# Is This the Best of All Possible Worlds?

A **theodicy** (or “defense of God”) is an attempted “solution” to the Problem of Evil—it is an explanation of how an all-good, all-powerful God can be reconciled with the existence of evil. Theodicies are not themselves arguments *for* the existence of God; instead, they attempt to show that the Problem of Evil doesn’t succeed in showing that theism is false.

## Two Ways that the World Doesn’t Seem So Great: Moral and Natural Evil

Most theodicies begin by distinguishing between **moral evil** and **natural evil:**

1. Moral evil is due to human choice. Suffering caused by actions such as murder, theft, rape, bullying, or deceit are instances of moral evil, as are things such as hate, fear, or greed. Evils that are caused by negligence (e.g., a child dying of starvation in a case where adequate food was available) also count as instances of moral evil.
2. Natural evil is caused by factors other than human choice. Examples include a child who suffers and dies from childhood leukemia, or a wolf cub whose starves to death after its mother dies.

In general, most theodicies attempt to account for moral evil by appeal to free will,while the strategies for dealing with natural evil are a bit more varied. Many theodicies start from the idea that, in a truly good world, humans would possess **libertarian free will,** which would allow them to behave “independently” of the laws of nature that govern the rest of the world. By contrast, many (though not all) of their atheist and agnostic critics deny that this sort of free will is even possible. At best, they suggest that humans sometimes have **compatibilist free will,** which means that there are no *external* forces (such as threats, drugs, physical coercion) forcing them to do one thing rather than another.

## Does Human Free Will Account for Moral Evil? Natural Evil?

**Richard Swinburne (1934-)** is a famous British philosopher known for his defense of theism generally, and Christianity more specifically. He holds that that theists *must* provide a satisfactory theodicy in response to the Problem of Evil, since this problem (if unsolved) would show that their faith is irrational. His own theodicy is based on the ideas that (a) a world with meaningful choices is better than a world without such choices, (b) meaningful choices require the possibility of evil, and so (c) an all-good God would have good reason to allow evil.

**Swinburne on Moral Evil.** Swinburne begins his argument by considering the case of moral evil.

1. God would have good reasons for creating a world where humans could practice “free and responsible choice,” and thus have a chance to develop their characters (by overcoming temptation, displaying bravery, enduring hardship).
2. Humans’ having “free and responsible choice” logically requires that their actions be capable of *significantly* changing their own lives, the lives of others, and the lives of those around them. After all, a world where only trivial choices are allowed (“Would you like the green M&M or the red one?”) would hardly develop humanity’s character.
3. So, humans must be given the capacity to genuinely harm other humans and sentient animals.
4. Humans must also have some innate desire to do evil. Otherwise, there never be any “reason” to choose evil and thus, no real choice.
5. Conclusion 1: If an all-good, all-powerful God were to exist, humans would have both the capacity and desire to do evil.

**But That’s Not Fair…**One traditional objection to Swinburne’s style of argument has focused on the seeming disconnect between the people who benefitfrom this arrangement (the humans who get to repeatedly “practice” overcoming various temptations to do evil) and the people who *suffer* (the innocent children and animals who get killed by the people who don’t succeed at this). With this in mind, one might ask: How could an all-good God justify the existence of evil to those who suffered it? Swinburne offers a few ideas:

1. Being caused physical suffering by someone else’s action isn’t necessarily evil. After all, the baby/puppy is being used (by God) as instrument for the wrongdoer’s moral development. Being of service this way might actually be a good thing, in somewhat the same way that people benefit from giving to charity or from volunteering. (This apparently is true even of animals.)
2. If God really did create the world, God has \*some\* right to sacrifice the well-being of some creatures for that of others (though this right isn’t unlimited). This is analogous to a parent asking some of her children to make sacrifices on behalf of their siblings.
3. If God created the world, God couldn’t get “consent” from those who suffered ahead of time. So, God simply had to choose *for* humans whether a world with suffering would be better than one without. Swinburne thinks that most people would rather lead a brief, painful life (i.e., you bear a child, and then die) that benefitted someone, than a brief, pleasurable life (taking heroin, enjoying it, dying) that accomplished nothing.
4. Many theists believe a perfect afterlife could “make up” for suffering experienced in this life. However, Swinburne emphasizes that, in order to appeal to heaven, theists will need to provide *independent* evidence for it, which will presumably mean having evidence of God’s existence more generally. (You can’t just say confidently “well, the infant is in heaven now” in response to a person who asks why God would allow infants to die painfully in the first place.)
5. Conclusion 2: So, an all-good God is justified in creating a world where the truly innocent (babies, puppies, etc.) suffer.

