

IS THERE ANY VALUE IN SUFFERING?

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1. Let us start by reminding ourselves of the main argument of theodicies: faith in God puts us in the situation of having to hold together three apparently incompatible 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 benevolent
 - 1.3. God is all-powerful.
2. The memorable verdict of the "eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume (+1776) went as follows:
 - 2.1. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.
 - 2.2. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent.
 - 2.3. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"¹
3. The problem with this argument is that it is based on an abstract understanding of its three elements:
 - 3.1. We see the act of creation as an act of wizardry.
 - 3.2. We understand power in isolation from love, that is not as a *loving power* or a *powerful love*.
 - 3.3. More importantly, our notions of God's creation, power, and love are not checked against the *only place* in which they are revealed and manifested to us, namely the person, life, and teaching of Jesus.

John 1: 18 - No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
4. This means is that
 - 4.1. the way God acts in creation and in history (and in our lives)
 - 4.2. can only be understood by seeing how Jesus acted in his life.
5. Paul says that what Jesus did is a "new creation"

2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"
6. How should we represent this new creation to ourselves?

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¹ Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, 25.

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- 6.1. if we imagine creation as an artisan making a golden bowl,
 - 6.2. a new creation would be melting the gold and fashioning another bowl that he finds satisfying.
- 7. Instead, the way in which Jesus ‘recreated’ the world and humanity was by
 - 7.1. the refusal of any form of coercion,
 - 7.2. the refusal to fight violence with violence, evil with display of power
 - 7.3. but by using persuasion
 - 7.4. compassion
 - 7.5. and embracing our condition, our limitations, included our vulnerability to suffering and death.
- 8. As we have seen, Paul reveals to us that in so doing Jesus was not relinquishing his divine power but showing the real nature of this power:

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, [7](#)but **emptied himself**, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8](#)And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
- 9. This forces us to rethink entirely our understanding of God’s power and of the way he created the world
 - 9.1. Creation was not comparable to the work of an artisan who makes a metal bowl, who exercises total power over that which he calls into being
 - 9.2. Even in creating the world, God in a way ‘emptied himself’ – as we saw, ‘made room’ for other than himself to come into existence
 - 9.3. And the nature of God’s gift is such that he never withdraws it – one of the main traits of God’s character in the whole Scripture is that he is *faithful*:

2 Timothy 2:13 - If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

Rom 11:29 - God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.
- 10. The comparison with parenthood can help:
 - 10.1. Having a child can initially be perceived by the parents as giving birth to a continuation of themselves
 - 10.2. But the moment you have ‘made room’ for a new life, a new person, your ‘power’ to determine her or his future is very limited: care, education, love can have a lot of influence in shaping the future of this new person, but what she or he will become has an element of unpredictability and risk.
 - 10.3. Accepting this unpredictability and this risk is an expression of love and faithfulness.
 - 10.4. ‘Power’ to have a child means ability to make room for the child and of having a great deal of influence on the future of this child – yet it is anything but total control.

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- 10.5. Total control is not what being a parent is, and would prevent the child from becoming a functioning and thriving human being.
- 10.6. In fact total control is the opposite of love, is not 'creative'.
- 11. In this light we see how deeply flawed Hume's argument is:
 - i. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.
 - ii. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent.
 - iii. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?".²
- 11.2. God is certainly willing to prevent evil (he hates evil)
- 11.3. but is not able to do so *not* because he is impotent,
- 11.4. but because his is a *loving power* that for our sake has to accept the possibility of evil.
- 12. It is easy to see how this applies to God's relationship with human beings and with regards to moral evil because of our freedom (evil happens because we choose it).
- 13. However we find more difficult to apply this principle to the inanimate world and to natural evils
 - 13.1. With inanimate world is not God's position more similar to the artisan with its metal bowl?
 - 13.2. What prevents God from exercising total power on inanimate things?
 - 13.3. Here too though we have to come the conclusion that God does not exercise power in this way because *this is not the kind of power he has, it is not the kind of God he is.*
 - 13.4. Even with inanimate things, *he lets them be, to deploy their own internal potential, in ways that include unpredictability and risk.*
 - 13.5. This is the only view compatible with what science tells us of the nature of reality.
- 14. Let us also remember that as long as no human beings are part of the picture there is no evil and not even bad things:
 - 14.1. The collision of planets, the explosion of stars, black holes: all these phenomena who are potentially dangerous for human beings are the processes that explain the creativity of the universe as we know it, and ended up producing the planet in which our life has become possible.
 - 14.2. These same processes can indeed be harmful to us when they happen on earth (earthquakes for example) – and this is the part of unpredictability and risk that can cause 'bad things' to happen to us.
- 15. This approach does not produce a 'rational' explanation of evil and suffering and an answer to the argument against the existence of God
 - 15.1. It is more a 'defence' based on faith
 - 15.2. And could potentially speak only to those who have this faith in Jesus, although it certainly does not answer all the questions.

