) develops the calm and clarity needed to penetrate the true nature of reality and uproot the causes of suffering. This comprehensive path addresses suffering at multiple levels simultaneously, offering practical methods for transformation rather than theoretical explanations.

Buddhist approaches to suffering have developed diverse expressions across different traditions and cultures. Theravada Buddhism, prevalent in Southeast Asia, emphasizes individual liberation through the monastic path and meditation practices like Vipassana (insight meditation). Mahayana Buddhism, which developed in

India and spread to East Asia, emphasizes the ideal of the bodhisattva—one who postpones final liberation in order to help all beings achieve freedom from suffering. The bodhisattva ideal expands the focus from individual liberation to compassionate action for the benefit of all sentient beings, adding a dimension of social engagement to Buddhist responses to suffering. Vajrayana Buddhism, found primarily in Tibet, utilizes visualization, mantra, and ritual practices as skillful means for transforming consciousness more rapidly. These diverse traditions share a common foundation in the Four Noble Truths but offer different methods and emphases in addressing the problem of suffering.

Islamic theodicy presents yet another distinctive approach to the problem of evil, rooted in the concept of Tawhid—the absolute unity and sovereignty of God. Islam, which emerged in 7th-century Arabia through the prophetic mission of Muhammad, affirms the strict monotheism of Allah as the all-powerful creator and sustainer of the universe. This conception of divine unity shapes Islamic responses to evil and suffering in fundamental ways, emphasizing God’s absolute sovereignty over creation while affirming human responsibility within the limits of human freedom. Islamic theodicy draws upon the Quran, Hadith (sayings and actions of Muhammad), and the reflective tradition of Islamic philosophy and theology (kalam) to address the problem of evil within a framework of divine unity and justice.

The concept of Tawhid (divine unity) stands at the center of Islamic thought and has profound implications for understanding suffering and evil. Tawhid affirms that Allah is the sole creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe, whose power and knowledge encompass all things. This absolute divine sovereignty means that nothing happens in creation except by Allah’s will and permission. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes Allah’s power over all things: “Say: ‘Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth, or who is it that has power over hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that directs all affairs?’ They will say, ‘Allah.’ Then say, ‘Will you not then fear Him?’ ” (Quran 10:31). This comprehensive divine sovereignty forms the backdrop for Islamic reflections on evil and suffering, which must be understood within the context of God’s absolute control over creation.

The role of divine decree (Qadar) and human responsibility represents a central tension in Islamic theodicy. The Quran affirms both God’s absolute sovereignty and human responsibility, creating a theological tension that has occupied Islamic thinkers throughout history. On one hand, numerous Quranic verses emphasize Allah’s power over all events: “No disaster strikes upon the earth or among yourselves except that it is in a register before We bring it into being—indeed that, for Allah, is easy” (Quran 57:22). On the other hand, the Quran also holds humans accountable for their actions: “Whoever does righteousness—it is for his own soul; and whoever does evil [does so] against it. And your Lord is not a tyrant to His servants” (Quran 41:46). Islamic theologians have developed various approaches to reconcile these apparent affirmations of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, ranging from the strict determinism of the Jabarites to the emphasis on human freedom by the Mu’tazilites, with the Ash’arite school offering a middle position that affirms divine

### 1.11 Modern Philosophical Developments

...sovereignty while affirming a meaningful role for human agency within the divinely ordained order. This tension between divine determinism and human responsibility, though expressed in specifically Islamic terms, reflects a broader concern that has animated philosophical discussions of theodicy across traditions and throughout history. As we move from these classical religious approaches to more recent philosophical engagements with the problem of evil, we find both continuity with traditional themes and innovative new directions that reflect the changing intellectual landscape of modernity. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed remarkable developments in philosophical approaches to theodicy, as thinkers have drawn upon diverse intellectual traditions and methodological frameworks to address the perennial challenge of reconciling divine goodness with the reality of suffering. These modern philosophical developments have expanded the scope and depth of theodicy discussions, introducing new concepts, challenging traditional assumptions, and creating unprecedented opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue on the problem of evil.

