The Problem of Evil and Pain

6. The Existential Problem of Evil and Redemptive Suffering
Opening Prayer

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of our community in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

From: Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 822
The Three Forms of the Problem of Evil
The challenge we face as Christians (a challenge also faced by Jews and Moslems), is how can we reconcile statements (1) and (2)?

1. An all-powerful, all-good and all-loving, all-knowing God exists
2a. Evil exists
2b. Extreme and horrendous evil exists
2c. Gratuitous and pointless evil exists
Forms of the Problem of Evil

The First Two Forms

- First two forms of the Problem of Evil:
  - (1) An all-powerful, all-good and all-loving, all-knowing God exists
  - (2a) Evil exists
  - (2b) Extreme and horrendous evil exists

- Theists agree (2a) and (2b) are both true, and show it is possible to provide reasonable explanations that reconcile (1) and (2)
The Third Form

Third form of the Problem of Evil:

- (1) An all-powerful, all-good and all-loving, all-knowing God exists.
- (2c) Gratuitous and pointless evil exists.

Theists deny that (2c) is true.
Forms of the Problem of Evil

Gratuitous Evil

- **Gratuitous evil** = evil which an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving and all-good God could have prevented without losing some greater good, or permitting some equally bad or worse evil.

- **Gratuitous evil** is evil that is *not necessary* for the attainment of a greater good, or the prevention of an evil that is equally bad or worse.
Forms of the Problem of Evil

Gratuitous Evil

- The only morally sufficient reason God has to permit evil is:
  - The permitted evil is necessary for the attainment of a greater good.
  - The permitted evil is necessary to prevent an equally bad or worse evil.

- Atheist argue gratuitous evil does exist, therefore God does not exist. Theists answer gratuitous evil does not exist.
Forms of the Problem of Evil

Argument Against Gratuitous Evil

■ A theist’s argument against existence of gratuitous evil:
  ■ 1. God’s perspective and God’s mind allows God to grasp good that lies beyond our ken.
  ■ 2. Those greater goods for which God permits evil and suffering are, to a large extent, beyond our ken.
  ■ 3. Therefore, our inability to see the point of evil and suffering is not unexpected – because the greater goods that justifies them are often beyond our ken.
Although by such abstract arguments, we can make a case that gratuitous evil does not truly exist, there is another dimension to the problem:

- On a deep, visceral level, evil often feels pointless and hence gratuitous.
The Existential Problem of Evil
The Existential Problem of Evil

Existential

- Existential:
  - Of, relating to, or dealing with:
    - Our unique, individual existence.
    - Our unique, individual experiences in living.
The Existential Problem of Evil

The Experience of Pointless Evil

- The *experience* of evil – in particular, evil that seems pointless and gratuitous – is something *primal* and *forceful* in our lives.

- “the sheer bloody agonies of existence” are something of which “all men are aware and have direct experience” (John Bowker).
The Existential Problem of Evil

The Experience of Pointless Evil

- The persistent, deep “gut-wrenching” experience of seemingly pointless evil has often supported a disbelief in God.

- This problem has been given various names:
  - The “religious” problem of evil.
  - The “pastoral” problem of evil.
  - The “existential” problem of evil.
The Existential Problem of Evil

A Pastoral Problem?

The theist may find a religious problem in evil; in the presence of his own suffering or that of someone near to him he may find it difficult to maintain what he takes to be the proper attitude towards God. Faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God’s face, or even to give up belief in God altogether. But this is a problem of a different dimension. Such a problem calls not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.”

- Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, pp. 63-64
The Existential Problem of Evil
A Philosophical Problem?

- But is this problem really just a pastoral problem rather than also a problem for philosophy or theology?
- Can we so easily bifurcate reason from experience?
The Existential Problem of Evil

A Philosophical Problem?

