The Problem of Evil and Pain

5. The Explanation of Process Theology
The Problem of Evil and Pain

1: Introduction to the Problem of Evil and Pain
2: The Explanation of St. Augustine: The Fall and Original Sin
3: The Explanation of Leibniz: The Best Possible World
4: The Explanation of St. Irenaeus: A World of Soul-making
5: The Explanation of Process Theology
6: The Existential Problem of Evil and Redemptive Suffering
7: Summary and Conclusions: The Problem of Evil and Pain
O God our heavenly Father, you have blessed us and given us dominion over all the earth: Increase our reverence before the mystery of life; and give us new insight into your purposes for the human race, and new wisdom and determination in making provision for its future in accordance with your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

From: *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, p. 828
We are using a “common-sense” definition of evil, including under “evil” such things as:

- Physical pain
- Mental suffering
- The suffering of innocents
- Physical deformities
- Psychological abnormalities
- Disease
- Character defects
- Injustice
- Oppression and Persecution
- Natural Catastrophes
Review

Definition of Evil

- Two kinds of evil:
  - 1. **Moral Evil**: evil caused by free human beings, such as:
    - Murder
    - Lying
    - Stealing
    - Greed
    - Dishonesty
  - 2. **Natural Evil**, such as:
    - Hurricanes, floods, tornados, fires
    - Famines
    - Cancer and AIDS
    - Birth defects and deformities
    - Disabilities: blindness, deafness, insanity
Epicurus (341-270 BC):

- Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.
- Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
- Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?
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. It seems that Gratuitous and pointless evil exists.
The presence of evil and suffering in the world is the most potent rational objection to the existence of a all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God.

- Han Kung: “the rock of atheism.”

The presence of evil and suffering in the world is one of the great and life-long challenges to a life of faith.

- Theodicy = an explanation of how evil and suffering can exist in a world created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God.
Review

Three Explanations or Theodices

- The explanation of Saint Augustine: a consequence of *The Fall and the Original Sin*.
- The explanation of Gottfried Leibniz: this is the *Best of All Possible Worlds* that meets God’s good purposes in creation.
- The explanation of Saint Irenaeus: this world is a *Vale for Soul-Making* or Person-Making.
Review
Saint Augustine: The Fall, Original Sin

- This is not the world God intended.
- Consequences of Adam and Eve’s Sin (“Original Sin”) for humanity:
  - Moral Evil:
    - Corrupption of our moral nature, causing loss of the inner harmony between reason and the passions.
    - The passions now dominated rational thought (concupiscence), inclining one to sin.
    - The ability not to sin was replaced by an inability not to sin.
    - This corrupted moral nature and the guilt of the original sin is bequeathed to our progeny.
Review
Saint Augustine: The Fall, Original Sin

- Consequences of Adam and Eve’s Sin ("Original Sin") for humanity:
  - Natural Evils were part of God’s punishment for Adams and Eve’s sin:
    - “nature red in tooth and claw.”
    - Earthquakes, storms, etc.
God wished to create a world that:

- Maximized the virtue of free, rational, sentient beings,
- Maximized the mirroring of the God’s goodness and splendor in the creation through a vast variety of things and creatures,
- Yielded the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest, most elegant, most beautiful set of laws.
Review

Leibniz: The Best of All Possible Worlds

- This present world is the **best of all possible worlds** that meets God’s good purposes.

- Evil is tolerated or permitted by God only because it is a **necessary consequence**, a **side-effect** of creating the **best possible world** that meets all of God’s good purposes.
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 and imperfect creatures to true “children of God.”

The presence of evil and suffering is necessary for that growth.

Moral and spiritual maturity may require struggling and grappling with temptation over time, and even participation in evil.
Introduction:
Process Theology
Introduction
God of Philosophy vs. God of Scripture

There has been an ongoing tension in Western thought between the God of Philosophy and the God of Scripture:

- Greek Philosophy: God is immutable, impassible (without feeling), unchangeable.
- Hebrew Bible: God is a personality who interacts with God’s creatures and is effected by them.
Introduction
Process Philosophy

- Early 20th century: a new movement began in philosophy called **Process Philosophy**, led by:
  - French philosopher **Henri Bergson** (1859-1941).
  - English mathematician and philosopher **Alfred North Whitehead** (1861-1947).
    - His book *Process and Reality* (1929) became the most influential document in the movement.
Introduction

Process Philosophy vs. Theology

- **Process Philosophy** proposed a new way of thinking about:
  - The nature of reality.
  - The nature of God and God’s relationship with the world.
- Some Christian theologians have adopted many (but not all) of the concepts in **Process Philosophy**, forming a very active and influential school of **Process Theology**.
The Nature of Reality in Process Thought
The Nature of Reality

Traditional View

- Traditional view of Western philosophy:
  - Fundamental reality is **being**.
  - “Being” in the world: to be material, concrete; to consist of matter or substance, of particles, and things made up of particles.
  - Matter or substance does not change until **forces** act on the matter to change it.
The Nature of Reality
Process View

- The view of **Process Philosophy**:
  - Fundamental reality is **becoming**.
  - What is *primal* in reality are events, occurrences, happenings, or processes.
  - The basic fabric of reality consists of innumerable moments or instances of *change* (termed "**actual occasions**").
    - "Matter" is a *secondary* phenomenon, one of the appearances of a spatially organized cluster of these moments / instances of change (= "**actual occasions**").
The Nature of Reality
Properties of Actual Occasions

