

Some Gathered Reflections on the Problem of Suffering

What would necessarily be lost if the world was such that there could never be pain above an easy tolerable level?

The world which we have is one where the regularities of the physical order of things make it possible for pain to take extreme forms.

We live in a world where gravitation keeps us on the ground and yet is the same force that will dash us to pieces if we fall from a cliff onto the rocks below.

A world where we can take advantage of the properties of steel to make a motor car a vehicle which is so very useful to us and yet through an accident could well maim disfigure or kill us.

A world where the nerve endings of our fingers are sensitive enough to make delicate craftsmanship or surgery possible is one where crushing or burning will send appalling shock waves through our nervous system.

We might have a world where pain was physically impossible, a world, we could say, of globular creatures in sterile, unbreakable plastic, rolling about on an endless foam – rubber sea.

Or we might have a world where, whenever something was about to go seriously wrong, God intervened and by a special act saved the day. He would have to intervene thus on every such occasion, or obviously he would be unfair.

The basic question therefore, is, “What would be lost in a world subject to this kind of intervention?”

There would necessarily be a serious limitation on our ability to discover regularities in nature. The exercise of scientific investigation and discovered would be lost.

Another major loss would seem to be the control of our own affairs and the responsibility that goes with this.

To opt for an intervention of God on every occasion would be to say that these things do not matter very much. To decide that they do matter leaves us with a choice between a regular but painless universe or one like the one we live in at present.

In a painless universe it would still be possible to make observations, collect information, compare evidence and derive various theories; and systems of knowledge – though some of the incentives that at present seem needed to stir us from our lethargy to do this kind of thing would be lost.

Social and individual relationships of an intellectual kind would remain. Hatred, fear, jealousy, envy, cruelty, loneliness would have gone. War, injury, death, disease, and starvation could all in theory without pain continue – but no one, not even the victims, would care in the way that they do now.

And that, of course is an important point. If someone's death causes me no pang or pain, is it possible for me to care about them?

If no word or act of mine, or anyone else's, no accident of nature, no defect in themselves, can cause pain either to them or to me, can I have any concern for them? In short, to our list of losses do we have to add – love?

Surely also there would be an end to that constellation of qualities we call disinterestedness, loyalty and sacrifice? I could not choose to do what was right even though it was as to my disadvantage, for nothing would ever be to my disadvantage. The idea of loyalty would lose its meaning, because there could never be any stress or pressure sufficient to justify one in speaking of it. I could never choose someone else's good at the cost of my own hurt or disappointment, for nothing would ever be enough to count. I could not sacrifice all for an ideal or a precious thing or a defenceless fellow creature that had put itself under my protection; I could not even practice self-denial. I could do my best for others, and for myself, in various ways, but I could never suffer for them.

Another forfeit which a painless world would exact is adventure in all its forms. The runner's pain barrier, the mountain climbers North Face, the yachtsman's solo voyage round the world, the potholer's exploration miles into the unknown hill, the racing drivers lap record, the crossing of Antarctic snows, all these would lose their essential meaning. It is true that when such activities are condemned because of the waste and danger involved – families bereaved, or bodies shattered, rescuers imperilled, and all for what? -- An obeisance is commonly made to outraged moral feeling by the thin pretence that what is done is in some way useful. But in all these largely "pointless" pursuits it is not the technical achievement, it is the life-enhancing fear of danger, the overcoming of both the hostile environment and oneself, which contributes a large measure of deep and even ecstatic satisfaction. If love is the first great quality conceivable only in a world of pain, the second is undoubtedly courage.

It is true that happiness cannot be sought for its own sake. It comes to us as a by-product of doing things, making objects of beauty or use, making love, helping in the corporate achievement, seeking knowledge, being with friends, breaking records, celebrating. All such activities involve a concern for some thing or someone other than the self, by which the self in self forgetting is fulfilled. But concern and self forgetting are attitudes possible only in a world where pain also is possible. In short if beings such as ourselves are to be happy, they need to be open to pain.

