The Problem of Evil and Pain

7. Summary and Conclusions
The Problem of Evil and Pain

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Opening Prayer

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

From: Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 816
Introduction
The “Problem of Evil”

- Epicurus (341-270 BC):
  - Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.
  - Is he able, but not willing? The he is malevolent.
  - Is he both able and willing? Whence then is 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 (or at least seems to exist).
We adopted a “common-sense” definition of evil, and include 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.
Introduction
Two Kinds of Evil

Two kinds of “evil:”

1. Moral Evil: evil caused by free human beings, such as:
   - Murder,
   - Lying,
   - Stealing,
   - Greed,
   - Dishonesty.
Two kinds of “evil:”

2. **Natural Evil**, such as:
   - Hurricanes, floods, tornados, fires,
   - Famines,
   - Cancer and AIDS,
   - Birth defects and deformities,
   - Disabilities: blindness, deafness, insanity.
Augustine’s Theodicy

The Fall and Original Sin
Augustine’s Theodicy

Evil Does Not Exist

- God made everything, and everything God made was good.
  - Being itself is good. Everything that exists, everything that has being, has goodness in proportion to the degree of being that God gave it.

- Evil does not really exist: it is not a thing and does not have being. Evil is a lack of being, and hence a lack of goodness.
  - Evil is the absence, deprivation, privation, or degradation of being and goodness (privatio boni = privation of good).
Augustine’s Theodicy
The “Appearance” of Evil

- Evils appear in creation when created things and creatures stop functioning in the way they were created to function, when they cease to have the “being” God intended them to have.

- Evil first appeared among those creatures who had free will.

- The Fall:
  - First some angels rebelled against the God, the Supreme Good.
  - These fallen angels in turn tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God.
Augustine’s Theodicy
The Fall and Evil

- Consequences of Adam and Eve’s Sin (“Original Sin”) for humanity:
  - **Moral Evil:**
    - Corruption 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.
  - **Natural Evil:**
    - Part of God’s punishment for Adam’s and Eve’s sin:
      - “nature red in tooth and claw”
      - Earthquakes, storms, etc.
Augustine’s Theodicy
The Fall and Original Sin

“All evil is either sin or the punishment for sin”

- Augustine
Theodicy of St. Irenaeus

A Vale of Soul-making
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.”

That is: an environment for “soul-making” or “person-making.”
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.
A world 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.
Theodicy of St. Irenaeus
A Vale of Soul-making

- Evil is inevitable in a world of soul-making:
  - **Moral evil** results when we choose selfishly, with consequences for ourselves and others.
  - **Natural evil** results from the need for a predictable physical world that operates independent of our wills.
St. Augustine said:

- Adam and Eve originally lived in a state of pristine perfection, in a world that was paradise.
- They sinned, corrupting their nature (which they bequeathed to us), leading to the appearance of evil.

St. Irenaeus said:

- Adam and Eve were created innocent, but imperfect and immature, in a world designed for soul-making.
- Soul-making is a creative, arduous task of maturing and growing into perfect spiritual moral beings, and that involves choosing between our selfish interests and those of Others, between our selfish interests and God, between good and evil. The possibility we will choose evil sometimes is inevitable.
Leibniz’s Theodicy

The Best Possible World
Omnipotence thus does not mean “anything goes,” and “nothing is impossible” for God. God is bound by the same rules of logic, and practical necessity as we are. If Action “A” logically or necessarily results in “B” occurring, then not even God can do “A” without “B” occurring.
God’s goodness would oblige God to actualize only the best one of all possible worlds.
Leibniz suggested 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.
Theodicy of Leibniz
The Best of All Possible Worlds

Evil, Leibniz suggests, was one of the necessary consequences or side effects arising from the trade-offs involved in the design of a world that:

- maximizes the virtue of free, rational, sentient beings,
- maximizes the mirroring of the God’s goodness and splendor in the creation through a vast variety of things and creatures,
- yields the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest, most elegant, most beautiful set of laws.
God remains holy in permitting this evil because it is the necessary consequence of God performing God’s obligation to create the best possible world that fulfills God’s good purposes for creation.
Theodicy of Process
Theology

God's Persuasive Power
Process philosophy places radical limits on the omnipotence, the power of God. Process Philosophers say God is not “all-powerful,” in that God cannot coerce or force the creatures or the processes of the world to change. They all have the freedom to “become” or change on their own.