Analytic philosophy has made particularly significant contributions to contemporary theodicy, bringing new levels of logical rigor and conceptual clarity to discussions that had often been conducted in more speculative or theological terms. The analytic tradition, with its emphasis on precise argumentation, logical analysis, and careful definition of terms, has transformed the landscape of philosophical theology since the mid-twentieth century. Richard Swinburne, Emeritus Professor at the University of Oxford, stands as perhaps the most influential analytic philosopher to engage systematically with the problem of evil. In his monumental trilogy on the philosophy of religion—*The Coherence of Theism* (1977), *The Existence of God* (1979), and *Faith and Reason* (1981)—Swinburne developed a sophisticated cumulative case for theism that addresses the problem of evil within a comprehensive probabilistic framework. Unlike many theodicians who focus primarily on logical consistency, Swinburne attempts to demonstrate that the existence of God is more probable than not, even given the reality of evil. His approach integrates elements of free will and soul-making theodicy with his distinctive moral theory, which emphasizes the importance of free will and the opportunity for significant moral responsibility.

Swinburne's argument for the value of free will represents a refined version of the free will defense that we examined earlier, but with important modifications that reflect analytic precision. He argues that God's primary reason for permitting moral evil is to give humans the opportunity to make significant free choices and develop their character through responsible decision-making. However, Swinburne goes beyond traditional free will theodicy by emphasizing that genuine moral responsibility requires not merely the freedom to choose but also the opportunity to make choices that have real consequences for oneself and others. A world without the possibility of causing harm, he suggests, would be a world without the possibility of genuine moral responsibility. Swinburne also addresses the problem of natural evil by arguing that it provides necessary knowledge to humans about the consequences of their actions and creates opportunities for virtuous responses to suffering. In *The Existence of God*, he suggests that a world without natural evil would lack the "epistemic distance" necessary for genuine faith and moral development, as humans would constantly be aware of God's presence and intervention.

Eleonore Stump, Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, has developed an Aquinas-inspired

approach to suffering and love that represents another significant contribution to analytic philosophy of religion. In her book *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (2010), Stump draws upon Thomistic philosophy and psychology to argue that suffering can serve as a means of union with God and with other human beings. Unlike many analytic philosophers who approach the problem of evil through abstract logical analysis, Stump employs biblical narratives—particularly the stories of Job, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany—to explore how suffering can facilitate personal transformation and deeper relationships with God. Her approach integrates philosophical analysis with narrative interpretation, suggesting that certain forms of suffering can break down barriers of self-absorption and create openings for greater love and compassion. Stump’s particular contribution lies in her development of what she calls the “desire-frustration theory” of suffering, which distinguishes between different kinds of suffering based on the desires they frustrate. This nuanced analysis allows her to address specific examples of suffering in a more sensitive and psychologically realistic way than many traditional theodicies.

Peter van Inwagen, another prominent analytic philosopher, has made significant contributions to both the free will defense and skeptical theism. In his influential essay “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God” (1989), van Inwagen develops an original response to the problem of natural evil by suggesting that God might use random processes governed by natural laws to bring about good outcomes that could not be achieved through direct divine intervention. He argues that a world governed by natural laws that allow for both regularity and chance provides the optimal environment for human freedom and development. While this natural order inevitably produces some suffering through processes like evolution and natural disasters, van Inwagen suggests that this suffering is an inevitable byproduct of a world that allows for the genuine exercise of human freedom and the development of moral character. His approach represents a creative synthesis of scientific understanding with philosophical theology, acknowledging the realities of evolutionary biology while maintaining a theistic worldview.