Adapted from John Austin Baker: *The Foolishness of God*

Some notable responses to the problem of evil

Theists acknowledge that the problem of evil raises a difficulty for them; here are some of the ways in which they have attempted to deal with the question.

The Soul making Argument

One often used line of argument is that the existence of some evil is a necessary means to some good. For example it can be argued that the existence of evil is necessary for the perfect development of human beings. The "Vale of soul making" as Keats called the world. It is argued that suffering is the inevitable condition of our growth as free moral individuals, necessary accompaniments of achieving the highest good. A study of history makes it clear that a challenging environment and man's gallant response to it plays a decisive role in the birth of civilized nations; civilized nations are not apt to be generated and cradled in environments which offer unusually easy or soft conditions of life. The Greek proverb stands: "the best things are difficult"; or, as a more familiar saying expresses it: "no gains without pains."

It is an abiding truth that only the cynic will bring himself to deny – that suffering, however cruel and undeserved, can and does ennoble men; and is often the occasion and the raw material of the greatest achievements of the human spirit. Shakespeare says:

"There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
would men observingly distil it out."

Shakespeare means here that since the possibility of evil is necessary to the good of the world, taken as a whole, man's finest endowment lies in the possibility of his triumph over evil, and of his transformation of defeat into victory. A Christian has good reason for knowing how true that is as he stands in gratitude before the Cross of Christ and enters into the fellowship of his sufferings. We may argue at this stage for the truth that a world with suffering and bravery in it is better – that is, of greater ultimate worth – than a world with neither in it. Joseph in the Old Testament story had solved the problem of evil when he said, "Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto God."

John Hick writes as follows:

My general conclusion, then is that in this world with all its unjust and apparently wasted suffering, may nevertheless be what the Irenaean strand of Christian thought affirms that it is, namely a divinely created sphere of soul making... Let us suppose that the infinite personal God creates a finite person to share in the life which he imparts to them. If he creates them in his immediate presence, so that they cannot fail to be conscious from the first of the infinite divine being and glory, goodness and love, wisdom, power and knowledge in whose presence they are, they will have no creaturely independence in relation to their Maker. They will not be able to choose to worship God, or to turn to him freely as valuing spirits responding to infinite Value. In order, then, to give them the freedom to come to him, God creates them at a distance – not a spatial but an epistemic distance. He causes them to come into a situation in which he is not immediately and overwhelmingly evident to them. Accordingly they come to self-consciousness as parts of a universe which has its own autonomous structures and laws....A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and

hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges. Accordingly, a person making environment, the plastic to human wishes but must have its own structure in terms of which men have to learn to live and which they ignore at their peril.

Evil and the God of Love p.336ff

One of the criticisms of the soul making argument is the problem of animal suffering. Recent research may give some answer to this in that various levels of pain are identified in animals, it is argued that even in the higher levels of animal life though an animal may feel pain there is not the awareness that they themselves are suffering.

The free will argument

God has given us free will. We are not blind automata, but free agents capable of making our own choices and acting on them. As a result of God having given us free will, we sometimes choose to do wrong. We start wars, steal, and so on. So some suffering results from us possessing free will. However, it is still better that we have free will. Free will is a very great good that more than compensates for the suffering it can bring.

One of the best known proponents of this view in recent time is Alvin Plantinga. His argument is set out in his most widely read work, *God, Freedom, and Evil*: Cornell University Press 1967. The following extract is from his second book, *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford:1974

He sets out to show him that the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good God is not inconsistent with the existence of evil, as many philosophers have argued. In a truncated form, Plantinga's argument is as follows:

He argues that it is greater for a human being to possess free will, as opposed to being non— free. And because God cannot guarantee the benevolence of a truly free being without intervention or influence, thus removing free will, it follows that for a human being to have true free will it follows that they must be capable of moral evil, else such a being would be only capable of moral good, which in itself is as Plantinga stated: "entirely paradoxical". Plantinga goes on to argue that a world with free will is more valuable than a world without such, therefore God has reason to create the world which has the capability of evil. Thus because of this the existence of evil counts "neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness", rather it is an error by the creature in their exercise of such freedom.