Process Theologians revise this, and suggest God could force or coerce, but forcing and coercion are not loving actions, and God, All-Loving, chooses not to force or coerce.
God’s power is “persuasive” rather than “coercive:”

- God choses not to 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."
Theodicy of Process Theology

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.°
Evil arises because *all* creation is *free*, and God chooses only to *persuade* or *lure* creation to goodness – and sometimes the *free* creation is *not* persuaded.
The Pastoral or Existential Problem of Evil
The Existential Problem of Evil

One Statement of the Problem

Can we reconcile these two statements:

(1) God made individual human beings to enter into free relationships of:
   - self-surrendering love with God, and
   - self-giving love with Others.

(2) Yet the *experience* of seemingly pointless evil:
   - creates a sense of deep moral protest, indignation, and outrage at the world in some individuals, and
   - drives them from belief in, and a relationship with the God who created that world.
The Existential Problem of Evil

Am I Glad of Existence?

- One possible answer to the moral protest, indignation, and outrage generated by the experience of seemingly pointless evil is to ask ourselves:
  - Am I glad that I exist?
  - Am I glad of the existence of those I love and who love me?
The Existential Problem of Evil

Am I Glad of 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…
- *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. °
If we then are glad we exist, and 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 in God 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.”
The Existential Problem of Evil
Another Statement of the Problem

Can we reconcile these two statements:

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. Yet the experience of evil has been so profound in the lives of some individuals that they genuinely regret their own existence.
Marilyn Adams suggests some answers may be found by reflecting on:

- The redemptive aspects of suffering:
  - For the person who is suffering,
  - for the witnesses of that suffering, and
  - even for the person who caused the suffering.

- The incommensurate, the incomparable good of the beatific 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.

That is: the beauty of sunset, and suffering may both be imperfect glimpses into the inner life of God.
Redemptive Suffering
The Good of the Vision of God

Christian mysticism suggests that in the *infinite* good of our future “face to face” intimacy with God (the beatific vision):

- our moments of deepest suffering and pain will be sanctified, made holy, in that
- we will not wish *any* of them away from our life history, for
- we will recognize that they were moments of identification with, and visions into the inner life of God.
Responses to Theology, and Summary
Some Jewish theologians, rather than try to justify God in the face of suffering (= to do theodicy), quote the scripture that follows the report of the death of Aaron’s two sons by divine fire:

“And Aaron held his peace.”
There are numerous passages in the Bible of protest against the presence of evil and suffering.

Such protest may be considered a faithful and trusting response of a faithful people to their God.

God understands and respects our concerns, our questions, uncertainties, and anxieties over the presence of evil and God’s purposes in the world.
Summary
A Mystery That Must Be Lived Through

- There is no fully satisfactory explanation ("theodicy") for the evil and suffering of this world.
- The mystery of evil and pain in the world is the mystery of God.
Summary
A Mystery That Must Be Lived Through

“Having been constantly preoccupied for decades with all attempts at theodicy, I can confidently say quite bluntly that there seems to me to be no theoretical answer to the problem of theodicy. On the basis of an attitude of faith only one thing can be said:

- Hans Kung, Credo, p. 89 °
Summary
A Mystery That Must Be Lived Through

- If God exists, then God was also in Auschwitz! Even in this death factory, believers of different religions and confessions held on to the conviction that despite everything, God exists.

- At the same time, however, the believer has to concede that there is no answer to the question, ‘How could God have been in Auschwitz without preventing Auschwitz?’

- Hans Kung, Credo, p. 89
Summary
A Mystery That Must Be Lived Through

“… suffering, -- excessive, innocent, meaningless suffering, both individual and collective – cannot be understood theoretically, but can only be lived through. For Christians and Jews there is only a practical answer to the problem of theodicy.”

- Hans Kung
Summary
A Mystery That Must Be Lived Through

- It can be recognized in the light of Jesus, the suffering servant of God…
  - That even when suffering is apparently meaningless, God is nevertheless hiddenly present
  - That while God does not preserve us from all suffering he does preserve us in all suffering
  - That wherever possible we should show solidarity in suffering and attempt to share in bearing it;
  - Indeed that in this way we are not only enduring suffering but where possible, fighting against it…

- Hans Kung
References

References


References

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