

“CAN WE BELIEVE IN A GOOD AND ALL-POWERFUL GOD WHEN WE SEE SO MUCH SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?”

Fr Luigi Gioia
Theologian in Residence

1. Faith in God puts us in the situation of having to hold together three beliefs:
 - 1.1. God created the universe out of nothing: this means that directly or indirectly God is the cause of everything that exists. With regards to bad things, evil, and suffering, we cannot attribute their origin to pre-existent chaos, matter, or to another maleficent divine entity ('dualism')
 - 1.2. God is love
 - 1.3. God is all-powerful
2. These beliefs do not allow us to say that God has nothing to do with bad things and with evil (and therefore with suffering):
 - 2.1. Why did he create a universe where **bad things** are possible and can **harm** us – make us suffer (see the scientific principles of entropy and evolution in our first talk)?
 - 2.2. Even if we say that (moral) **evil** is caused by us, there is the question of why God created human beings that are capable of evil and can inflict suffering on each other.
3. To answer these questions we can tweak the principle that God is love
 - 3.1. God wants the good of the whole system, or a final good result, and he is OK with allowing bad things and evil to happen, and human beings to suffer, for the sake of a greater good.
 - 3.2. Bad things, evil, and love are somehow an expression of God's love, part of his plan from the beginning.
4. Or we can tweak the principle that God is all-powerful
 - 4.1. God does not want any harm (whether from bad things or evil) to happen to us
 - 4.2. But he has not been able to prevent bad things and evil to happen
 - 4.3. He is not powerless, but he has chosen to put limitations of what he can do, or he is prepared to do.
5. In our last talk we focused on arguments that tweak the principle that God is love and considered three possibilities
 - 5.1. God's love is generic *benevolence*
 - 5.2. God's love is *tough love* (like a surgeon or an army instructor)
 - 5.3. God's love is *wise love* (like an educator)

6. In this talk we shall consider **arguments that tweak the principle that God is all powerful.**

7. The starting point is Philippians 2.5-11

Christ Jesus, **though [because]** he was in the form of God,

- did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
- **but emptied himself**, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.
- **And being found in human form**, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
- **Therefore God has highly exalted him** and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow**, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.

8. For some theologians (for example Jürgen Moltmann) this passage does not talk just about what Jesus did for our salvation, but about *who God is* and in particular explains how he created the universe

8.1. God's power does not consist in self-affirmation and control, but in self-emptying, self-limiting

8.2. To allow the existence of something that is not God, God has somehow to 'withdraw', to 'contract' or 'limit' himself to 'make room' for the world and for us:

“God creates by withdrawing himself [...]. Creation in chaos and out of nothing, which is an act of power, is also a self-humiliation on God's part, a lowering of himself into his own impotence. Creation is a work of God's humility and is his withdrawal into himself. God acts on himself when he acts creatively”.¹

“God permits an existence different from his own by limiting himself”²

9. This however means that “there is a certain ‘precondition’ in the nature of creatures and the world,

9.1. a ‘space’ which, in itself, is not (yet) evil but nevertheless provides the possibility for it.

9.2. This ‘precondition’ might best be described as the separation of potentiality and actuality in the creaturely realm”.³

10. Everything that exists is not perfect from the beginning but needs to undergo a process of becoming, of growing from possibility to completion (from potentiality to actuality). But wherever there is change, growth, becoming, process, there is the possibility of something going wrong – that is the possibility of ‘bad things’ or ‘evil’ happening.

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¹ Grebe, Matthias , and Johannes Grössl. *T&T Clark Handbook of Suffering and the Problem of Evil*. London: T&T Clark, 2023, 232.

² Jürgen Moltmann, (TKG, 118), in Grebe 232.

³ Grebe 233f.

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11. As we can see, this argument concerns the meaning of God's being "all powerful": as long as we understand God's power as 'complete mastery/control' we have to think that
 - 11.1. either he cannot control evil because he is not really that powerful
 - 11.2. or that he that evil is part of his plan (so that evil is not really that 'evil')
12. Jürgen Moltmann and most other theologians who have pursued this line of thought argue that
 - 12.1. For God to be God we have to say that he has to be all-powerful
 - 12.2. But add that God has decided to put limitations to his power to 'make room' for the world and for us.
 - 12.3. So that evil is caused by the voluntary limitations God has imposed on himself for our sake.
13. Other theologians think that this is not enough to exonerate God from being accountable for evil

"Voluntarily divine self-limitation makes God culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil. "I could stop this. But I think it's best for me to stay out of it."⁴
14. If we want to argue that God *really* is not responsible for bad things and evil in the world in any way, then we have to come to the conclusion that the limitations on his power are not *voluntary* but a consequence of *who God is* (not 'self-imposing' but 'self-emptying').
15. Indeed, in Scripture and in theological tradition there "are some things God cannot do."
 - 15.1. "Whatever involves a contradiction is not within the scope of God's omnipotence." (God cannot make $2+2=5$)
 - 15.2. God cannot lie (Heb 6:18),
 - 15.3. He cannot be tempted by evil (Jas 1:12),
 - 15.4. God cannot make another God,
 - 15.5. cannot decide to stop existing,
 - 15.6. cannot sin.
16. These limitations derive from God's own nature, not from some outside force or factor".⁵
 - 16.1. Because God is love in the sense of allowing other than himself to exist and 'be its own thing', 'be his/her own person',
 - 16.2. then he has no choice and therefore *no power* over what they become, how they evolve, what they end up deciding.
17. "God always gives freedom, agency, self-organization, and law-like regularity to creation, depending on the complexity of the creatures involved. [...]"
 - 17.1. "The regularities of the mechanical aspects of nature are to be understood theologically as signs of the faithfulness of the Creator."⁶

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⁴ Thomas Jay Oord, "An Essential Kenosis View", in Chad Meister, *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, 107.

