The Suffering of Man and the Sovereignty of God

An Examination of the Relationship between the Problem of Evil and the Purposes of God

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Introduction

On 1 November 1755 Lisbon was devastated by an earthquake. Being All Saints' Day, the churches were packed to capacity and thirty of them were destroyed. Within six minutes 15,000 people had died and 15,000 more lay dying. This was the eighteenth century equivalent to a nuclear holocaust, but one not caused by the perversity of man.

One of the many thinkers stunned and horrified by this event was the French philosopher Voltaire. His cry was quite simply: 'How could anyone believe in a benevolent and omnipotent God after this?' What else could he do, but treat with scorn Pope's lines in his *Essay on Man*, written from a comfortable villa in Twickenham:

> And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
> One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

This, for Voltaire, was the crass poetic expression of the philosophy of Optimism – a philosophy which in a different guise just over 150 years later was itself to be cut to ribbons in the form of the bodies of those young men who died on the battle fields of the Somme and Paschendale. In protest Voltaire railed against such optimism in his *Poem on the Disaster of Lisbon*, which asked why, if God is free, just and benevolent, do we suffer under his rule? Later, similar thoughts were to find expression in the satirical novel *Candide*, whose teacher Dr Pangloss, a professor of Optimism, blandly assures him that ' All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. Later, after many more disasters, not least the hanging of Dr Pangloss by the Inquisition, Voltaire writes 'Candide, terrified, speechless, bleeding, palpitating said to himself: "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what can the rest be?" '.

While neither the Bible nor any Christian theology founded upon the Bible ever claims that this is the best of all possible worlds, one must at least sympathise with the sentiments to which Voltaire is giving voice,

namely, that at the very least there is an *apparent* contradiction between belief in an all powerful, loving God and the fact of suffering which is deemed evil. Therefore, it is common to speak of the 'problem' of evil or the 'problem' of suffering. However, at the outset it ought to be said that for the atheist, or the thorough-going materialist, there is not a problem of evil in the sense that evil and suffering do not apparently count against his beliefs. For the atheist/materialist suffering is a mere fact of existence, a datum of experience, like the redness of red or the wetness of water. It may be a problem for the atheist in that he, like the rest of us, has to cope with the unpleasantness of suffering as he struggles against its threat of annihilation so rendering all his efforts ultimately meaningless (if death really is the end), but as far as it goes his belief system is not significantly brought into question by suffering *per se*.

The Dilemma Formulated

But for the Christian, suffering and evil do pose a problem because of what he or she believes. So McClosky writes:

> Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence of God on the other.[1]

That is precisely what Voltaire was getting at. Or the problem may be put in the form of a dilemma as formulated by John Hick:

> If God is perfectly loving and good he must wish to abolish evil; if God is all powerful he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists therefore God cannot be both perfectly good and almighty.[2]

Even if some of the terms Hick uses here were to be qualified so that 'good' were to be distinguished from sentimental indulgence and were to incorporate, as the Bible insists must be the case, God's righteous anger towards wrong, and 'omnipotence' were to be defined in a way that did not involve the ability to do that which was self-contradictory, as distinct from antinomic (the old chestnut 'can God make a boulder so large that he cannot move it?') we have honestly to admit that *prima facie* there is a dilemma which needs to be addressed.

Therefore, let us focus on this particular formulation of the dilemma: if God is good he must wish to want to abolish evil, if he is omnipotent he must be able, but evil exists and so he cannot be both. A moment's

1 N Pike ed *God and Evil* (Prentice Hall 1964)
2 John Hick 'An Irenean Theodicy' *Encountering Evil* S T Davies ed (T and T Clark 1981) pp 38–52

reflection upon this conundrum soon reveals two things which this dilemma presupposes for it to be effective. The first presupposition is that if God is good and all powerful he must wish to abolish evil *now*, or at least it raises the questions why he did not remove it earlier or why he allowed it to come into being in the first place. The second presupposition is that he must do it in an immediate and total way, presumably by divine fiat. In other words there is both a temporal and a means condition built into the formulation.

But what if it could be demonstrated, however tentatively, that God will not only deal with evil at some point in the *future*, but that he will as it were 'redeem' it by a means we would not think of, in a way that will transfigure it into that which is good? Then some, but by no means all, of the force is taken out of the dilemma. The tension would be relieved but not entirely removed. A perspective would be provided which would enable us to view the issue in a manner which is significantly different from the way it is generally perceived. It is this different perspective which is provided by the Bible that will be explored below.

