

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL, PAIN, AND SUFFERING

by

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Probably no charge has been made with greater frequency or with more intensity against the Christian faith than that the existence of evil cannot be harmonized with the existence of the infinite God of the Bible. This is the contention offered by many, among whom is H.J. McCloskey who wrote: "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 and perfection of God on the other. God cannot be both all-powerful and perfectly good if evil is real" (1964, p. 61).

McCloskey has suggested that there are a number of solutions available to the theist who is willing to modify his theism. First, "he can assert either (1) that God is not powerful enough to make a world that does not contain evil, or (2) that God created only the good in the universe and that some other power created the evil, or (3) that God is all powerful but morally imperfect, and chose to create an imperfect universe" (p. 62). He then added: "...if any of the 'solutions' is accepted, then the problem of evil is avoided, and a weakened version of theism is made secure from attacks based upon the fact of the occurrence of evil" (p. 62).

McCloskey demonstrated the acuteness of the problem when he observed: "For more orthodox theism, according to which God is both omnipotent and perfectly good, evil creates a real problem" (p. 62). In his conclusion of his statement of the problem of evil, McCloskey summarized what attempts theists make. "Some theists admit the reality of the problem of evil and then seek to sidestep it, declaring it to be a great mystery which we poor humans cannot hope to comprehend. Other theists adopt a rational approach and advance rational arguments to show that evil, properly understood, is compatible with, and even a consequence of God's goodness" (p. 62).

I am one of the latter theists to whom McCloskey refers, but I do not wish to adopt one of his so-called solutions. To accept one of the three solutions would result in a "weakened version of theism" that McCloskey believes would be "secure from attacks based upon the fact of the occurrence of evil" (p. 62).

The Bible, however, does not uphold such a “weakened version of theism” and therefore I do not adhere to such.

Rather, I contend that the existence of evil is compatible with the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God; thus, I maintain that McCloskey has not established his case—namely, that the existence of evil in the world warrants the conclusion that the infinite God of the Bible does not exist.

The method I plan to employ in proving this hypothesis is threefold. First, I shall show that this world is the best of all possible worlds for God’s purposes in creation. Second, I shall make clear that sin (i.e., “transgression of the law”) is the only intrinsic evil. Third, I shall demonstrate that every instance of human suffering results from some condition that is necessary in God’s purposes in creation. While there are many aspects of the problem of evil (such as human suffering, animal pain, natural calamities, etc.), a consideration of human suffering will be sufficient to show that there is no dysteleological pain.

Before beginning this discourse, I need to define what I mean by the term “God.” When I use this term, I am making reference to “the infinite, eternal, uncreated personal reality, who has created all that exists other than himself, and who has revealed himself to his human creatures as holy and loving” (Hick, 1963, p.14). To say that God is infinite is to say that He is infinite in all of His attributes—power, knowledge, love, presence, etc.

It is vital, in solving the problem of evil, to understand that this world is the best of all possible worlds for God’s purposes in creation. In his *Theodicy*, Leibniz developed this argument when he wrote: “...if there were not the best (optimum) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. ...there is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must needs have chosen the best...” (1966, p. 35).

The Bible teaches that God had a definite purpose in mind before He brought the world and man into existence (Ephesians 3:11)—the creation of a being who would be able, because of his own free will, to love God with all his heart and to render obedience to Him. Because of God’s infinite knowledge and wisdom, He knew that in order for such a being to exist he would have to live in an environment suited for God’s purpose. Thus, God created the world as the ideal environment for the primary purpose of

“soulmaking.” [John Keats coined this expression when he said, “Call the world if you please ‘The vale of Soul-making.’ Then you will find out the use of the world” (1961, p. 642).] While the world existed prior to man chronologically, man was prior to the world logically.

To bring into existence a being who would love and obey God, Jehovah also had to give man the freedom to hate and disobey Him. God wants man to love and obey Him as a result of free choice. This is God’s ideal will in the matter. If this is God’s eternal purpose, and if the world was created as a “vale of soul-making,” what characteristics would such a world have? First, we would expect this world to reveal God to man without overwhelming him. God must set man at an epistemic distance, i.e., a distance of knowledge (Hick, 1966, pp. 317-318). Francois Petit commented on this knowledge when he said: “It is necessary therefore that God should make himself known without showing himself, by means of a knowledge that is absolutely certain without being obvious...” (1959, p. 94). The world would be such that man would not automatically (i.e., as though he were not free) believe in God; rather, it would be such that evidence of God could be seen readily (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20). Because of man’s physical makeup, he would have an attachment for the world; yet because of his spiritual nature, he could come to God in a free-will response.