William Alston, Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University until his death in 2009, made substantial contributions to skeptical theistic approaches to the problem of evil. In his article “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition” (1991), Alston argues that human cognitive limitations are so profound that we cannot make reliable judgments about whether God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting particular instances of suffering. Drawing on epistemological considerations about the limits of human knowledge, Alston suggests that the apparent gratuitousness of evil provides little evidence against the existence of God because we are not in a position to know whether God might have reasons beyond our comprehension. His approach complements the work of Stephen Wykstra and Michael Bergmann, adding further support to the skeptical theistic position that we examined in section eight. The sophisticated logical and epistemological refinements in the analytic tradition have significantly advanced philosophical discussions of the problem of evil, bringing new levels of precision and rigor to debates that had often been conducted in more speculative terms.

Postmodern and continental approaches to the problem of evil represent a fundamental challenge to the entire theodic project, questioning the assumptions and methods that underlie traditional attempts to reconcile divine goodness with the reality of suffering. Where analytic philosophy has sought to refine and improve traditional theodicies through logical analysis, postmodern and continental thinkers have often rejected the very

possibility of providing a satisfactory theoretical explanation for evil. This critical turn reflects broader postmodern suspicions of grand narratives, totalizing explanations, and universal systems of thought—suspicions that have profound implications for how we approach the problem of evil.

The rejection of grand narratives and totalizing explanations stands at the heart of postmodern approaches to theodicy. Jean-François Lyotard, in his influential book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), defined postmodernity as “incredulity toward metanarratives”—those comprehensive stories that claim to explain reality as a whole. Traditional theodicies, from this perspective, represent precisely the kind of metanarrative that postmodernity calls into question. They attempt to incorporate the reality of evil within a comprehensive explanatory framework that gives meaning and purpose to suffering, thereby reducing the particularity and concreteness of individual experiences of suffering to mere instances of a general pattern. Postmodern thinkers argue that this totalizing approach inevitably distorts the reality of suffering by subsuming it under abstract concepts like “soul-making” or “free will” that fail to do justice to the particularity and irreducibility of individual suffering.

Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish origin, developed an ethics of the face and responsibility for the other that has profoundly influenced postmodern approaches to the problem of evil. In works like *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), Levinas argued that ethics precedes ontology—that our encounter with the face of the other person makes an infinite ethical demand that cannot be subsumed under any theoretical system or explanatory framework. For Levinas, the suffering of another person commands “thou shalt not kill” in a way that overrides any attempt to justify or explain suffering, including theodic explanations. The face of the suffering other makes an absolute claim that resists incorporation into any totalizing system of meaning. This ethical perspective challenges traditional theodicies by suggesting that the attempt to explain evil theoretically represents a form of violence against the particularity and concreteness of individual suffering. Levinas’s approach emphasizes the primacy of ethical response over theoretical explanation, suggesting that the appropriate response to suffering is not intellectual comprehension but practical responsibility for the other.

Jacques Derrida, another influential French philosopher, developed a deconstructive approach to theodicy that questions the very possibility of reconciling divine justice with human suffering. In works like *The Gift of Death* (1995) and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001), Derrida explored the paradoxical nature of responsibility and justice, suggesting that any attempt to systematize or totalize these concepts inevitably betrays their essential character. Derrida was particularly interested in the biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, which he interpreted as illustrating the absolute responsibility of the individual to a divine command that transcends human ethical systems. This “secret” responsibility to the divine, Derrida suggested, can never be fully justified or explained within human ethical frameworks. His deconstructive approach challenges traditional theodicies by revealing the contradictions and aporias that underlie any attempt to reconcile divine goodness with human suffering. Rather than seeking to resolve these contradictions, Derrida’s work emphasizes the necessity of living with the tension between faith and reason, justice and mercy, in a way that resists final resolution.