Consider the problem reconciling these two statements:

- God made human beings to enter into nonmanipulative relationships of self-surrendering love with Godself, as well as relationships of self-giving love with others.
- The experience of seemingly pointless evil creates a sense of deep moral protest, indignation, and outrage at the world in some human beings, and drives them from belief in the God who created that world.
The Existential Problem of Evil

A Philosophical Problem?

Examples of seemingly pointless (and hence gratuitous) evil: “the cases of Bambi and Sue:”

- A helpless fawn who is trapped in a forest fire and suffers horribly for days before dying.
- A 5 year old girl who is raped, severely beaten, and strangled to death by her mother’s drunken boyfriend.

If such evils were indeed necessary for a greater good, couldn’t God have created a world where that greater good was more apparent to us?
When I am told that ... I must ... call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms I will not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him.

- John Stuart Mill
Evil and Personal Identity
Evil and Personal Identity

Am I Glad That I Exist?

- One possible answer to the moral protest, indignation, and outrage generated by the experience of seemingly pointless evil is to ponder the relationship between one’s personal identity and the evils of the world.

- Each person must first ask themselves: Am I glad that I exist?
Evil and Personal Identity

Am I Glad That I Exist?

The question is not whether my life is all that it ought to be or all that it conceivably could be. It is not whether the pleasure-pain balance in my life to date has been, on the whole, favorable or unfavorable. It is not whether my life is, in general, a benefit to those who are affected by it. It is not even the question whether my life, all things considered, contains more good than evil.
All of these questions are deeply interesting, and the answers to them, if known, might affect my answer to the question I am asking. But the question is simply, am I glad that I am alive? Or is my existence, on the whole, something which I regret? Is my life something which I affirm, or do I wish, like Job, that I had never been?

Evil and Personal Identity
Am I Glad That They Exist?

- Similarly we can ask concerning those who we love and who love us: *Am I glad of their existence?*
- If the answers are “yes,” then consider the astonishing sweep of improbable events that led to our own existence, and the existence of those we love:
  - The circumstances and events that caused our parents to meet and decide to have children…
  - The circumstances and events that caused our grandparents to meet and decide to have children…
Evil and Personal Identity

World History and Our Identity

>We must conclude: had the world’s history been different than what it was (including all the past evils of world), neither ourselves nor the people we love would have ever existed.
The farther back we go into history, the larger the proportion of evils to which we owe our being; for the causal nexus relevant to our individual genesis widens as we go back in time. We almost certainly would never have existed had there not been just about the same evils as actually occurred in a large part of human history.

Evil and Personal Identity
Existential Honesty and Authenticity

- If we are glad we exist, and/or are glad of the existence of our loved ones, then we are saying, at the level of our personal experience, that all of world history (and its evils) has overall resulted in good that we are glad of.

- If we then claim that we are driven to disbelief by our experience of the evils of this world as being pointless, as having no greater good to justify them, we are guilty of a “disconnect.”
Evil and Personal Identity
Existential Honesty and Authenticity

The only way we can be existentially authentic, existentially honest in claiming that our experience of seemingly pointless evil drives our disbelief in God, is if we also genuinely regret our own existence and the existence of our loved ones.
Redemptive Suffering
Redemptive Suffering
Those Who Regret Their Lives

3 Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ 4 Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.
5 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. 6 That night — let thick darkness seize it! let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. 7 Yes, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it.
Redemptive Suffering
Those Who Regret Their Lives

11 Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? 12 Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? 13 Now I would be lying down and quiet; I would be asleep; then I would be at rest ... 16 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light?

- Job 3:3-7, 11-13, 16 (NRSV)
Redemptive Suffering
Those Who Regret Their Lives

Consider this Existential Problem of Evil:

(1) A morally good God would not allow even one individual to have a life that is not a great good to him or her on the whole.

(2) The experience of evil has been so profound in the lives of some individuals that they genuinely regret their own existence.