Simple Solutions

There are, of course, some simple solutions to the dilemma which essentially involve the removal of one or more elements of belief so it ceases to be a dilemma at all. One could deny the existence of evil or suffering, viewing them as 'illusory' – Theravada Buddhism or Christian Science might qualify as examples here. Alternatively, one could deny that God is all-powerful as does the process theologian David Griffin, who states quite unashamedly that his solution is found by 'denying the doctrine of omnipotence fundamental to it'.[3] Or thirdly, one could deny the goodness of God, a view well captured by Archibald MacLeish in his play *JB*, an updated presentation of the story of Job in which one finds the haunting refrain 'if he is God he is not good, if he is good he is not God'.

The traditional Christian claim, however, is that God is good, that he is almighty, and that evil and suffering are realities to be reckoned with. The 'problem' therefore turns on how to relate these two articles of faith (the goodness and omnipotence of God) to the fact of suffering, without compromising either of these tenets of belief or trivialising human suffering.

The Moral Status of Pain

In turning to consider the question 'What makes suffering morally unacceptable?', a prior question needs to be addressed: 'Is all suffering evil or is it so only in certain contexts?'. While psychologically most pain might

3 David Griffin 'Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil' *Encountering Evil* S T Davies ed (T and T Clark 1981) pp 100-119

be considered to be objectionable, it is not necessarily the case that it is morally so, especially if the pain endured is part of means to a recognised good. For example, biologically pain serves as part of the body's defence mechanism preventing further injury by means of, say, a reflex action. Certainly it could be objected that this simply pushes the 'problem' one stage back, for one could ask, why the more serious injury? Even so, the point still remains that pain in itself is not necessarily evil. In some contexts it is morally neutral, like the 'healthy' pain after long exercise, or morally good, as in the case of corrective punishment.

Surely, what makes suffering so morally objectionable is its occurrence in a form that is wholly negative and irrational, apparently devoid of any significance. It is this which lies at the root of so many tormented human cries – 'Why should my ten day old baby die?' 'Why should such a gifted man be reduced to a mere shell through cancer ?'. It is this seeming lack of purpose, what is often referred to as dysteliological suffering, that provides the twist which calls for such pain to be viewed as evil. And so we might put the matter like this: suffering 'becomes' morally unacceptable when, within our own limited temporal context, it exhibits those features commonly recognised as standing in direct opposition to that which is good – eg disintegration, meaninglessness.

The Why of Suffering

When one asks the question 'why is there suffering?' one could be straining towards one of two things. First, one could be looking for a cause: 'What is the cause of suffering?' – both in terms of an ultimate cause – 'where did it come from in the first place?' or in the more immediate sense, a proximal cause, 'what is the cause of this particular suffering?' (this question bearing a metaphysical, rather than biological, sense). This general line of approach to the question of evil has many distinguished writers to commend it – Augustine, C S Lewis and Alvin Plantinga to name but three. Here explanations are sought in terms of the defence of free will, the Fall, the activity of fallen angels and so on. Each of these has some part to play in moving towards an overall Christian understanding of suffering and evil in the world. However, it is the teaching about the Fall which is particularly significant and foundational.[4] The basic outline of the biblical plot is that the sovereign and totally good God created a good universe. We human beings rebelled and that rebellion is now such a part of our make up that we are enmeshed in it. All the suffering we now face turns on this fact, and is in some way related to 'sin' (but not all suffering is related to sin in the same way). The Bible centres on how God takes action to reverse these terrible effects and their

4 For one of the most biblically penetrating and pastorally helpful books which deals with this issue see D A Carson *How Long O Lord?* (IVP 1990).

root cause, which is sin itself. Furthermore, the one who is a believer sees on the broader canvas the future dimension of a new heaven and earth where neither sin nor sorrow will ever be experienced again.

This means that there is a fundamental recognition by the Christian that the world in which we live is thrown out of joint at every level: it is not now the best of all possible worlds, the price of sin is great, and suffering in this life is in some measure a consequence of it. Perhaps the cry of our post-Enlightenment generation echoing the cry of a man like Voltaire is 'How can God be so cruel?', whereas the cry of earlier generations was one with a man like Martin Luther namely 'How can God be so merciful?'. The reason why we find it difficult to say the latter (but not the former) is because we fail to appreciate the seriousness of sin and the pure character of a God who stands in opposition to sin.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that every item of suffering is the immediate result of sin. Jesus clearly corrects that idea, for it is patently obvious that many 'good people' suffer, and Christians of all people should certainly not expect a trouble free life; they have their 'losses and crosses' as the Puritans quaintly put it. However, some suffering can be the result of a specific sin (eg the man in John 5:1–15). This is a possibility but not a necessity. Sometimes the consequences of human sin can be more broadly distributed on the human scene in a way that does not appear very discriminating – war, plague, congenital defects for instance. Therefore, to use the categories of retribution and punishment solely to understand specific sins is unacceptable and insufficient.