The critique of onto-theology and its relationship to theodicy represents another significant dimension of



continental approaches to the problem of evil. Onto-theology, a term coined by Martin Heidegger in his essay “Identity and Difference” (1957), refers to the Western philosophical tradition’s tendency to think of being in terms of a highest being—typically God as the ground or cause of all that exists. Heidegger argued that this onto-theological approach reduces the mystery of being to a being among beings, thereby obscuring the question of being itself. Continental thinkers like Jean-Luc Marion and John D. Caputo have extended this critique to traditional theodicies, suggesting that they participate in onto-theological thinking by attempting to explain God’s relationship to evil in terms of causal relationships and instrumental purposes. Marion, in works like *God Without Being* (1982), argues that traditional theodicies reduce God to a being who acts in the world according to rational purposes, thereby failing to appreciate the radically transcendent character of divine love. Caputo, in *The Weakness of God* (2006), develops a “theology of the event” that emphasizes God’s kenotic (self-emptying) love rather than divine power, suggesting that God’s relationship to the world is one of call and promise rather than causal determination.

The emphasis on particularity and concrete suffering over abstract explanations represents a unifying theme in postmodern and continental approaches to the problem of evil. Where traditional theodicies often operate at a high level of abstraction, seeking general explanations for the phenomenon of evil as a whole, postmodern thinkers emphasize the irreducible particularity of individual experiences of suffering. This emphasis reflects a broader philosophical shift from the universal to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete, that characterizes much postmodern thought. For these thinkers, the problem of evil cannot be solved through theoretical speculation but must be addressed through concrete acts of solidarity with those who suffer. The Holocaust, in particular, has served as a focal point for this emphasis on concrete suffering, as many continental thinkers argue that the sheer horror and particularity of this event defy incorporation into any explanatory framework. As we have seen in our discussion of anti-theodicy, this emphasis on concrete suffering and solidarity represents a significant challenge to traditional approaches that seek intellectual resolution to the problem of evil.

Feminist approaches to theodicy have emerged as a powerful critique of traditional theodic frameworks, challenging their patriarchal assumptions, abstract methods, and failure to address the specific experiences of women’s suffering. Feminist philosophers and theologians have argued that traditional theodicies, developed primarily by male thinkers operating within patriarchal contexts, often reflect and reinforce male perspectives on suffering that marginalize or ignore the distinctive experiences of women. This critical perspective has opened up new avenues for thinking about the problem of evil, emphasizing concrete experiences of suffering, particularly of women, and developing alternative frameworks for understanding evil and its relationship to divine power and human responsibility.

The critique of traditional theodicy as patriarchal and abstract stands at the foundation of feminist approaches to the problem of evil. Feminist thinkers like Daphne Hampson have argued that the very project of theodicy—seeking to justify God’s ways to humans—reflects a patriarchal mindset that values abstract rationality over concrete experience and control over vulnerability. In her book *Theology and Feminism* (1990), Hampson suggests that traditional theodicies often serve to legitimize suffering by presenting it as necessary for some greater good, thereby discouraging resistance to unjust social arrangements that disproportionately affect women. This critique aligns with broader feminist criticisms of patriarchal religion, which argue that

traditional religious concepts have been used to justify women's subordination and suffering. From this perspective, the problem of evil cannot be adequately addressed within traditional theodic frameworks that reflect and reinforce patriarchal values and assumptions.

The emphasis on concrete experiences of suffering, especially of women, represents another central dimension of feminist approaches to theodicy. Where traditional theodicies often operate at a high level of abstraction, discussing evil in general terms without attention to particular forms of suffering, feminist thinkers emphasize the importance of attending to the specific ways in which women experience evil and suffering. Sarah Pinnock, in *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Responses to the Problem of Suffering* (2002), argues that women's experiences of suffering—including domestic violence, sexual assault, reproductive oppression, and economic exploitation—have been largely ignored in traditional theodic discussions. These specific forms of suffering, Pinnock suggests, raise unique questions that cannot be adequately addressed by abstract philosophical frameworks. By centering women's experiences of suffering, feminist approaches to theodicy seek to develop more nuanced and responsive ways of thinking about the problem of evil that take seriously the concrete realities of women's lives.