**Swinburne on Natural Evil.** The second part of Swinburne’s theodicy takes on the problem of natural evil:

1. The opportunity to make free and responsible choices (see above) requires at least two things:
   1. The existence of invariant (i.e., unchanging) laws of nature, the discovery of which allows humans to change the world around them in predictable ways, even if this harms others.
   2. A nontrivial amount of suffering and evil, which increases the number and variety of significant choices that humans are faced with. This suffering motivates everything from science to medicine to engineering to computers to construction. If the *only* sort of evil were moral evil, humans wouldn’t have any reason to engage in these (spiritually valuable) sorts of character-building activities.
2. So, the ability to make free and responsible choices requires BOTH that there are invariant laws of nature AND that these laws cause suffering and evil.
3. CONCLUSION: So, if an-all good, all-powerful God exists, there will be a nontrivial amount of natural evil, as well as moral evil.

**This second argument forms the heart of Swinburne’s theodicy, since it is plausible that the most common evils experienced by humans and animals (disease, injury, starvation, and so on) are natural, rather than moral.**

## Stump’s Criticism of Swinburne

**Eleonore Stump**  is another prominent theist philosopher. She argues that Swinburne succeeds in disarming Mackie’s logical problem of evil, and shows that it is at least *possible* that God exists. However, she contends that he fails to answer the evidential problem of evil, and has failed to show that it is *likely* that God would allow the amount and type of evil that we see in the world around us. She presents an alternate theodicy.

**Stump’s objection to 11a:** Significant choice (and in particular, the ability to know the laws of nature) does not require that these laws be absolutely invariant. There are lots of ways for people to learn about the existence of the laws besides directly experiencing the terrible effects of them: God could tell them, they could be revealed in dreams, we could see the laws’ effects in cases that don’t involve suffering. Take-away point: Swinburne hasn’t shown why God couldn’t miraculously intervene to stop horrendous evils from happening. For example, it seems unlikely that the Black Plague (which killed millions of people) was the best/most effective way of getting humans to learn about the harmful effects of bacteria.

**Stump’s objection to 11b:** Not every instance of suffering increases choice. There are at least some human deaths which (a) teach us nothing (i.e. we already know the cause) and (b) are not the result of either their own negligence or someone else. For example, accidental lead poisoning. On Swinburne’s account, natural evil should *only* occur in cases where this somehow enhances our ability to choose, either by revealing something about the laws of nature, or by allowing us opportunities to develop our character.

**Stump’s general objection:** According to Swinburne, experiencing natural evil gives us the motivation and means to learn about the laws of nature, the knowledge of which allows us to prevent future natural evil. But there is nothing inherently valuable or “good” about learning how to prevent natural evil—this knowledge only matters because we happen to live in a world with natural evil. Her analogy: If you scattered spikes on a person’s front lawn every night, they would slowly develop the skill of “not stepping on spikes.” However, this doesn’t mean you’ve “helped” them. After all, the only reason a person would want to have this skill is if they have spikes in their front yard! For similar reasons, Stump argues that Swinburne has failed to show why an all-good God would allow natural evil in the first place.

**Stump’s alternative theodicy (the short version):** The existence of natural and moral evil motivates humans to will that God intervene in the world—it helps humans “want” the right sort of thing. That is, suffering serves as the motivating force for spiritual growth. A biblical example: Abel dies "a good death" (and God allows it) because he already has a correct will. His death at Cain’s hands is justified because it allows Cain to grow spiritually—it helps motivate Cain to want the right sort of things. Another of way of thinking about Stump’s theodicy: the existence of suffering plays an essential role in enabling humans to love (both one another and God).

## REview Questions

Suppose that you were given the power to create a world. Which of the following would you include in your world? Defend your choices in detail using the ideas/arguments we’ve covered in class, and explain how this relates to the problem of evil and the project of theodicy. Make sure to consider potential *objections* to your choices.

1. Sentient beings capable of experiencing pain and pleasure, such as most humans and animals.
2. Intelligent beings capable of reflective choice, such as most adult humans.
3. Intelligent beings with innate desires to do things that harm others—e.g., beings that are prone to anger, lust, etc.
4. Invariant laws of nature, which you would never under any circumstance break (i.e., would your world be one with no “miracles”?).
5. Natural disasters such as the Black plague, earthquakes, or tsunamis, which will cause massive amounts of suffering to innocent inhabitants of the world.

## References and Bibliography

Some prominent theodicies include the following:

* Hick, J. 2010. *Evil and the God of Love*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
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