

# Evaluating the Augustinian Theodicy

## Strengths

1. Augustine's argument that evil is a 'deprivation of good' rather than a positive substance created by God has been supported by some modern thinkers. **Brian Davies** describes evil as 'a gap between what there is and what there ought to be'.
2. Augustine's argument that evil has resulted from the abuse of human free will has also been supported by modern thinkers. It seems clear that much of the evil and suffering in the world is caused by humans choosing to act in the wrong ways.
3. The biblical basis of Augustine's theodicy would also be considered a strength by many - primarily fundamentalist / literalist - Christians.

## Weaknesses

### 1. Logical errors

#### *A perfect world gone wrong?*

Schleiermacher has argued that there is a logical contradiction in the argument that a perfectly created world has gone wrong. If the world was perfect when it was created - as Augustine argued - this would mean that evil created itself out of nothing. This is logically impossible. According to Schleiermacher:

- a) either the world was not perfect to begin with; or,
- b) God created a perfect world and then enabled it to go wrong.

#### *Evil originated from human free will?*

It is difficult to see how, in a perfect world where there was no knowledge of good and evil, there could possibly be freedom to either obey or disobey God. Both good and evil were unknown: how therefore could Adam and Eve choose to do either the right or the wrong thing? The fact that God's creatures chose to disobey Him would seem to suggest that there was already knowledge of evil. This could only have come from God. In both cases here, Schleiermacher is pointing out internal contradictions in Augustine's theodicy. Both result in him arguing that evil originated with God.

#### *The problem of Hell*

Schleiermacher's observations are given support by looking at the concept of Hell in Augustine's theodicy. Augustine argued that those who do not accept the salvation made available by the mercy of God through the saviour Jesus Christ would be punished in Hell, a place of separation from God which involves eternal suffering. The existence of Hell poses a logical problem for Augustine's theodicy. Hell is portrayed by Augustine as part of God's design of the universe - this means He must already have anticipated that the world would go wrong *and* have accepted that this would happen. This raises various problems:

- a) If God knew His world was going to go wrong, can we still regard His creation as perfect?
- b) Instead of accepting that the world would go wrong - and that it would therefore require Hell as a place of punishment - why didn't God create a better world which wouldn't have gone wrong? After all, God is supposed to be omnipotent.

## 2. Moral errors

### 1. *Would an omnibenevolent God punish people for Adam and Eve's sin?*

Augustine's theodicy contains the key idea of collective responsibility: all people in the world subsequent to Adam and Eve are as guilty for the original sin they committed and have inherited it as part of their nature. God is a just God and so continues to punish people for this disobedience. Many argue that this challenges the idea that God is omnibenevolent. Would a loving God make people suffer today for misdemeanors of past generations? Even the Bible rejects this idea:

*"In those days they shall no longer say: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his own sin; each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge."*

Jeremiah 31: 29-30

### 2. *Would an omnibenevolent God allow sinners to suffer eternally in Hell?*

The same point applies to Augustine's idea that those who do not accept Christ will suffer eternally in Hell. Would a loving God allow even those who have rejected Him to suffer in Hell forever? Augustine would no doubt appeal to God's justice but some would argue that an over-emphasis on justice leads to a cold God, lacking in love and compassion.

## 3. Scientific errors

### 1. *Augustine's theodicy is challenged by evolutionary theory*

According to Augustine, when God made the world it was perfect. Augustine assumes that the world was created in 6 days, as it is stated in Genesis. Augustine also argues that the world was irreparably damaged by humans by acting selfishly and thereby abusing their free will. All of these ideas are contradicted by evolutionary theory, according to which:

a) rather than being originally perfect, the world has developed or evolved from an earlier stage of chaos; and,

b) innate and selfish desires (e.g. the desire for survival) are essential and positive within an evolutionary framework but are negative and destructive in the story of the Fall.

### 2. *Augustine's theodicy is challenged by biology*

Augustine assumed that each human being was 'seminally present in Adam' and that humanity since Adam has inherited his sin. Biology rejects the idea that a disposition to sin can be inherited in this way. From this viewpoint, humanity cannot in fact be guilty for Adam's sin. This means that God is not just in allowing us to suffer for someone else's sin.