The work of Daphne Hampson, Sarah Pinnock, and Grace Jantzen exemplifies the diversity of feminist approaches to theodicy. Hampson, as mentioned earlier, has been a vocal critic of traditional theodic frameworks, arguing that they reflect patriarchal assumptions that are incompatible with feminist values. In *After Christianity* (1996), she develops a post-Christian feminist perspective that rejects traditional theism altogether, arguing that the concept of an omnipotent God is irreconcilable with the reality of women's suffering. Pinnock, by contrast, remains within the Christian tradition while developing a critical feminist perspective on traditional theodicies. In *Asking God Why: A Study of Suffering* (1999), she argues for a “protest theism” that combines faith in God with honest protest against suffering, particularly the suffering of women. Grace Jantzen, in *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998), takes yet another approach, developing a “natality” philosophy that emphasizes birth, creation, and flourishing rather than suffering and death as the central categories for religious reflection. Jantzen argues that traditional preoccupation with suffering and death reflects a masculine obsession with control and violence, and she proposes an alternative framework centered on natality and relationality that offers new possibilities for thinking about divine power and human flourishing.

The relationship between theodicy and issues of power and oppression represents another significant focus of feminist approaches. Feminist thinkers have argued that traditional theodicies often serve ideological functions that maintain existing power structures by legitimizing suffering and discouraging resistance to oppression. This critique draws on feminist insights about the relationship between knowledge and power, suggesting that abstract philosophical discussions of evil often mask concrete political realities of oppression. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in *\*But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1984), argues that biblical texts and theological traditions have been used to justify women's subordination, and she calls for a “kyriarchal” critique of power that exposes these oppressive structures.

## 1.12 Conclusion

...Oppression” (1984), argues that biblical texts and theological traditions have been used to justify women's subordination, and she calls for a “kyriarchal” critique of power that exposes these oppressive structures.

From this perspective, the problem of evil cannot be separated from the concrete realities of social, political, and economic oppression that affect women disproportionately. Feminist approaches to theodicy thus often emphasize the need for social transformation alongside philosophical reflection, suggesting that addressing evil requires changing the structures that cause suffering rather than merely explaining why God permits it.

The development of alternative frameworks for understanding evil and suffering represents the constructive dimension of feminist approaches to theodicy. Rather than simply critiquing traditional frameworks, feminist thinkers have proposed new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between divine power and human suffering. One influential approach is the concept of “God the Mother” or feminine divine imagery that emphasizes nurturing, relationality, and interdependence rather than the masculine imagery of control and domination often associated with traditional theism. Another approach, developed by process feminist theologians like Marjorie Suchocki, emphasizes the relational and persuasive nature of divine power rather than coercive control. Suchocki, in *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (1994), argues that evil arises from broken relationships and that God works to heal these relationships through persuasive love rather than unilateral control. These alternative frameworks offer new possibilities for thinking about the problem of evil that reject the patriarchal assumptions of traditional theodicies while affirming the reality of divine love and presence in the midst of suffering.

Scientific perspectives on evil and suffering have added new dimensions to contemporary philosophical discussions of the problem of evil, challenging traditional assumptions and providing new frameworks for understanding the origins and nature of suffering. The dialogue between science and religion on the problem of suffering has been particularly fruitful in recent decades, as scientific discoveries in fields like evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and psychology have offered new insights into the nature of suffering and its role in human life. These scientific perspectives have not only challenged traditional religious explanations of suffering but have also provided new resources for rethinking the relationship between divine purpose and natural processes.

Evolutionary explanations for the capacity for moral evil represent one significant scientific contribution to discussions of the problem of evil. Evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists have suggested that human moral capacities, including the capacity for both altruism and violence, evolved through natural selection as adaptations to specific environmental challenges. The capacity for moral evil, from this perspective, is not a mysterious corruption of an originally perfect nature but an inevitable byproduct of evolutionary processes that favored traits like tribal loyalty, competition for resources, and dominance hierarchies. Frans de Waal, in works like *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (2006), has documented the evolutionary roots of human morality by studying primate behavior, suggesting that our moral capacities—including both their positive and negative aspects—have deep evolutionary origins. This evolutionary perspective challenges traditional religious narratives of the Fall and original sin while offering a naturalistic explanation for the human capacity for both good and evil.