⁵ Oord 104.

⁶ Oord 110.

- 17.2. “God necessarily gives freedom, agency, and regularities to creation, because God’s nature is self-giving love.
- 17.3. God cannot withdraw, override, or fail to provide freedom, agency, or law-like regularities.” (117)
- 18. Does this mean that God is less powerful than even we are? Sometimes we can prevent someone from causing harm to another person – why God does not do it?
 “God cannot prevent evil in the way creatures sometimes can, because **God does not have a localized divine body**; God is an omnipresent spirit”. (114)
- 19. What about miracles?
 - 19.1. “God’s uncontrolling love continues to create, and this view of God as Creator is consonant with contemporary scientific theories, such as evolution.
 - 19.2. The miracles we read of in the Old and New Testaments often describe creaturely cooperation, and sometimes miracles were thwarted because creatures did not cooperate with God’s uncontrolling love”.⁷
- 20. **Criticism:** the problem with such a radical delimitation of God’s power is that
 - 20.1. It end up becoming a form of *deism*: that is the belief that God just sets things in motion and then never intervenes (like a clock maker who makes a clock but gives no tech support!)
 - 20.2. And a form of *naturalism*: there cannot be any supernatural action on reality.
 - 20.3. Even granted that the interpretation of miracles in Scripture is controversial, it is difficult to reconcile this approach with the Incarnation, Resurrection, the action of the Holy Spirit.
 - 20.4. And it denies the value of prayer.
- 21. Despite these critiques however, there is considerable value in this line of thought. Cf the parable of the Prodigal Son
 - 21.1. The father could have prevented the son’s departure by refusing to let him go or not giving him a share in the inheritance
 - 21.2. Again the father does not send anyone to force or even persuade his son to come back home
 - 21.3. He gives everything he can and then waits – relying on the fact that his son knows his father’s love for him
 - 21.4. In many ways it is the very love the father has for his son that makes him powerless to prevent his son’s departure and degradation.
- 22. This line of thought is at the heart of one of the most influential books on the problem of evil: Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981)
- 23. Kushner suggests the following interpretation of the book of Job.

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⁷ Oord 117.

24. “Let me suggest that the author of the Book of Job takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take.

- 24.1. He believes in God’s goodness and in Job’s goodness, and
- 24.2. is prepared to give up his belief in proposition that God is all-powerful.
- 24.3. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. [...]
- 24.4. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the Book of Job chooses to believe in God’s goodness. (42)

25. “The most important lines in the entire book may be the ones spoken by God in the second half of the speech from the whirlwind, chapter 40, verses 9–14 [...]

Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?

10 “Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity;
clothe yourself with glory and splendor.

11 Pour out the overflowings of your anger,
and look on everyone who is proud and abase him.

12 Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low
and tread down the wicked where they stand.

13 Hide them all in the dust together;
bind their faces in the world below.

14 Then will I also acknowledge to you
that your own right hand can save you.

- 25.1. “I take these lines to mean “if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it.”
- 25.2. God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even he can’t bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.
- 25.3. But could man, without God, do it better?
- 25.4. The speech goes on, in chapter 41, to describe God’s battle with the sea serpent Leviathan. With great effort, God is able to catch him in a net and pin him with fish hooks, but it is not easy.
- 25.5. If the sea serpent is a symbol of chaos and evil, of all the uncontrollable things in the world (as it traditionally is in ancient mythology), the author may be saying there too that even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check and limiting the damage that evil can do”. (43f)

26. There may be a sense of loss at coming to this conclusion.

- 26.1. In a way, it was comforting to believe in an all-wise, all-powerful God who guaranteed fair treatment and happy endings, who reassured us that everything happened for a reason, even as life was easier for us when we could believe that our parents were wise enough to know what to do and strong enough to make everything turn out right.
- 26.2. But it was comforting the way the religion of Job’s friends was comforting: it

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worked only as long as we did not take the problems of innocent victims seriously.

26.3. [...] If God is a God of justice and not of power, then He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us.

26.4. [...] If we have grown up, as Job and his friends did, believing in an all-wise, all-powerful, all-knowing God, it will be hard for us, as it was hard for them, to change our way of thinking about Him (as it was hard for us, when we were children, to realize that our parents were not all-powerful, that a broken toy had to be thrown out because they could not fix it, not because they did not want to).

26.5. But if we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible. (43f)

27. According to Thomas Long,⁸ “the solution Kushner found was that God is loving and just, but God is simply not powerful enough to banish all evil and suffering”. (65)

28. “So if God is not responsible for evil, then where, in Kushner’s view, does it come from?

28.1. Some of it arises out of sheer bad luck, he suggests,

28.2. some from the cruel acts of immoral people, but

28.3. most of it comes from the randomness of nature and from fate. “Fate, not God, sends us the problem.” (66)

29. What is admirable about Kushner is his refusal to make God the author of evil and suffering. (68)

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⁸ Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*.