

- the relation between free will and the problem of evil

“If mankind is free, then humans are responsible for all of the evil in the world.” Discuss.

Some people might argue that ‘evil’ includes babies born with severe disabilities, natural disasters etc. They might argue that these things are out of human control, and God should be held responsible and accountable for them. Others might claim that such disasters are punishments for people not following God’s laws, and therefore also the responsibility of humans. Many Christians talk of original sin, saying we live in a broken world because of Adam’s disobedience. This again suggests that humans are responsible for all evils.

It is important to draw a distinction between ‘natural evils’ such as famine, AIDS etc and those actions that can be seen as contradicting the will of God or going against a particular moral code. I will be using evil in this latter sense when talking about evil.

The quotation seems to be suggesting that if man is free, God is not responsible for the evil done by mankind. This might be a way of answering Augustine’s dilemma that “either God cannot abolish evil or He will not; if He cannot, then He is not all-powerful; if He will not, then He is not all-good.” God may have decided that it was better for humans to be free and yet suffer from the consequences of sin, than to be like robots programmed to be happy – so God would still be seen as all-good. He has the power to stop us from doing wrong, but chooses not to exercise that power because He wants us to be free.

This doesn’t seem to take all responsibility away from God, however. If I allow a dangerous criminal to walk out of a police station and he murders a number of people, the criminal will be held responsible for these killings. However, I am also responsible as I should have known what would happen if I let the man go. Likewise, if God gave us free will, He should have known what would result from it, and cannot be absolved of responsibility.

Irenaeus might agree with this reasoning without being concerned by it. Yes, God should have known what would happen if He made people free – a belief in an omniscient God would say He did know. Irenaeus argued that God knew what would happen if mankind was given free will – but Irenaeus saw the evil

that results from our actions as a positive thing. Evil develops personal qualities, preparing people for eternal life in heaven. Irenaeus would agree that humans are responsible for the evil that they do, but he would argue that God is also responsible, but it is part of His plan.

Augustine would have agreed with the quotation, but would have disagreed that God is also responsible for evil. Augustine believed that God made a perfect world, and would disagree with Irenaeus that God could use evil to make people better. In order to be good, people don't need to suffer, they need to turn their hearts to God and follow His laws.

Augustine says that evil results when people turn away from God to material goods, just as Adam and Eve turned away from God. God is ordered, but the will that turns away from God is disordered. If humans choose to turn away from God, they are responsible for the disorder and suffering that results.

Many Christians still struggle with the problem of evil. They want to hold onto the belief that God is all-powerful and all-loving, but they also recognise that there are examples of immense suffering with no apparent good resulting. It might seem to them that God either doesn't want to help, or can't. They might agree that humans are responsible for their actions, but they recognise that God made us the way we are. Swinburne argues that we couldn't have been created free without the capacity to do evil as well as good.

Others argue that God's plans are beyond human comprehension, and that Christians should trust in God. Like Irenaeus, they would agree that God uses suffering to bring about good, even if they couldn't see how themselves. They might argue that God shares responsibility for evil.

For Whitehead and others, the answer may be more radical. They may agree with the quotation that humans are responsible for the evil they do. In response to the question "but didn't God make us free?" the answer they would give is "No!" By changing beliefs about God, process theology gives a very different answer to the question "Who is responsible when man does wrong?" Not only is God not responsible for evil, He is not in control at all and if mankind continues to do wrong, God Himself suffers and might be defeated.