The biblical writers have a realistic estimation of both the human condition and the character of God. Unlike us, they are not so taken by surprise at human wickedness nor by the suffering it occasions. What is more, with such an understanding comes the overwhelming sense of the kindness of God as his blessings which we take for granted come to us daily. This sense of amazement at such grace is reinforced by the fact that in spite of our ingratitude and the way we treat each other and God, he still goes on being kind when perhaps we should expect more signs of his displeasure. We tend to reverse this perception: we expect that no matter what, without qualification, life should go along quite nicely for us. When trouble comes our way we are taken aback to the point of resentment. The biblical perspective is a much needed corrective.

It is at this point that an objection is raised which goes something like this: ' If God does care about us and is so opposed to sin, which is the cause of so much suffering in the world, why does he not intervene to do something about it?'.

Apart from this raising the question of the means and temporal conditions mentioned earlier, there are more sobering implications which we do not often think about, but which have been well put by the writer, herself no mean lay theologian, Dorothy L Sayers:

> Why doesn't God smite this dictator dead?" is a question a little remote from us. Why, madam, did he not strike you dumb and imbecile before you uttered that baseless and unkind slander the day before yesterday? Or me, before I behaved with such a cruel lack of consideration to that well meaning friend? And why sir, did he not cause your hand to rot off at the wrist before you signed your name to that dirty bit of financial trickery? You did not quite mean that? But why not? Your misdeeds and mine are none the less repellent because our opportunities for doing damage are less spectacular than those of some other people. Do you suggest that your doings and mine are too trivial for God to bother about? That cuts both ways; for in that case, it would make precious little difference to his creation if he wiped us both out tomorrow. [5]

In other words if we want strict and immediate justice, then what we are asking for is literally hell, for that is precisely what it would be.

However, as well as looking backward for an answer to the question 'Why suffering?', one could also be looking forward, so that what one is really asking is: 'What is the *purpose* of suffering?' 'What possible good, if any, could there be in it?'. This way of looking at the question was in fact taken up by a certain school of psycho-analysis called logotherapy, headed by Victor Frankel, who himself experienced the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. It was there of all places that he noticed the positive way in which some people approached their situation. This observation in turn led him to quote Nietzche with approval when he said that ' Men and women can endure any amount of suffering so long as they know the why to their existence'. In other words, if that suffering can be placed within some wider context of meaning and purpose, much, but no means all, of the sting is taken out.

Pain with a Purpose?

There is a story in John 9 which illustrates this point well: the healing of the man born blind. As Jesus and his disciples came across this man, it was the disciples who raised the question: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents?'. They were looking for an answer to this tragic state of affairs in terms of causation linked to specific sinful action. But Jesus replied 'Neither, but this happened so that (ινα) the work of God may be

5 Dorothy L Sayers ' The Triumph of Easter' *Creed or Chaos* (Methuen 1954)

displayed in his life'. Jesus alters the perspective by focusing upon the divine purpose behind the situation, linking it to the creative-redeeming activity of God. Accordingly the man is healed. This would appear to be where the theological centre of gravity lies in the New Testament, bearing in mind that the major concern of the writers is the practical one of enabling God's people to see that the suffering and persecution which they may be undergoing or are likely to face, when considered against the backcloth of God's eternal purpose, have creative significance. This comes out in several places: as specific instances we may think of Romans 5:1-5, and later 8:28ff 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose', a statement set within the context of Christian suffering. But we may want to ask: 'Upon what grounds could Paul or anyone else make such a startling claim that God can and will work 'all things for good?'. This, in fact, brings us to the heart of the Christian faith, namely the death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If a decisive insight into the mystery of suffering is to be found anywhere, then it is to be found at the Cross where we come face to face with 'the God who is hidden in suffering' to use the term of Martin Luther. Here the foundational Christian belief is that the one who was known as Jesus of Nazareth was none other than the God who became man, the God who took to himself the sin of the world, bearing the penalty for sin which is rightly ours, absorbing evil, disarming principalities and powers and acting re-creatively to bring about the greater good. That is, it is seen as the means whereby people can be put in a right relationship with God, be forgiven and receive eternal life (2 Cor 5:19–21; 1 Pet 2:24 *et al*), and God's kingdom established.