- Each moment or instance of change (= “actual occasion”):
  - Incorporates within itself aspects of all past “actual occasions,” and hence is influenced by them.
  - Is confronted with possibility: the realm of possible or potential ways it can “become” or change.
  - Is charged with a primal inner “creativity” and power which allows it to choose to actualize one of the possible ways it can “become.”
  - Is “moved” in its choice by a primal “lure” / “feeling” / “desire” towards a goal or purpose beyond it.
The Nature of Reality

Human Experience

- The “actual occasions” that we know firsthand are the moments of human experience.
- Human experience consists of perhaps 4-10 actual occasions per second, most of them unconscious feelings of the body and its environment.
- Since “actual occasions” are the basic units of reality, the sweep of our human experience over a lifetime is the foundation of our identity.
The Nature of Reality

Human Experience

- Our religious and moral sense, our emotions, our intimations of beauty, our yearnings for meaning and purpose and transcendence, are the higher order manifestations of the primal “lure” / “feeling” / “desire” towards a goal or purpose that is part of each actual occasion.

- Our sense of freedom and free will is the higher order manifestation of the primal “creativity” and power in each actual occasion to actualize one way of “becoming” out of the realm of possible or potential ways it can “become.”
In the Beginning (In Whitehead’s Process Philosophy):

- There was a preexistent God and an uncreated chaos of actual occasions.
- God was as powerful as any entity can ever be.
- God was *not* “all-powerful” however, in that God could not coerce or force actual occasions to “become” or change in one particular manner.
God chose to interact with the world, and *persuade* it to evolve creaturely realities.

God’s chief goal is to maximize the richness of the experience of those creatures.

- Two main values for judging the richness of experience: **harmony** and **intensity**.
  - Others include novelty, creativity, adventure, complexity.
God’s power is “persuasive” rather than “coercive:”

- God cannot *coerce* or *force* creatures to do what is good, but offers possibilities for becoming, and tries to *persuade* or “lure” creatures towards the best possibility.

- When creatures do other than what God tried to persuade them to do, God adjusts and offers them new possibilities, and again tries to *persuade* them towards the best choice.
God in Process Thought

God’s Persuasive Power

- God’s power is “persuasive” rather than “coercive:”
  - God similarly cannot coerce or force the free processes of nature, but can only try to “persuade” them.
    - However, God’s ability to persuade, for example, a rock not to fall is limited, because rocks are primitive entities with minimal ability to respond to persuasion.
  - God has a much greater ability to persuade God’s creatures (humans beings open to the Spirit most of all) than inanimate entities.
God in Process Thought

God’s Persuasive Power

- God does not know the future, but interacts with the world, trying to persuade its creatures and processes towards changes that would lead to the best possible future.
  - The futures that are possible change as creatures respond and actualize the possibilities open to them.
  - God adjusts and continues to offer God’s creatures new possibilities, and again tries to persuade them towards the best choice.
- God’s “lure” or persuasion is the ground of all religious and moral feeling, of all meaning and purpose that we experience.
God’s Two Natures In Process Thought:

- **Primordial Nature:**
  - Contains all eternal possibilities for how the creaturely world can advance.

- **Consequent Nature:**
  - Contains the experiences and responses of all creatures as they choose to actualize the possibilities open to them.
God in Process Thought

God’s Two Natures

Because God’s **Consequent Nature** is continually filling with the experiences and responses of the world’s creatures, God is always changing.

All the positive and negative experiences of all creatures are stored in God’s **Consequent Nature**, and forever become a part of God’s conscious life.

- To love or hurt another human being forever changes God.
- To injury a sparrow is to forever change God.
“God is directly involved in the risk of creation, for the quality of the divine experience depends in part on the quality of the creatures’ experience. God shares our human joys, but also our human as well as subhuman pains. The whole weight of earthly sorrow and agony, wickedness and stupidity, passes into the divine consciousness, together with the glory of all earthly happiness and ecstasy, saintliness and genius.”

- John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, p. 51
The Problem of Evil in Process Thought
Evil in Process Thought

Two Types of Evil

- The two most important qualities of a moment of experience are its **harmony** and **intensity**.

- **Lack** of harmony and **lack** of intensity are the two main types of evil:
  - Lack of harmony leads to the evil of discord “…the feeling of evil in the most general sense, namely physical pain or mental evil, such as sorrow, horror, dislike.” (Whitehead)
  - Lack of intensity leads to the evil of needless triviality.
Evil in Process Thought

Two Types of Evil

- Evil is inevitable, for the two values of harmony and intensity of an experience are partially in conflict:
  - Greater complexity, for example, may increase the intensity of an experience, but reduce its harmony.
Unlike the “all-powerful” God of classic theism, the God of process thought only has the power to persuade, and is already doing everything in God’s power to prevent the evil of this world.

The God of process thought however, is in part responsible for evil, because “in the beginning,” God decided to persuade the primordial chaos to become this present world, knowing that evil would inevitably be a part of that world.
Process thought excuses God by claiming that God felt the goodness that would result in luring the primordial chaos to become this present world would outweigh the evil, and risked the quality of God’s own divine experience and conscious life in proceeding.
References

Next Time: The Problem of Evil and Pain

The Existential Problem of Evil and Redemptive Suffering

Leon Bonnat “Job” 1880