According to Chad Meister, professor of philosophy at Bethel College, most contemporary philosophers accept Plantinga's argument.

Note

Calvinist often prefer the term free agency to free will. Calvinists deny that man because of his fallen nature can choose to repent and believe because he is bound by his own fallen nature from doing so. Man's will is not coerced from without. It not forced by some external force greater than himself to do something he does not want to do. However he is bound within the limits of his own fallen nature, the will is a

faculty of man's soul and personality, the will is therefore determined by the soul of man. It cannot escape the moral character out of which it comes. If the soul is entirely corrupt so that its knowledge and desire are defective and rotten, it follows that it will ever will to do that which is evil. At the same time Calvinists do believe in man's responsibility,. Calvinists believe that a man's inability to repent and believe is caused by his own sinful nature... and not any positive imposition on God's part. Calvinists do not believe that men are puppets or blocks of wood or robots, but responsible beings and are treated as such by God, even when fallen.

Evil and the Moral Law, man's sense of right and wrong

When someone states that they do not believe in God because a good God would not allow evil, they made a fatal error in logic. First, the recognition of evil is the recognition that certain actions are "right" and certain actions are "wrong." But how do we determine what actions are morally right and morally wrong? We discern this on the basis of a moral law: a universal sense that certain states of affairs are right and others are wrong. Even most atheists will admit that certain actions are universally wrong and, conversely, universally right.

For example, no one could seriously argue with the statement that it is better to love a child than to torture it. The point is that there is an innate, universal sense of right and wrong within all of us. What is the basis of this moral sense? Some would argue that it is based on cultural customs or traditions. But can this be so?

The famous atheist Bertrand Russell once debated with a Christian who asked him if he believed in right and wrong. Russell replied "of course." Then he asked him how he determined what is right and wrong. Russell replied that he determined right and wrong on the basis of his feelings. "Well, in some cultures they feel it is okay to eat you, and in others they don't. Which do you prefer?" The point is that social customs, attitudes, traditions or feelings, cannot determine a universal sense of right and wrong.

A universal sense of moral right and wrong can only come from a source outside of ourselves: a transcendent source, a moral Lawgiver. So the recognition of moral law is by default the recognition of a moral Lawgiver. To argue that the existence of evil proves that there is no God is equivalent to stating that the existence of moral law proves there is no Lawgiver! It is like declaring that the Chrysler automobile that I drive proves without a doubt that there is no Chrysler Motor Company!

Atheists often present the problem of evil as the fatal argument for the existence of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, it is an absolutely unsolvable problem for the atheist. How does the atheist explain evil – the sense of moral right and wrong – in the absence of a moral Lawgiver? They can't! If there is no moral Lawgiver, then there is no way to explain the sense of moral wrong and moral right we all possess.

Dr. Mark Eastman. Internet

The Educational or Revelatory Argument

Many theologians apply the principle of education to the problem of moral evil. They argue that it has a necessary part to play in the unfolding of the divine plan. Many explain it as necessary to the displaying and the exercise of the divine attributes of justice and mercy. The educational effects of sin may be illustrated on all sides of the religious life. It affects all consciousness of communion, our ideal of service, our conception of God. Thus it is through sin, with its consequences in our own lives and in the lives of those we love, that we learn, as we could learn it in no other way, our need of God, and our constant dependence upon him for salvation and strength. It is through sin, with its deadly havoc in the world, making appeal to the finest sympathy and the most complete devotion, that we learn the meaning of Christian service, the cost and the reward of Christ-like ministry. Above all, it is through sin, with the cross by which it has been overcome that we have learned to see God in Christ, and to measure the extent of the divine love.