What can we say about evil that might help reconcile (1) and (2)?
Redemptive Suffering
A Christian Solution

- Marilyn Adams, in “Redemptive Suffering: Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil,” suggests a solution might be found in reflecting upon:
  - 1. The Suffering of Martyrdom and the Cross.
  - 2. The Incommensurate Good of the Vision of God.
God made human beings to enter into nonmanipulative relationships of self-surrendering love with Godself, as well as relationships of self-giving love with others.

One of God’s noncoercive (albeit very expensive) strategies to bring free human beings into loving relationships with God and with others is the suffering of “martyrdom.”

A martyr is a witness who gives testimony (about a person, an event, or an ideal), and who pays a price for doing so.
Martyrdom can be a vehicle of God’s goodness to the onlooker.

- A martyr can be an inspiring example of:
  - How to live.
  - The person they ought to be.
  - The commitment they ought to have.

- A martyr may allow an onlooker to imagine themselves as persecutor and be moved to repentance.

- A onlooker may receive redemption through a martyr’s testimony.
Martyrdom may be redemptive for the persecutor.

- Persecutor may be forced to face a picture of who he/she is really like – the more innocent the victim, the starker the contrast.

- Jesus on the cross, as the only truly innocent victim, displays the true nature of his persecutors.
Redemptive Suffering

Martyrdom and the Cross

- Martyrdom is a vehicle of God’s goodness to the martyr.
  - The call of martyrdom can be a time of testing and judgment, a struggle over one’s true values and where one’s loyalties lie.
  - Martyrdom builds trust and deepens the relationship between the martyr and that to which the martyr testifies.
  - Suffering of martyrdom can be an opportunity for intimacy and identification with God, who similarly suffered on the cross.
Martyrdom can be considered a paradigm for “redemptive suffering,” but other types of suffering and pain can also have similar redemptive qualities:

- Suffering that moves an onlooker to repentance because of seeing a victim’s plight.
- Suffering that is trial for the victim, but allows their faith in God to emerge stronger.
Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

- Not all suffering has a redemptive dimension.
- Furthermore, “martyrdom” often will not work as a non-coercive strategy.
  - Martyrdom may deepen the cruelty of the tormentor.
  - Martyrdom may push the victim beyond what he or she can bear (e.g. modern “brainwashing”).
- Justifying the evil of suffering requires a larger context: the best good is “face to face” intimacy with God.
Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

- Creation itself is “God-infested”
  - When we are moved by a beautiful mountain scene, or piece of music, or a painting, we are experiencing God “shining through the mask” of God’s creatures.
  - When we share a deep, satisfying intimacy, part of the tasted joy is God in the middle of it.

- Yet: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I known only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV)
Some of the evils experienced in this world can be so profound that no temporal good can ever “compensate” them.

The good of a “face-to-face” intimacy with God however is infinite, simply incommensurate with any nearly temporal good.
Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

From a Christian point of view, God is being a greater than which cannot be conceived, a good incommensurate with both created goods and temporal evils. Likewise, the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely non-transcendental goods or ills a person might experience.
Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

Thus, the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would engulf... even the horrendous evils human experience in this present life here below, and overcome any prima-facie reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living.

Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

- Christian mysticism suggests that experiences of suffering, while still evil, may have a “good” dimension in that they may be a vision into the inner life of God.

- The inner life of God may itself include deep agony as well as ecstatic joy, or it may be something beyond both joy and sorrow.

- Thus suffering, and the beauty of sunset, may both be imperfect glimpses into the inner life of God.
Redemptive Suffering

Summary

Christians will not want to deprecate the awfulness (awefulness) of suffering in this life... Nevertheless, they see in the cross of Christ a revelation of God’s righteous love and a paradigm of his redemptive use of suffering. Christian mysticism invites the believer to hold that a perfectly good God further sanctifies our moments of deepest distress so that retrospectively, from the
Redemptive Suffering
Summary

vantage point of the beatific vision, the one who suffered will not wish them away from his life history – and this, not because he sees them as the source of some other resultant good, but inasmuch as he will recognize them as times of sure identification with and vision into the inner life of the creator.

References