The problem of natural evil in light of evolutionary biology presents another significant scientific challenge to traditional theodicies. Charles Darwin himself recognized that the evolutionary process, with its inherent struggle, suffering, and extinction, posed profound difficulties for traditional conceptions of a benevolent

creator. In a letter to Asa Gray in 1860, Darwin wrote: “I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* [a family of parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.” The evolutionary history of life on Earth reveals millions of years of animal suffering before human emergence, suffering that cannot plausibly be explained as punishment for sin or as a means for human soul-making. Christian evolutionary biologists like Kenneth Miller and Francis Collins have attempted to reconcile evolutionary science with religious faith by suggesting that God works through natural processes rather than direct intervention, but the problem of animal suffering remains a significant challenge for these approaches.

Neuroscience and the question of free will and moral responsibility have added yet another dimension to contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. Neuroscientific research on decision-making, consciousness, and the neural correlates of moral judgment have challenged traditional conceptions of free will as an uncaused cause of human action. Experiments by Benjamin Libet in the 1980s, which suggested that brain activity associated with voluntary movement begins before conscious awareness of the decision to move, have been interpreted by some philosophers as evidence that free will is an illusion. More recent neuroscience research has revealed the complex neural mechanisms underlying moral judgment, suggesting that our moral decisions are influenced by unconscious processes, emotional responses, and neural structures that evolved for purposes other than moral reasoning. These scientific findings challenge traditional free will theodicies by suggesting that human choices may be more determined by biological and environmental factors than by genuinely free will. However, some philosophers and theologians have argued that these scientific findings do not eliminate moral responsibility but rather require a more nuanced understanding of human freedom as embedded in biological and social contexts.

Psychology of trauma, resilience, and post-traumatic growth has provided valuable insights into how humans actually respond to suffering, offering both challenges and resources for theodicy. Psychological research on trauma has documented the devastating effects of extreme suffering on human well-being, challenging soul-making theodicies that suggest suffering inevitably leads to growth. Studies of Holocaust survivors, victims of torture, and survivors of natural disasters have revealed the profound and often lasting psychological damage caused by extreme suffering, including depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. At the same time, research on resilience and post-traumatic growth has demonstrated that many individuals who experience significant trauma report positive changes in their lives, including deeper relationships, greater personal strength, enhanced appreciation for life, and a more developed sense of spirituality. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, in their research on post-traumatic growth, have identified five domains of potential growth following trauma: greater appreciation of life, improved relationships with others, new possibilities for one’s life, increased personal strength, and spiritual development. These psychological findings offer both challenges to simplistic theodicies that assume all suffering leads to growth and resources for developing more nuanced understanding of how suffering can sometimes contribute to human development.

The dialogue between science and religion on the problem of suffering has been particularly fruitful in recent decades, as both scientists and religious thinkers have sought to develop more integrated approaches

to understanding evil. The John Templeton Foundation has funded numerous research projects and publications exploring the relationship between science and religion, including several focused specifically on the problem of evil. These interdisciplinary conversations have led to more sophisticated understandings of the relationship between divine action and natural processes, challenging both scientific reductionism and religious supernaturalism. For example, the concept of “non-interventionist objective divine action,” developed by philosophers like Thomas Tracy and Robert Russell, suggests that God acts in the world not by violating natural laws but by determining the indeterminacies allowed by quantum physics and chaos theory. This approach attempts to reconcile scientific accounts of natural processes with religious belief in divine providence, offering new possibilities for thinking about God’s relationship to suffering in a naturalistic framework.

Interdisciplinary approaches to the problem of evil have extended beyond science to include insights from literature, art, sociology, political philosophy, and contemplative studies, creating a rich tapestry of perspectives on suffering and its meaning. These interdisciplinary approaches have expanded the scope of theodicy discussions beyond narrowly philosophical or theological concerns, addressing the cultural, social, and existential dimensions of suffering in more comprehensive ways. The integration of literary and narrative approaches to suffering, for example, has emphasized the importance of stories and metaphors in human understanding of evil, suggesting that narrative may be more adequate to the complexity of suffering than abstract philosophical analysis.