It is sometimes asked why God created mankind and allowed him to fall into sin, knowing that he would then bring about, indeed had already planned, the whole process and means of man's salvation, through the death of his only begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Why did the meta – narrative of God's purpose move from Paradise, to Paradise Lost, to Paradise regained, why not just go straight to Paradise gained and avoid the whole painful business of Paradise Lost?

The answer to this is that God's purpose was to create the world in which his glory could be manifest in all its fullness. The glory of God is the overarching goal of creation. The universe was created to display the glory of God (Psalm 19:1), and the wrath of God is revealed against those who fail to glorify God (Romans 3:23). The glory of God is made known when his attributes are perfectly displayed, and the story of redemption is part of that revelation.

The ultimate exhibition of God's glory is seen in the cross of Christ, where God's wrath, God's justice, and God's grace and mercy meet. None of this could have been seen nor in any way understood without the rebellion of Satan or the fall of Adam and Eve.

The Latin expression *felix culpa* is traced to the famous line of Augustine's when he said in relation to man's Fall and Original sin, *O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem*, "O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer." The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas quoted this line when he explain how the principle that "God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom" underlies the causal relation between Original Sin and the divine Redeemer's incarnation, thus concluding that a higher state is not inhibited by sin. Ambrose also spoke of the fortunate ruin of Adam in the Garden of Eden in that his sin brought more good to humanity than if he had stayed perfectly innocent. In general use the term "*felix culpa*" can describe how a series of miserable events can eventually lead to a happier outcome.

Why does God allow suffering? How poor the world would be without it! We could then never have rejoiced in the tribulations which bring in their train the virtues of endurance and experience, and issue in the hope that maketh not ashamed (Rom5:4,5). No suffering! Then we should never have known a mother's self-sacrificing love; and such words as "sympathy," "heroism" and "courage" would be unknown. There would never have been a Victoria Cross or a George Cross, for their

would never have been a Cross of Calvary. It is indeed beyond our understanding; but those who know what it is to have been crucified with Christ, and to rise again with Him to a new life, can "rejoice about partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when his glory shall be revealed (they) may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1Peter 4:13).

Some Moral Difficulties of the Bible H.E. Guillebaud p.37

What if every aspect of the mystery of evil was plain and clear?

To say that there are mysteries in relation to God and his ways is not a copout. Consider the following: real independence moral growth in mankind would be impossible if we were not removed to a degree from the overwhelming brightness of the divine character of God.. Everyone knows that, even amongst men and women a powerful massive character, though yet an excellent character, often can hold back or even injure those within the circle of its influence. Such individuals are crushed by an unconscious mechanical bending to the will of the stronger personality. Moral preference, moral freedom, moral character, may be superseded altogether by the single unanalyzed predominance of another's wish. It was in relation with this, that made it necessary for the removal of the bodily presence of Christ in order for the true moral growth of the apostles. It was necessary in order that they should grow and become "fellow workers" with God, faith means the discernment of God's character without subjugation of the small finite personality to the infinite life. To change faith for sight on earth would be to exchange theism for pantheism – moral education for moral absorption.

Consider the alternative to belief in God.

Atheism necessarily tends to reduce relatively the influence of the higher intellectual and moral faculties. Atheism seeks to eradicate from the imagination the very things which stimulate the higher faculties of morality and spirituality. For the atheist the highest point of human consciousness is the self. Atheism teaches us to look down instead of up beyond ourselves to God. The atheist has only his own powers to trust and finding them shackled and paralyzed by a thousand chains, can but despair, and can find no help in his flickering conscience, which only seems to mock his gloom and ignorance.

