The Problem of Evil and Pain

4. The Explanation of St. Irenaeus: A World of Soul-Making
The Problem of Evil and Pain

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Opening Prayer

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not in to glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever

From: Common Prayer: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, p. 466
Saint Irenaeus
Saint Irenaeus

- Born to Greek Parents in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) early in first half of the second century.
- As a child, he heard the preaching of Polycarp, the last known living connection with the Apostles (The apostle John).
- Worked as a missionary to southern Gaul and as peacemaker among the churches in Asia Minor.
  - In the second century, there was a close cultural connection between southern Gaul (the Rhone Valley) and Asia Minor.
Saint Irenaeus

- In 177 AD, Bishop Pothinus of Lyon (Lugdunum) was martyred. Irenaeus succeeded him as Bishop.
- His principal work was the 5 volume work *Against Heresies*.
  - Defended the validity of the Jewish Bible, God as creator, and the goodness of creation against the heresy of Gnosticism.
- Fiercely defended the traditions handed down by the apostles.
  - Wrote *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, used for the instruction of candidates for Baptism.
Saint Irenaeus

- Today known as the Father of Catholic Theology and considered the most important theologian of the second century.
- Died about 200 AD.
- Feast Day on the Episcopal Calendar: June 28.
St. Irenaeus’ Explanation For Evil
A Vale of Soul-Making
Irenaeus proposed that God made the world to provide an environment for “soul-making” or “person-making,” and the presence of evil and suffering was necessary for that task.

In modern times, the philosopher John Hick has strongly advocated this explanation, developing it further in a now classic book *Evil and the God of Love*. 
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Premise

- God created human beings as free, but immature and imperfect creatures, with an immense but undeveloped capacity for moral and spiritual development.

- God intends life on this earth to provide an environment for the moral and spiritual growth of human beings from immature beings to true “children of God.”
In the language of St. Irenaeus:

- God made human beings in the “image” of God – with an enormous capacity for spiritual and moral growth.

- God intends life on this earth to help us freely develop this capacity, to grow and mature into the “likeness” of God.
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Irenaeus versus Augustine

- Contrasts markedly with St. Augustine’s later doctrine. Augustine said:
  - Human begins were created in a state of pristine perfection in a world that was paradise.
  - We lost it all and fell into our present states of imperfection because of the misuse of our freedom (Original Sin).

- Irenaeus said:
  - Human beings were created innocent, but imperfect and immature, in a world designed for soul-making.
  - We are now involved in the creative, arduous task of freely maturing and growing towards a perfection that lies in our future.
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Why would God create us as beings who are immature and undeveloped in moral and spiritual goodness?
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Why Must We Grow Into Goodness?

1. It may not be possible to create outright a free, intelligent, morally mature being. Moral maturity may require struggling and grappling with temptation over time, and even participation in evil.

2. Even if it was possible, God may consider beings who have grown into moral goodness a much greater good than beings “ready-made” with moral goodness.
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Why Must We Grow Into Goodness?

“...a human goodness that has come about through the making of free and responsible moral choices, in situations of real difficulty and temptation, is intrinsically more valuable – perhaps even limitlessly more valuable – than a goodness that has been created readymade, without the free participation of the human agent.”

- John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, p.44
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Why Must We Grow Into Goodness?

I suggest... that it is an ethically reasonable judgement, ... that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.

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Why is evil and suffering a part of a world of Soul-Making?
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

- As immature beings, we are caught in a tension between:
  - the natural selfishness that arises from our instinct for survival,
  - the call of morality and religion to transcend our self-centeredness.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

- An environment conducive for our moral and spiritual growth as free, immature creatures requires:
  - Real challenges, opportunities for display of moral virtue, possibilities for expressing faith in God,
  - Interactions with a community of others and the opportunity to develop relationships with others in which we can transcend ourselves,
  - A physical order of impersonal objects that operate according to predictable rules, independent of our wills: quantum fields, atoms, the cells of our body, the motion of the planets and stars.
Such conditions allow *both*:

- The possibility of situations and moments that further our moral and spiritual growth,
- The possibility of failure, ruin, pain and suffering: that is, the possibility of evil.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

Consider the “counterfactual hypothesis:” a world that is a paradise without any possibility of pain and suffering.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

..no one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer’s knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars; fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow leave the fabric of society undamaged.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

No one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. There would be no need to work, since no harm could result from avoiding work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger...
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work by “special providences,” instead of running according to general laws that we must learn to respect on penalty of pain or death... sometimes gravity would operate, sometimes not; sometimes an object would be hard; sometimes soft. There could be no sciences, for there would be no enduring world structure to investigate.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

..life would become like a dream in which, delightfully but aimlessly, we would float and drift at ease.

