

Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies.....

Dialogue *Australasia*

Issue Twenty Eight | November 2012



Fear and Trembling: **Teaching the Problem of Evil**

No person is an abstraction
Elie Wiesel, Holocaust Survivor

It's 9.05 am on a Tuesday morning and Year 12 are hungry for the Problem of Evil. Mercifully, most of them don't know what real evil is, and understand it as a 'thing out there,' an event that they know happens but perhaps not to them. Let's hope that this appealing generalisation is as true as it can be, for as many as it can be.

At the age of seventeen one should, very largely, be inured from evil. So all is well... until, that is, one comes to the very real problem of teaching 'The Problem.' Because if there is no *real* apprehension of evil, then there is no compelling need to reconcile it with a God of love – or not – and understand, intellectually and with good reason, why one cannot. If there is no real apprehension of the scale of what is being talked about, evil remains a little abstracted, a little academic, a little removed. And hence, any involvement with the debate retains that same feeling of being removed or anaemic; a tussle held at arm's length.

The Problem of Evil raises complex and profound questions and by its very nature demands that we confront them head on. *Why doesn't God accomplish his purpose without the immensity of suffering that exists? Is a God who tolerates it even worthy of worship? What sort of 'Purpose' could this suffering justify?*

Such questions deserve to be embraced, explored and understood with all that we are. This is the challenge: to engage the mind *and* the emotions as we face up to the appalling, horrifying power of evil and its consequences for theistic belief. Its existence tests, to the limits, traditional views about God, and leads more people to abandon their faith than for any other reason. This is not a mere intellectual or theoretical objection. People feel it. People live it.

And this has to be imparted to our students.

The Welsh philosopher Dewi Zephaniah Phillips wrote:

Philosophizing about the Problem of Evil has become commonplace and theodicies abound. However, such philosophizing should always be done in fear and trembling! Fear that, in our philosophizing, we'll betray the evils people suffer and have suffered and in that way sin against them; and trembling, because betrayal occurs every time explanations and justifications of evil are offered which are simplistic, incredible or obscene.¹

Phillips' words are true, not just for philosophers or theologians penning theodicies in ivory towers, but for teachers of Philosophy and Religious Studies on that Tuesday morning with Year 12. His words are a summons to empathise with those who suffer and have suffered on what Hegel calls '*the slaughter bench of history*' and, by rejecting abstraction and intellectualisation, make some inner movement towards empathy and compassion. While Phillips insists on the need to be philosophically coherent and academically rigorous, he's also



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saying that any theodicy – or lesson for that matter – needs to be acutely sensitive to the fact that it's essentially dealing with real people, real suffering and real pain.

So, how best can we present this most profound and perplexing of problems – the problem of reconciling an omnipotent, omniscient God with the fact that evil exists (or in other words a theodicy), to young people?

The new Ethics Online '*Problem of Evil*' films are a sincere attempt to respond to this challenge, documenting as they do the main theodicies and the problems they present, in a careful but dramatic way. And, by juxtaposing startling cinematography with extracts from some of the world's greatest literature concerning "evil," the student is immediately awakened to the scale of the suffering we are talking about.

Why doesn't God accomplish his purpose without the immensity of suffering that exists? Is a God who tolerates it even worthy of worship? What sort of 'Purpose' could this suffering justify?

The Lisbon Earthquake 1755

One-hundred thousand unfortunates devoured by the earth
Who, bleeding, lacerated, and still alive,
Buried under their roofs without aid in their anguish,
End their sad days!
In answer to the half-formed cries of their dying voices,
At the frightful sight of their smoking ashes,
Will you say: "This is result of eternal laws
Directing the acts of a free and good God!"
Will you say, in seeing this mass of victims:
"God is revenged; their death is the price for their crimes?"
What crime, what error did these children,
Crushed and bloody on their mothers' breasts, commit?
Did Lisbon, which is no more, have more vices
Than London and Paris immersed in their pleasures?
Lisbon is destroyed, and they dance in Paris!

Voltaire²

"Night"

I shall never forget Auschwitz, a death camp that forever murdered
my God and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget
these things I saw, never shall I forget. Blessed be God's name?
Blessed because in His Great Might He created Auschwitz and
so many other factories of death? Blessed because He caused
millions of human beings to die in His mass graves or burn in
His crematoriums? How could I bless Him as an Almighty Loving
Master of the Universe? How could I bless Him as our parents,
brothers, sisters and children were tortured and slaughtered day
and night? Every fibre in me rebels!