a. The atheist says, even you admit that God helps only those who help themselves; well, we help ourselves, and therefore God, if he exists, helps us; if he does not, we have all the help we can expect. Science is the true Providence of man. We lay no faith on "personal God;" we use our own faculties." Very well; but let men only realize your negative creed, and you will find that they have not the heart, or perhaps the temerity, on great occasions, to help themselves any longer. Trust is the postulate of the capacity to help ourselves in any great or noble work. It becomes impossible to do our part bravely without this perfect reliance on the cooperation of God. What is to justify trust in the mere sudden gleam of light, – a streak just flashing over a universe at midnight, – except the conviction that it comes from One who will send more and more, as the occasions demand, if that be followed? Luther's intense saying, "We tell our Lord God plainly, that if he will have his church, he must look after it himself. We cannot sustain it; and if we could, we should become the proudest asses

under heaven," is the inspiration of all great action. No man will dare to follow a gleam of conviction which tends to overturn a world, unless he is sure that he is but the interpreter of a Power who gave him that conviction, and who can guard it after his interpreter is gone. Luther took no responsibility in the case, except the responsibility of his own individual life. Atheism tends to make prudent men and nations anxious, timid, hesitating, disinclined to place humble confidence even in such moral insight as they have"

Essays Theological and Literary R.H. Hutton

b. Atheism shakes the authority of the moral faculties of man, by doing away with all adequate means of discerning and expressing the infinite distinction between right and wrong. A rejection of the reality of God, the God of the Bible, must ultimately so bring the conscience to resign all concept of absolute and infinite right and wrong.

c. Atheism undermines the worth of personal human affections.

d. If God be dislodged from our thoughts, will truth cover a wider area, and gain a deeper significance? Will it spread itself over that world of thought from which the image of God is banished, absorbed into itself the sacred attributes with which Christian man invests God, and supply anything analogous to the softening influence of personal reverence? Clear the mind of God, and truth is reduced almost to mere knowledge – true "information."

It seems then, that atheism, in proportion as it is fully realized, cannot but tend to weaken and even shatter the authority of conscience; and sow despondency both as to personal and human progress; to cast personal affections in a much narrower and more selfish type; and to dispel all the highest fascination and grandeur of the concept of truth.

Derived from Hutton's essay as above

The practical impossibility of atheism

About the only solution the atheist can offer in regard to life's significance and purpose is that we face the absurdity of life and live bravely. Bertrand Russell, for example, wrote that we must build our lives upon "the firm foundation of unyielding despair." Only by recognizing that the world is really a terrible place can we successfully come to terms with life. Camus said that we should honestly recognize life's absurdities and then live in love for one another.

The fundamental problem with this solution, however, is that it is impossible to live consistently and happily within such a world view. If one lives consistently, he will not be happy: if one lives happily, it is only because he is not consistent. Francis Schaeffer has explained this point well. Modern man, he says, resides in a two-story universe. In the lower story is the finite world without God; here life is absurd, as we have seen. In the upper story are meaning, value, and purpose. Now modern man lives in the lower story because he believes there is no God. But he cannot live happily in such an absurd world; therefore, it continually makes leaps of faith into the upper story to affirm meaning, value, and purpose, even though he has no right to, since he

does not believe in God. Modern man is totally inconsistent when he makes this leap, because these values cannot exist without God, and man in his lower story does not have God.

The atheist is attempting to live a life without meaning, without value, and without an ultimate purpose.

Reasonable Faith William Lane Craig p. 64

Mystery and Meaning

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known.

I Cor. 13:12.

The testimonies of religious faith are confused more greatly by those who claim to know too much about the mystery of life than by those who claim to know too little. Those who disavow all knowledge of the final mystery of life are so impressed by the fact that we see through a glass darkly, that they would make no claim of seeing at all. In the history of culture such a position is known as agnosticism. Agnosticism sees no practical value in seeking to solve the mystery of life. But there are not really many agnostics in any age or culture. A much larger number of people forget that they see through a glass darkly. They claim to know too much.