The Perfect Paradox

It is at the Cross that we are presented with the paradox running throughout the mysterious relationship between the evil of suffering and God's good purposes. From one point of view, the Cross was the worst thing that could have happened (the murder of the divine Son, so pinpointing forcefully our rebellious attitude towards God). Yet *at the same time* it was the best thing that ever happened (the divine means of rescuing us). Here we see God taking sin and suffering seriously because he tasted it first hand in his Son, suffering physical and spiritual of a magnitude beyond our comprehension. It was this that shaped the New Testament writers' attitude towards suffering. They not only looked to Jesus and the Cross as an example to follow (1 Pet 3:17; Heb 12:2), but as the theological centrepiece of the belief that the outworkings of what God had achieved by Jesus' death and resurrection *in time* would be brought to completion *at the end of time,* ushering in the new heaven and the new earth.

Wherever we look in the New Testament we cannot fail to be struck by the wonderful truth that the God whom we see in Jesus Christ is no remote God. For he was not willing only to get his hands dirty, he was willing to get them pierced for the sake of those who did it. Listen again to Dorothy L Sayers and the way in which she drives this point home in her play *The Man Born To Be King*:

> For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and lack of money to the worst horrors, pain, humiliation, defeat, despair and death. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and felt it was all worthwhile.

Some of the good which can be brought out of evil can be glimpsed in this life. For example, through suffering we may become more caring, sympathetic and in a deeper way more whole people. We are reminded, quite rightly, that we are not gods but contingent beings, and it is no bad thing to have our minds focused on eternal matters through pain, so coming to the realisation that this life is not the whole story. Suffering can be a means into a deeper, more intimate relationship with the God for whom we were made. One person who has testified to this truth is Mary Craig who describes how two of her four sons were born with severe abnormalities, one with Hohlers Syndrome and the other with Downs Syndrome. Interestingly enough she speaks of 'redemptive suffering'. So she writes:

> In the teeth of the evidence I do not believe that any suffering is ultimately pointless or absurd, although it is often difficult to go on convincing oneself of this. At first we react with incredulity, anger and despair. Yet the value of suffering does not lie in the pain of it but in what the sufferer makes of it. It is in sorrow that we discover the things that really matter; in sorrow that we discover ourselves.[6]

A similar perspective to that of Mary Craig is shared by Professor Sir Norman Anderson, whose son, Hugh, after a brilliant career at Cambridge, died of cancer at the age of 21. With a father's heavy heart Professor Anderson wrote:

> People used continually to ask us why a young man of such promise, and with such a zest for life, should be allowed to die so young. To this the only reply, we both feel, is that we do not, cannot know. The

6 Mary Craig *Blessings* (Hodder and Stoughton 1979)

> vital question to ask God in such cases is not "Why did you allow this?" (to which he seldom, I think, vouchsafes an answer), but "What do you want to teach me through this?"[7]

How we respond is an important element in, as it were, creating the appropriate conditions for some good to be produced, but such a response requires a foundation. Neither Mary Craig nor Norman Anderson knew the particular answer to the question 'Why?', but they did know why they trusted God who knew why, and that trust was based upon the solid foundation of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

However, it is important to stress that not all good will be seen in this life, and here the eternal perspective is crucial.[8] What is being suggested is that from the eternal perspective of God – the author of the drama – who 'sees the end from the beginning', all creaturely decisions and responses are woven in with all other events to serve his purpose. Individual actions do have significance in that they go towards making up patterns of lasting importance within the drama, but they do not exert an ultimate significance; that is provided by the sovereign God who places the decisions and actions of his creatures in an eternal context which alone affords ultimate meaning.

An illustration which might give us some 'feel' of how this might be so is the well known one of the weaving of Persian carpets. It is said that Persian carpets are made on a large frame. On one side of the frame stands the family placing threads into the framework, sometimes randomly, sometimes thoughtfully. On the other side of the frame stands the father, the master weaver, who takes all these threads and weaves them into a rich pattern of his design. When the carpet is completed the frame is then turned around for all to see. With certain qualifications, God may be likened to the master weaver in this respect: that he takes each 'thread' (events and actions) and weaves them into a pattern which gives the 'threads' their significance. However, unlike the master weaver, God 'from the beginning' not only knows what those 'threads' are and where they will be placed on this side of the frame (a consequence of his omniscience), but he also decrees the events and actions themselves according to the eternal counsel of his will (a consequence of his omnipotence and wisdom).[9] Some of the patterns and configurations can be discerned in this life (our side of the frame); however, it is only the

7 Norman Anderson *An Adopted Son* (IVP 1985)

8 This thesis is explored in some detail by V P White *The Fall of a Sparrow* (Paternoster 1985).

9 For a first rate discussion of the relationship between the providence of God and evil from a 'no risk' compatibilist point of view see Paul Helm *The Providence of God* (IVP 1993).

other side of the frame (God's eternal purpose) which provides the lasting context from which ultimate significance is derived. The central point in that framework through which all of these threads are related and integrated is the life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus Christ.