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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

- In such a hedonistic paradise there could be no true morality, for there could be no wrong actions.

- Courage and fortitude; honesty, generosity, kindness, *agape* love, unselfishness could never arise.
The psychic state of “suffering” (as opposed to physical pain):

- Suffering: “that state of mind in which we wish violently or obsessively that our situation were otherwise.”

- Includes: regret, remorse, anxiety, despair, guilt, shame.

- Often part of physical pain. The anguish of a terminal illness, for example, includes:
  - Physical pain: the illness of the body,
  - Psychic suffering: the anticipation of loss.
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Evil and Suffering in Soul-Making

- The value of suffering:
  - Our own suffering moves us to search for a deeper meaning in our existence, and hence towards God.
  - The sufferings of others calls us out of ourselves and prepares us for mutual service to others.
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The Need for a Hidden God
A Vale of Soul-Making
A Hidden God

According to Christianity, the divine purpose for men is not only that they shall freely act rightly towards one another but that they shall also freely enter into a filial personal relationship with God Himself.

An important part of a world designed for “soul-making” is that there be a certain “distance” between God and human beings, a distance in the dimension of knowledge = an “epistemic distance:”

If knowledge of God and God’s presence was too forcefully impressed on the human consciousness, there could be no genuine freedom to chose God.
Therefore God must partially conceal God’s self, to the point of making the world appear nearly atheistic, with the dual effect:

1. Makes possible a sincere, uncompelled acceptance of God’s invitation to a life of faith.

2. Allows some human beings to chose to live apart from God, in self-centered competition with their fellow human-beings.
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Could Not the Task of Soul-Making Be Accomplished by a World with Less Evil and Suffering?
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Horrendous Evil and Soul-Making

Need the world contain the more extreme and crushing evils which it in fact contains? Are not life’s challenges often so severe to be self-defeating when considered as soul-making influences? Man must (let us suppose) cultivate the soil so as to win his bread by the sweat of his brow; but need there be the gigantic famines, for example in China, from which millions have so miserably perished?

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Horrendous Evil and Soul-Making

- Ultimately, the excessive and random character of some evil must remain mysterious to us.
- Yet even such horrendous evil can play a role in soul-making:
  - Human misery calls forth in us deeply personal sympathy and a passionate desire to help.
  - Unless the suffering is truly undeserved and truly bad for the sufferer, we would not have such a powerful reaction.
  - If suffering and good-fortune were exactly proportional to what each person deserved, the sufferings of others would lose its power to draw us out of ourselves.
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Implications for Life After Death
The premise that God’s purpose in creation is to allow free but immature beings to grow towards a moral and spiritual perfection has necessary implications for life after death.

The precarious conditions of this world may indeed provide ground for some to mature, but for others it may lead to:

- Resentment, fear or disintegration of character,
- A life snuffed out before they have any fair chance to grow morally or spiritually.
Therefore “any divine purpose of soul making that is at work in earthly history must continue beyond this life if it is ever to achieve more than a partial and fragmentary success.”

Our growth and maturation towards the “full humanity” intended by God, towards becoming true “children of God,” towards becoming the “likeness of God,” will continue after death through continued opportunities to exercise love and trust.
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Life After Death

- In addition, there must be an ultimate greater good to justify the toil and sorrow and travail of the soul-making process: a fullness of life and joy beyond our present imaginations.

- Hick suggests God’s persistence and patience to persuade and guide us towards moral and spiritual perfection knows no bounds, and will ultimately lead to the free acceptance by all of God’s love: to universal salvation.
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Life After Death

In the end:

“The Kingdom of God will be an infinite because eternal good, outweighing all temporal and therefore finite evils”

- John Hick, Evil and the God of Love, p. 344
References

Next Time: The Problem of Evil and Pain

The Explanation of Process Theology

Leon Bonnat “Job” 1880