Ellie Wiesel³

While his parents and siblings were murdered at Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel
survived to tell his story and dedicate his entire life to working for
peace, and, in 1986, was awarded the Nobel Prize. In his Acceptance
Speech he said:

If someone had told us in 1945 that, in our lifetime, religious wars
would rage on virtually every continent, that thousands of children
would once again be dying of starvation, or that racism and
fanaticism would flourish once again, we would not have believed
it. After the war we reassured ourselves it would be enough to read
the world a poem, written by a child in Auschwitz, to ensure that
no one anywhere would ever again have to endure hunger or fear.
A naive undertaking? There may be times when we are powerless
to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail
to protest. The Talmud tells us that by saving a single human being,
man can save the world.⁴

Wiesel's incredulity that evil still exists, even after Auschwitz, is an
important point. One can imagine, standing with him in the yard
recently liberated by the Allies, thinking that evil was now a thing of the
past. It was inconceivable that it could be otherwise. And, strangely, this



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Possible Christian Solutions (Theodicies) to the Problem of Evil

Sin is a Punishment

This solution was put forward by Augustine and is called the Augustinian theodicy.

Augustine says that everything WAS perfect before the Fall of Man as described in the Genesis Creation story.

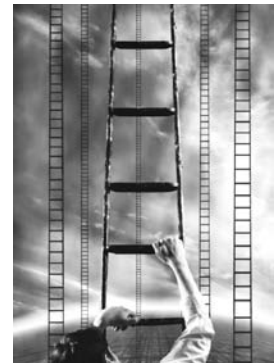
- We have inherited the **original sin** of Adam and Eve who were tempted to do wrong by the devil disguised as a serpent, who himself was a rebellious angel.
- Suffering exists through our own fault and it is now up to each of us to try and 'climb up to God' through doing our best to minimize suffering around us



Suffering is a Test for Soul Making

This solution was put forward by Irenaeus in the 2nd Century and is called the Irenaen theodicy.

- Suffering helps us to grow and mature
- Suffering is necessary for us to be able to become better humans. If we didn't know what evil was we wouldn't be able to choose to be good
- We could not be genuinely good if we were pre-programmed by God to be good
- Therefore God has to allow us to have freewill in order that we can really decide our own fate



is part of the challenge of the topic. For, however much we, as teachers and adults know that we can never afford to be indifferent to evil, and that silence *about* suffering implies consent *to* it, it is not the role of an academic subject to preach good works. Young people will make up their own minds and come to their own conclusions as to why evil in all its forms – hidden and beguiling or brutal and unattractive – should not be tolerated. That is not the principle role of these films, although it may provide a valuable undercurrent.

The principle role is to teach/revise/impart/explore the main thrusts of the various theodicies, so that their taste stays in the mouth of the viewer – at least until the exam and hopefully, long beyond! In the films the theodicies are powerfully visual.

Like great literature, or subliminal stories, the theodicies were born with imagery attached to their navels.

Although nowhere near as popular as they once were, Augustine's ideas – '*Privatio Boni*,' '*The Aesthetic Theme*,' '*The Principle of Plenitude*,' '*Original Sin*' and '*Soul-Deciding*' – raise intriguing metaphysical questions capable of engaging today's most indifferent of classes. Despite Darwin, could it be that the world was once perfect and flawless? After him, in what sense might it still be so? Is evil the mere *absence* of good, as darkness is the absence of light? Why, if everything was perfect, did free-willed beings disobey God?

The questions go on and on, prompted as the film suggests, by many a capable critique, and one of the great strengths of these films is the way in which the students are not just 'left hanging.' Our subject is often criticized as being 'all questions and no answers.' We would reply that the skill comes from offering cogent, logical criticisms, in the Socratic spirit of testing everything and accepting nothing. True, the result may be another set of impossible questions, but there is a value in their asking and a value in their debate.

At first glance, the Irenaean theodicy offers a more palatable option in our post-Darwinian universe. A cynic might say that the idea of '*soul-making*' accords with our individualism and our heightened sense of self. In any case, students often prefer it! And, while making the film, news came through that John Hick, the great British philosopher, had passed away. His astute, yet systematic analysis of the problem of evil in *Evil and the God of Love*, provides a dynamic and compelling reformulation of the Irenaean theodicy, bringing this century's old idea to life and ensuring that it still carries weight today.

And so more questions. Are we to agree with Hick that as humans have evolved from primitive life forms into more psychologically complex creatures, so our moral and spiritual development should be seen in the same evolutionary light? The student who adopts Hick will see the world as a difficult place; a vale of *soul making* rather than a *lost paradise*. If, as per Irenaeus and Shakespeare, '*All the world's a stage*,' then it's a place where our most valuable potentialities are drawn out and developed by the challenges, brutal and distinct, of the play we find ourselves in.