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² Long, 25.

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16. Turning to a more pastoral and spiritual approach to these questions, when we are dealing with suffering, especially when the cause is not other people, but 'natural' (for example serious illness), then we should pay attention to few things.
- 16.1. People usually do not come believe in God because faith gives them satisfactory answers to the question of "why evil and suffering".
 - 16.2. When we are faced with evil and suffering in our lives, from the viewpoint of faith our main questions
 - i. Is not "why"
 - ii. But "why *me*?"
 - iii. And "What now?".
17. And it is with regards to these two questions that indeed faith proves to be incredibly comforting and powerful.

Why Me?

18. It is lack of faith in God that leads us to indulge in the idea that God can in any way use suffering either for our 'soul-formation' or as a form of 'punishment'.
19. "Clergymen know that any time there is a death, the survivors will feel guilty. There seem to be two elements involved in our readiness to feel guilt.
- 19.1. The first is our strenuous need to believe that the world makes sense, that there is a cause for every effect and a reason for everything that happens.
 - i. That leads us to find patterns and connections both where they really exist (smoking leads to lung cancer; people who wash their hands have fewer contagious diseases)
 - ii. and where they exist only in our minds.
 - 19.2. The second element is the notion that we are the cause of what happens, especially the bad things that happen.
 - i. Even Job would rather have had God document his guilt than admit that it was all a mistake.
 - ii. If he could be shown that he deserved his fate, then at least the world would make sense. It would be no pleasure to suffer for one's misdeeds, but it might be easier to take than finding out that we live in a random world where things happen for no reason"³.
20. One of the reasons why people often turn to faith and prayer in situations of suffering is that it gives them the possibility of expressing pain, anger, guilt
- 20.1. As the example of Job shows, even anger at God is an expression of faith, based on the belief that God can take our anger.
 - 20.2. "We cry out only when there is hope that someone may hear us"⁴.
21. The bible, especially to book of Psalms, is full of lament and protestation – they are a crucial part of the way we process pain and suffering.

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³ Kushner, Harold S.. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 91-93.

⁴ Long, 147.

What now?

22. Suffering is not caused by God, neither directly nor indirectly – but this does not mean that it does not have any value.
23. Even people who do not believe in God and have no faith testify that *when suffering happens* it can make us more resilient, mature, compassionate. We can develop all these qualities without suffering of course, but trials are unavoidable in life, and learning how to live with them is an essential aspect of our emotional and spiritual growth.
24. “Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us.
- 24.1. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly.
 - 24.2. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them.
 - 24.3. The question we should be asking is not,
 - i. “Why did this happen to me?”
 - ii. What did I do to deserve this?”
 - iii. That is really an unanswerable, pointless question.
 - 24.4. A better question would be “**Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?**”
 - 24.5. The facts of life and death are neutral. We, by our responses, give suffering either a positive or a negative meaning”⁵.
25. “[Early Christians’] response to the problem of evil and the existence of suffering was
- 25.1. not to question God’s goodness, love, and power, but
 - 25.2. rather to develop faithful forms of community within which the impact of evil and suffering could be absorbed, resisted, and transformed as they waited for God’s return.
 - 25.3. Instead of developing abstracted philosophical theodicies, the early church responded to evil by building ‘theodical’ communities.
 - 25.4. Paul does not try to explain why there is evil and suffering. He simply calls the church to persevere and hold on to the faith even in the midst of suffering”⁶.

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⁵ Kushner, 136-138.

⁶ John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 51-52.