The role of art, music, and literature in responding to evil represents a significant interdisciplinary dimension of contemporary theodicy discussions. Throughout history, artists, writers, and composers have grappled with the problem of evil through their creative works, often expressing insights that transcend philosophical analysis. Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels, particularly *The Brothers Karamazov* with Ivan’s rebellion against God in the face of innocent suffering, explore the existential dimensions of the problem of evil with unparalleled depth and psychological realism. Artistic responses to the Holocaust, such as Pablo Picasso’s painting *Guernica* or the poetry of Paul Celan, bear witness to suffering in ways that resist incorporation into explanatory frameworks. Musical compositions like Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* or Dmitri Shostakovich’s symphonies express both the horror of suffering and the possibility of redemption through artistic creation. These artistic works do not provide theoretical explanations for evil but rather create spaces for contemplation, lamentation, and sometimes hope in the face of suffering. They remind us that the problem of evil is not merely an intellectual puzzle but a profound human reality that engages our emotions, imagination, and creativity as well as our reason.

Sociological perspectives on structural evil and injustice have added another important dimension to contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. While traditional theodicies have often focused on individual moral evil or natural suffering, sociological approaches emphasize the structural dimensions of evil—social systems, institutions, and cultural practices that systematically cause suffering and oppression. The concept of structural sin, developed by liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, draws on sociological insights to highlight how economic systems, political structures, and cultural patterns can create conditions that cause widespread suffering. This perspective challenges individualistic approaches to evil that focus solely on personal moral choices, suggesting that addressing evil requires transforming unjust

social structures as well as individual hearts. The sociological concept of “social sin” has been particularly influential in Catholic social teaching, which emphasizes the responsibility of Christians to work for justice and peace as part of their response to evil in the world.

Political philosophy and the problem of systemic evil represent another significant interdisciplinary dimension of contemporary theodicy discussions. Political philosophers like Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), have explored how political systems can produce evil on a massive scale through bureaucratic processes and ideological thinking. Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil”—the idea that great evil can be perpetrated by ordinary people following orders within bureaucratic systems—challenges traditional notions of evil as the product of monstrous individuals or supernatural forces. Similarly, Judith Shklar’s concept of “the liberalism of fear,” developed in *Ordinary Vices* (1984), emphasizes the political priority of avoiding cruelty and protecting the vulnerable from systemic violence. These political perspectives on evil complement traditional theodicies by highlighting the structural and institutional dimensions of suffering that individualistic approaches often overlook.

The emerging field of contemplative studies and approaches to suffering has added yet another interdisciplinary dimension to contemporary theodicy discussions. Contemplative traditions, particularly Buddhist mindfulness practices and Christian contemplative prayer, offer practical methods for responding to suffering that complement theoretical approaches. The integration of contemplative practices with philosophical reflection on evil has been particularly fruitful in recent decades, as represented in the work of thinkers like David Loy, who brings Buddhist insights to bear on Western philosophical discussions of suffering, and Tilden Edwards, who integrates Christian contemplative traditions with contemporary approaches to the problem of evil. These contemplative approaches emphasize the importance of direct experience and awareness in responding to suffering, suggesting that transformation of consciousness may be as important as theoretical understanding in addressing the problem of evil.

As we bring our exploration of theodicy arguments to a close, it becomes clear that the problem of evil represents one of the most persistent and challenging questions in human thought—one that has engaged philosophers, theologians, scientists, artists, and ordinary people throughout history and across cultures. The diversity of approaches we have examined reflects the complexity of the problem itself, which resists simple solutions or comprehensive explanations. Each tradition we have explored offers valuable insights into different dimensions of the problem of evil, while also revealing its own limitations and blind spots. The logical and evidential problems of evil have demonstrated the intellectual challenge of reconciling divine attributes with the reality of suffering, while classical theodicies have attempted to provide systematic explanations within particular metaphysical frameworks. Modern developments like free will, soul-making, and process theodicies have refined and expanded these traditional approaches, while skeptical theism and anti-theodicy have challenged the very project of explaining evil by emphasizing either human cognitive limitations or the moral problematic of seeking explanations for suffering. The diversity of religious responses across world traditions has revealed the cultural and historical specificity of many Western approaches to the problem of evil, while also suggesting common themes and concerns that transcend particular traditions.