The Eternal Perspective

Let us now tie this in with our earlier discussion about the nature of evil. Within our temporal context of experience some events are evil, including certain forms of suffering. But this is not the whole context, for another perspective is available. It is when the evil event is related to the wider context of God's eternal purposes that the evil is transfigured; within this broader God-given context evil events can be seen to contain good *ends*. This does not take the evil out of evil, but it does mean that evil has a real but temporary hold on reality. Let us focus on how this might be so by thinking about the events surrounding the crucifixion. In terms of the betrayal, the trial, the scourging and the torture of the Cross, the configuration of events is formed. Within this context such events are deemed evil, not least because man's wickedness is involved, the rebellion mentioned earlier. But this is not the final, nor even the primary, context from which these events derive their full significance (1 Cor 2:7ff); that is provided by God's action of redemption in which each event is a constituent part. Here one is not saying that the event of the Cross is being transposed *into* something good by virtue of the resurrection, as if the resurrection were a divine salvaging job; rather, the good (man's rescue from bondage to sin, the defeat of death etc) is already being wrought *in and through* the event of the Cross itself, with the resurrection being but one vital aspect of the divine activity whereby evil is conquered. The resurrection of Christ is also a revelation on our side of the frame of the significance which is to be fully revealed at the end of time (Acts 2:23).

'If God is good and almighty, then why does he not do something about the fact of evil in general and suffering in particular?' The Christian's reply is that he has and he will. The goodness of God is maintained by relating each event to an intended good by placing it within the context of his own design, to be revealed at the end of time. The omnipotence of God is upheld by his weaving of all events into his eternal purpose, leaving nothing outside his ultimate control. Both the goodness and omnipotence of God in his dealing with evil find their expression in a way that we could never have contemplated left to ourselves, and that is in the Cross of Christ, the 'crucified God', to borrow the phrase of Moltmann.

No Simple Solution

And so we have come full circle to the point where we began, namely the relationship between evil, God's goodness and power. The scriptural

testimony is that evil, sin and suffering are too deeply intertwined and all pervasive in the fabric of human existence to lend themselves to any simple solution. Furthermore, God's goodness embraces not only his undeserved love towards us but also his justice, his implacable opposition to all that is antithetical to his moral character. If it is simply justice we want, then that would mark the end of all of us. If it is simply undeserved love – forgiveness – we ask for, that would mark the end of a moral universe and God ceasing to be God. Simple justice – God denies us; simple forgiveness – God denies himself. But what we see in the person and work of Jesus Christ on the Cross is God's justice and God's love meeting in such a way that his omnipotence is paradoxically wrought in weakness. 'This is love', says the apostle John (1 John 4:10), 'not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins'. And what that means is this: God's justice demands that sin (the root cause of all suffering in some way) is dealt with and punished. God's love is shown in that he took the punishment to himself in his Son on the Cross, so that in that the words of Barth 'The Judge (Jesus) was judged in our place'. What we deserve – judgment and death – he willingly received, what we do not deserve – pardon and eternal life – he freely gives. And what was achieved there in veiled form and declared by the resurrection, will be declared before the whole universe at the end of time when the veil is finally lifted.

Focus On The Cross

We end with a quote from P T Forsyth who, like Karl Barth after him, discovered the theological bankruptcy of the optimistic liberal theology upon which he had been raised, and turned to the deep theology of the Bible with the Cross of Christ at the centre. In the midst of the carnage of the First World War, when optimistic self-reliant evolutionism was reaping its own rewards, he wrote his great *Justification of God* in which he states:

> If the greatest act in the world, and the greatest crime there; became by the moral, holy victory of the Son of God, the source of not only endless blessing to man, but perfect satisfaction and delight to a holy God (cross), then there is no crime, no war, which is outside his control or impossible for his purpose. There is none that should destroy the Christian faith which has as its object, source and sustenance that cross and its victory, in which the prince of this world has in principle been judged and doomed for ever. In that cross we learn that faith which brings things not willed by God are yet worked up by God. In a divine irony, man's greatest crime turns God's greatest boon. The riddle is insoluble but the fact sure.[10]

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10 P T Forsyth *The Justification of God* (Duckworth 1916)