

“Why Evil? Two Theodicies: Free Will and/or Soul Building?” *Theodicy*, by John S. Feinberg

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by John S. Feinberg**

[Now] we turn to the next problem, namely, why God allowed evil in the first place. An answer to this question is called a theodicy, which means “the justification of God.”

Several possible answers have been offered, but none has gained universal acceptance. The Bible simply doesn’t answer the question directly. Some scholars present their answers as defenses rather than as theodicies, for theodicies purport to give “the” reason for evil, whereas defenses offer only possible solutions which serve simply to undermine the criticism. They function this way: If the critic says that the existence of God cannot be reconciled with the reality of evil, a defense is offered which could reconcile the two if it were true. Of course, a defense offered might not be the real reason God permitted evil. Its intent is simply to undercut the objection that God and evil can’t co-exist.

In the reading below, John Feinberg presents two theodicies which have been influential in Christian thought. The first, the free will theodicy, is probably more widely held than the second, the soul-building theodicy, especially among conservative Christians.

The theodicy using the free will defense begins by pointing out that God is not the cause of evil in the world; the abuse of human free will is. Then, the question is whether God is not guilty for giving man free will when he knew that man could abuse it to commit evil. The answer is no. Free will is a value of the highest order, which God should have given. However, God is not the one who uses such free will to commit evil; man does, so man is responsible for evil. Moreover, God is still good for giving man something which he could, and in fact did, abuse because a world in which there are significantly free beings (even though they produce evil) is a far better world than one that contains no evil but is populated by automatons. In other words, God cannot both create significantly free beings and make it the case that they always freely do good. On the free will defender's account of free human action, if God makes it the case that man does anything, man cannot do it freely. Genuine free will, then, involves evil, but God is justified in what he did, for free will is a good that far overbalances any evil produced by the use of such a will.

Note that (1) if the free will defender is granted his concepts of God, evil, and free human action (and he must be, given the nature of a problem of evil), he can answer his problem of evil. His system is internally consistent. He has proved that this world is one of those good possible worlds God could have created. (2) The theodicy follows the basic strategy outlined previously. The free will defender holds to divine omnipotence, but argues that it means God can do whatever is logically consistent. The free will defender then argues that God was faced with two choices, neither of which could be actualized simultaneously with the other. God had the choice of either making man free or removing evil. He chose the former, and the good produced by such a choice far overbalances the evil man can and does produce with free will. However, God is not

guilty for evil that remains in the world, for, having given man free will, God cannot remove that evil, and no one is guilty for failing to do what he could not do.

Soul-building theodicy also rests on a modified rationalist theology, but it incorporates a consequentialist ethic. The most noteworthy form of this view in recent years is that of John Hick, who begins by suggesting that God's intent in creating man was not to create a perfect creature, but rather to create a being in need of moral development. God intended for man's time on earth to be spent in building his moral and spiritual character in preparation for his participation in the kingdom of God. Hick asks, What sort of environment would be most conducive to soul-building? Would a world in which no evil ever confronts man be better for developing character, or would man be more likely to develop spiritually if he lived in a world where he would be confronted by problems and evil? Hick argues that the answer is obviously the latter. If God wants to use the world to build souls, he cannot place man in an Edenic paradise where nothing ever goes wrong. Consequently, there is evil in the world, but God is not to be blamed for it, since he intends to use it to build souls and ultimately develop men to a point where they are ready for the kingdom of God. Hick recognizes that if God's purpose with the world is to build souls, many will argue he has severely failed. Evil in the world often turns people away from God rather than encouraging them to grow spiritually. Therefore, it does not seem that the evil in the world accomplishes its purpose, and God must be guilty for creating such a world. Hick answers that though it seems that souls are not being built, God will nonetheless see to it that everyone ultimately makes it to the kingdom of God. No soul will finally go unbuilt; no evil will prove to be unjustified or unjustifiable.

Note first that if we allow-as we must--Hick's concepts of God and evil he can answer the problem of evil that confronts his theology. Some may not accept his theology as a whole, but he has shown a way to render it internally consistent. He has proved that this is one of the good possible worlds God could have created. Second, as in the preceding examples, Hick's theodicy follows the basic strategy outlined. God was faced with two choices, neither of which could be actualized simultaneously with the other. God could remove evil from the world, but then he would not be able to build the souls of his creatures; or he could build the souls of his creatures, but then he would have to include evil in the world, for that is the way to build souls. Building souls and preparing them for the kingdom of God is a value of the first order which makes it worth the evil present in the world. However, God cannot be guilty for not removing evil, for he could not both build souls and remove evil, and no one is guilty for failing to do that which he could not.