Second, we would expect the ideal environment to be both law abiding and teleological—one upon which man could depend for regularity of response, thus allowing the possibility of pain and suffering. Third, the ideal “vale of soul-making” would be challenging, allowing man to choose to love and obey God or reject and disobey Him. Fourth, the ideal environment, because of man’s physical nature, would provide man’s physical necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing (Warren, 1972, p. 46).

Are not these the characteristics of the world in which live? Yes, and since God is infinite in all of His attributes, and since He would not create “second best,” we may conclude justifiably that this is the best of all possible worlds for God’s purposes in creation.

Also crucial to solving the problem of evil is a clear understanding that sin (transgression of the law) is the only intrinsic evil (1 John 3:4; Romans 3:19; 4:15). Edwin Lewis has suggested the following: “We have learned...that God is Father, therefore that God’s expectation from men is for sonship and brother-

hood. We may therefore say that, in the Christian view, sin is whatever is unfilial (contradicting sonship) and unfraternal (contradicting brotherhood)” (1933, p. 32). This is simply to say that sin is a violation of God’s law. Men do sin. They contradict sonship to God and brotherhood to man; thus, they transgress the law. It is not, however, evil that men do commit evil. It already has been noted that for man to be free to love and obey God, he must at the same time be free to reject and disobey Him. Man’s freedom has been the means by which evil has come; hence, God is not blameworthy (Warren, 1972, p. 40).

Since evil can be committed only by a being with the capacity to transgress the law, pain and suffering per se can be neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically evil. Warren summarized this point well when he noted:

Before the question, “Is pain an intrinsic evil?” can be answered properly, two further questions must be asked: “To whose will are you attributing it?” and “Is it in harmony with God’s will?...” To say that a state, thought, or action is intrinsically evil is to say that some will brought it about and that it is out of harmony with God’s will... (1972, p. 40).

Thus, sin is the only intrinsic evil and man is the only being to whose will intrinsic evil can be attributed.

Although there are many aspects of the problem of evil, space will not permit a discussion of each. Therefore, the final part of this article will be limited to a brief treatment of human suffering. I will show that every instance of human suffering results from some condition that was necessary in God’s purposes in creation. We observed earlier that God’s purpose in creation was to create a being who would be capable of loving and obeying Him. We further noted that God provided the ideal environment for the accomplishment of His purpose. Why, then, do we find natural calamities, animal pain, and, specifically, human suffering in the world?

First, consider some of the causes of suffering among mankind. Some suffering occurs as a result of ignorance. Some suffering occurs as a result of accidents. Other suffering results from sin. Many people suffer because of their own sin (1 Samuel 15). Others suffer because of the sins of others (Ezekiel 18:20). Some suffer because of chastening from the Lord (Hebrews 12:6). Still, however, many suffer because of natural calamities and wild animals. One surely can see that much of the suffering of mankind is due an abuse of his personal freedom.

We can gain further insight into the problem of suffering by observing the relationship between human suffering and the characteristics of the ideal “vale of soul-making.” Since man is a free moral agent created to live in a world that would not overwhelm him, what does this imply concerning the nature of man’s ideal environment? In discussing the possibility of a world without pain and suffering, John Hick suggested: “We have already seen that such an anaesthetic existence would lack the stimuli to hunting, agriculture, building, and social organization, and to the development of the sciences and technologies, that have been essential for human civilization and culture” (1966, pp. 70). Thus, suffering contributes to mankind in that it allows him to “gain dominion” over his environment (Genesis 1:28).

The second characteristic of man’s ideal environment is that it is law-abiding. Thomas Warren observed that “since man has a physical body living in a physical environment in which there are other physical entities, there must be the possibility of ‘mutual interferences’...” (1972, p. 70). Hence, mankind of necessity is subject to suffering.

A third characteristic of man’s ideal environment is that it allows him to be challenged. The ideal environment allows man the challenge of loving and obeying God, thereby becoming a child of God. Man’s ideal environment allows him the challenge of becoming and living as a true brother to his fellow man. Furthermore, the ideal environment allows man to face the challenge of learning and gaining knowledge of the things he needs to learn most. He needs to learn that while his life on Earth is sure to end, he cannot be certain as to when (Hebrews 9:27; James 4:13-15). Suffering is a continual reminder of this. Man also needs to learn that his life is both significant and insignificant. It is significant in that it is the only opportunity he will have of becoming God’s child. It is insignificant in that the sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the glory of eternal fellowship with God (see Warren, 1972, pp. 72-76).

The fourth characteristic of the ideal environment is that it provides man’s physical necessities. Clearly, whatever suffering animals experience as they die to provide food for man is justified upon these grounds.

My conclusion is that there is no human suffering, or any other type suffering, which does not result in some condition necessary in the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose. The existence of evil is compatible with the existence of the infinite God of the Bible.

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