

Theodicies: atheist responses activity

Those who believe in a good god provide a number of different responses to the problem of suffering. The process of attempting to answer this problem is known as **theodicy**. It is the attempt to defend a god's goodness despite the existence of widespread suffering. Many atheists, however, believe these theodicies create further questions and don't satisfactorily answer the problem.

Can you match up the possible atheist response to each theodicy?

Theodicy	An atheist response
God gave us free will so we could be morally virtuous and learn from our mistakes.	It is hard to believe this is the best of all possible worlds when it is so easy to imagine a better one.
Satan or some other evil force tempts us into evil.	Is this true? Can we not demonstrate good behaviour without the need for suffering to motivate us? Could there not at least be less suffering?
Suffering allows us the opportunity to be good. Without suffering, there could be no opportunity for kindness, courage, or determination.	If this is a test, then for many people it is a particularly cruel and difficult test.
Suffering is character-building. We can learn from it and it can help us to appreciate the good things in life.	Human free will does not explain the existence of suffering caused by natural disasters and disease.
Suffering exists to test our faith. This whole life is a test or a preparation for another life after we die.	It would be extraordinarily cruel to punish people for the sins of their ancestors when we have no responsibility for their behaviour.
Suffering is punishment for 'original sin' or the sins of our ancestors.	Is this force beyond god's control? If not, why does he allow it to exist? We are back to the original problem.
This is the best of all possible worlds. We can't understand god's mysterious plan.	Do we need to suffer quite so much to appreciate the good things in life? Would being able to imagine how things could be worse be enough? What about those who die young, before they have had a chance to build their character?

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There is an additional question raised by the notion of **free will**. If god is omniscient (knows everything), then he must surely always know what we will do. If such a god exists, then can we really have free will? Could we ever have acted differently?

Theodicies often try to offset suffering with some benefit to human beings. An atheist might then wonder why there existed so much suffering for millions of years before humans evolved. Other animals suffered and died painfully from heat, cold, starvation, thirst, disease, and predation. The suggestion that this was all to benefit human beings strikes many atheists as strange.

Many atheists accept that their responses and questions don't prove there is no god. Many believe theodicies allow religious believers to define their god in a way that makes his or her existence still possible. For atheists, however, none of these explanations is convincing enough to persuade them that a god exists. For them, the simplest and most likely conclusion, given the existence of so much suffering in the world, is that there is no benevolent god.