When we assess the strengths and weaknesses of these various theodical approaches, several patterns emerge. The logical coherence of different theodical approaches varies considerably, with some—like Plantinga’s free will defense—succeeding primarily at the level of logical consistency while others—like process theodicy—offering more comprehensive metaphysical frameworks that may sacrifice some logical simplicity for greater explanatory power. The explanatory power of different approaches also varies, with some theodicies providing more satisfying accounts of moral evil while struggling with natural evil, and others offering more adequate responses to certain kinds of suffering while failing to address others. The existential and pastoral adequacy of different approaches represents another important dimension of assessment, as some theodicies may be logically coherent but emotionally unsatisfying or pastorally problematic in their implications for those who suffer. The relationship between theodicy and religious belief also varies considerably, with some approaches supporting traditional religious beliefs while others challenging or revising those beliefs in significant ways. Finally, the moral implications of different theodical positions represent a crucial dimension of assessment, as some approaches may inadvertently justify suffering or discourage resistance to oppression while others inspire compassionate action and social transformation.

Despite these variations and limitations, theodicy remains remarkably relevant in contemporary thought, as the problem of evil continues to challenge religious belief, philosophical reflection, and human understanding in profound ways. The persistence of evil in contemporary experience—from natural disasters and diseases to war, terrorism, and systemic injustice—ensures that the question of how to reconcile divine goodness with human suffering remains as urgent as ever. Global events like the Holocaust, the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia, the September 11 attacks, and the COVID-19 pandemic have all prompted renewed reflection on the problem of evil, challenging traditional explanations and inspiring new approaches. The role of theodicy in interreligious dialogue and understanding has become increasingly important in our globalized world, as different religious traditions encounter one another and seek common ground in addressing shared concerns about suffering and its meaning. The relationship between theodicy and questions of meaning and value remains central to human existence, as individuals and communities continue to seek purpose and significance in the face of suffering. The personal and existential dimensions of grappling with suffering ensure that the problem of evil is not merely an abstract philosophical question but a profound human reality that touches every life.

Looking toward future directions in theodicy research, several promising avenues emerge. Emerging philosophical approaches to the problem of evil continue to develop, drawing on insights from analytic philosophy, continental thought, feminist theory, and postcolonial perspectives. The potential of interdisciplinary research on suffering and meaning represents another promising direction, as philosophers, theologians, scientists, artists, and practitioners from various fields collaborate to develop more comprehensive understandings of evil and its relationship to human flourishing. The relationship between technology, artificial intelligence, and the problem of evil raises new questions that will require thoughtful reflection, particularly as technological advances create new possibilities for both alleviating and causing suffering. The impact of globalization on understanding diverse approaches to suffering will continue to shape theodicy discussions, as different cultural and religious traditions encounter one another and exchange insights about the nature and meaning of evil. Finally, the development of new religious and philosophical syntheses will likely con-

tinue as thinkers integrate insights from multiple traditions and disciplines to address the enduring challenge of evil.

As we conclude our exploration of theodicy arguments, several final reflections on the problem of evil emerge. The enduring mystery of suffering and its challenge to human understanding reminds us of the limits of human knowledge and the humility with which we must approach questions of ultimate meaning. The relationship between intellectual inquiry and existential commitment suggests that the problem of evil requires both rigorous philosophical reflection and personal engagement, as theoretical understanding must be complemented by practical response. The value of multiple approaches rather than a single solution becomes apparent as we recognize the complexity of evil and the diversity of human experiences of suffering. The importance of humility in the face of profound suffering reminds us that the problem of evil is not merely an intellectual puzzle to