The world isn't designed for the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain, but is rather well adapted to the quite different purpose of soul making. The most loving parents enjoy providing their children pleasures, but at the same time realize there are times when a child must be denied immediate pleasure to gain greater values, such as unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all, the capacity for love.

John Hick⁵

Hick's polished prose provides an attractive 'solution,' as all good theodicies do. Yet of course, questions remain. Does evil always provide an opportunity for the development of mercy, sympathy and love, or does it equally elicit cruelty, hatred and despair? What of the wanton cruelty of nature, or the child whose pain-filled and short life offers little time for 'growth?' And doesn't the world often seem more like a vale of *soul breaking* rather than a vale of *soul-making*?

The final film in the series is a history of the Holocaust as told in images and words. It is not offered lightly and it should be shown with the greatest of caution. But it is, we hope, a genuine addition to the film because here – in one engulfing landslide of suffering – evil is perhaps encapsulated. And, more than any other, it is the plight of suffering humans, albeit through the medium of a film, that will speak to Year 12 on that Tuesday morning. Not to shock or cheapen or view as a privileged outsider, but to bring the problem home. And make it as much their problem that they will engage with and wrestle with and debate, long after the bell has sounded and they have got up and gone on their way.

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Joe Jenkins has taught Religious Studies for 30 years and is the author of popular classroom resources. He is currently a teacher of Philosophy & Ethics at Hereford Sixth Form College and Director of Ethics Online.

Activities

1. Categorise the following into natural (moral) evil and non-natural evil (non-moral) evil:
 - A spontaneous forest fire in which a young deer is burned and takes several days to die
 - An earthquake that kills tens of thousands of men, women and children
 - The stoning to death of a toddler by two children aged 10 and 12
 - The deaths of six million children every year from hunger
 - Auschwitz
 - The medieval practice of boiling alive a cook who poisons their master
 - Allowing every one of your children to die when you could have prevented it
 - Animals that kill and eat other animals to survive
 - A well fed cat who tortures a mouse before killing it
 - A tsunami, possibly caused by global warming
 - Nuclear war
 - Ice on the road that causes a coach to crash, killing all of the students inside
2. If you were God, list the order in which you would prevent the tragedies.
3. Which (if any) of the above would God not be guilty of and why?
 - a) According to the Augustinian Theodicy
 - b) According to the Irenaean Theodicy
 - c) According to you
4. There are several premises and consequences in both the Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies (and their modern reformulations), in addition to the essential assumption that God exists, is omnipotent and that evil is real. They are muddled up. See if you can identify them with an '**A**' or an '**I**'. Are there any of the statements that can be applied to *both* the Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies (identify these with a '**B**')?
 - That humans need to have the capacity for spiritual growth
 - That the world was created 'good'

- That God's goodness couldn't be better expressed in a 'monochrome' or less diverse world
 - That human beings are unaware of the whole picture
 - That completely content human beings would seek something beyond that state
 - Epistemic distance is necessary for free will to exist
 - That it will all be 'alright' in the end!
 - That good humans were still endowed with the possibility of choosing evil
 - That evil is 'just' the absence of good
 - That a perfectly loving God is happy with providing a hell into which imperfect humans might fall
 - It is better to choose to be good than to be forced to be good
- That man is ultimately responsible for the existence of evil
 - That God is ultimately responsible for the existence of evil
 - That a world of good and evil is the world is the best possible world for man's moral development
 - That humans have not evolved – rather they are static or have declined
 - That the Adam and Eve story is factually 'true'
5. Discuss
- "Sometimes I want to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice in the world when he could do something about it, but I'm afraid he might ask me the same question"*
- Anonymous

"Abstracting, decontextualizing and isolating evil is an abiding sin of the ethics brigade, as if evil were some specific gene whose toxicity we don our white coats to examine"

George Walden

To order *The Problem of Evil* and other films and accompanying teaching resources from Ethics Online see: www.ethicsonline.com

Endnotes

- 1 Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965
- 2 <http://geophysics-old.tau.ac.il/personal/shmulik/LisbonEq-letters.htm>
- 3 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, translated from the French by Marion Wiesel, first published in France by Les Editions, 1958
- 4 Elie Wiesel, Acceptance Speech, Nobel Prize Winner, 1986
- 5 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Macmillan and Company Limited, London, 1966

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Film Three, The Irenaean Theodicy:
Soul-Making, Epistemic Distance, Irenaeus, Hick, Plantinga, Phillips

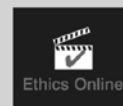
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