Those who claim to know too much may be divided into two groups, one ostensibly religious and the other irreligious. The religious resolve the problem of human existence and the mystery of the created world into systems of easily ascertained meaning. They deny that there is any mystery in life all the world. If they can find the previous cause for any subsequent effect in nature, they are certain that they have arrived at a full understanding of why such and such a thing exists. The natural course is, for them, and adequate explanation of anything they may perceive.

The religious group on the other hand recognizes that the whole of the created world is not self-explanatory. They see that it points beyond itself to a mysterious ground of existence, to an enigmatic power beyond all discernible vitalities, and to a "first cause" beyond all known causes. But they usually claim to know too much about this eternal mystery. Sometimes they sharply defined the limits of reason and the further limits of faith beyond reason, and claim to know exactly how far reason penetrates into the eternal mystery, and how much further faith reaches. Yet though they make a distinction between faith and reason, they straightway so mix and confuse reason and faith, that they pretend to be able to give a rational and sharply defined account of the character of God and of the eternal ground of existence. They define the power and knowledge of God precisely and explain the exact extent of his control and foreknowledge of the course of events. They dissect the mysterious relation between man's intellectual faculties and his vital capacities, and claim to know the exact limits of *physis*, *psyche* and *nous*, our body, soul and spirit. They know that man is immortal and why; and just what proportion part of him is mortal and what part immortal. Thus they banished the mystery of the unity of man's spiritual and physical existence. They have no sense of mystery about the problem of immortality. They know the geography of heaven and hell, and the furniture of the one of the temperature of the other.

A genuine Christian faith must move between those who claim to know so much about the natural world that it ceases to point to any mystery beyond itself and those who claim to know so much about the mystery of the "unseen" world but all reverence for its secret and hidden character is dissipated. A genuine faith must recognize the fact that it is through dark glass that we see; though we do by faith penetrate sufficiently to the heart of the mystery not to be overwhelmed by it. A genuine faith resolves the mystery of life by the mystery of God. It recognizes that no aspect of life or existence explains itself, even after all known causes and consequences have been traced. All known existence points beyond itself. To realize that it points beyond itself to God is to assert that the mystery of life does not dissolve life into meaninglessness. Faith in God is faith in some ultimate unity of life, in some final comprehensive purpose which holds all the various, and frequently contradictory, realms of coherence and meaning together. A genuine faith does not mark this mysterious source and end of existence as merely an "X," or as an unknown quantity. The Christian faith is at least a faith in revelation. It believes that God is made Himself known. It believes that He has spoken through the prophets and finally in His Son. It accepts the revelation in Christ as the ultimate clue to the mystery of God's nature and purpose in the world, particularly the mystery of the relation of His justice to His mercy. But these clues to the mystery do not eliminate the periphery of mystery. God remains *deus absconditus*

Of the prophets of the Old Testament Isaiah is particularly conscious of the penumbra of mystery which surrounds the eternal and the divine. He insists upon the distance between the divine wisdom and human councils: "Who hath directed the spirit of the Lord or, being his counsellor, hath taught him?" (Isa 40:13). He emphasizes the transcendence of God's power: "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers – the bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity." (Isa:40:22-23) the question of the meaning of life must not be pressed too far, according to the prophet: "Woe unto him that strive with with his maker. – Shall the clay say unto him that fashioneth it, what maketh thou?_Woe unto him that saith unto his father, what begetteth thou? Or to the woman, what hast thou brought forth?" (Isa 45:9-10). Faith, as the prophet conceives it, discerns the meaning of existence but must not seek to define it too carefully. The divine wisdom and purpose must always be partly hid from the human understanding, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa:55:8-9). The essential character of God, in his relations to the world, is known. He is the Creator, Judge and Saviour of men. Yet he does not fully disclose Himself and His thoughts are too high to be comprehended by human thought. (see Isa:45).

Discerning the Signs of the Times Reinhold Niebuhr pp.132-135.

NOTE: Some of the authors I have quoted, whilst helpful in seeking to understand the problem of suffering, we may not necessarily agree with in other areas of their theology.