



Musings About Suffering -

Must God immediately vanquish evil?

I recently had a discussion regarding the haunting and perennial question of suffering. Why did God create the universe with both the possibility and the prevalence of suffering and evil? Surely an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God could have created a world free from the harrowing pain that plagues us all.



The question is not academic, since suffering in our lives can lead to bitterness and chronic depression. Pointless suffering can lead to eventual madness and spiritual suicide, so it is vital to attempt to understand its function in our lives and find hope in our struggles.

A classic version of the so-called “problem of evil” claims that the following three propositions are logically inconsistent:

1. **God is all loving**
2. **God is all powerful**
3. **Evil exists**

First it must be said that strictly speaking there is no *formal* contradiction between the statements here (i.e., you can rationally believe all three propositions without explicit contradiction). However, the skeptic believes that if you “tease out” the assumptions behind each statement you will eventually expose an inconsistency or contradiction, and therefore a rational person will admit that at least one of three statements must be in error: *either* God is not all-loving (i.e., perhaps he is “beyond good and evil”), *or* he is not all-powerful (i.e., perhaps he is limited in his ability to fight evil), *or* evil does not really exist (i.e., perhaps evil is an illusion). Since the existence of evil is said to be self-evident, the problem must be with one (or both) of the first two statements, with the conclusion that God (understood as all-loving and all-powerful) does not exist.

Answering a skeptic is far easier than providing a positive case for the purpose of evil and suffering in the universe. For instance, the skeptical argument has weight only if we assume that an all-loving and all-powerful God must *immediately* vanquish evil. In other words, it is assumed that omnibenevolence and omnipotence would annihilate evil without delay and that there could be no *possible* reason that God would allow it to continue. But this assumption is not warranted, especially since it comes from non-omniscient mortals. Since we do not know God’s reasons for allowing evil in the universe, it cannot be said that there are no such reasons, that is, without claiming omniscience ourselves....



Another problem with the skeptical view is that it assumes that we can understand the terms of the very argument. In other words, the burden is on the skeptic to define the terms “good,” “benevolence” and “evil” in a way that does not beg questions or make appeal to unknown metaphysical entities. Take the statement “evil exists,” for example. Some have countered that evil is not a “thing” at all, but rather the *privation* or perversion of a good. Others have argued that the very idea of evil implies a moral law or transcendent standard by which something can be identified as either good or evil. In either case, the discussion must go back to further presuppositions and explore their connections with other assumptions. And since the agnostic or atheist does not have a metaphysical system that accounts for the meaningful use of these terms, the burden of the argument must rest on them to define what is meant in their use of these words.



A further problem for the skeptic is the fact that much evil in the universe is the result of human causes, not divine. On the assumption that man has “free will,” he can then look into the mirror and ask himself why he permits worldwide poverty to continue, why he exploits and destroys the environment, why he devises weapons to kill and torture his fellow man, why he engages in racism (and sexism, ageism, etc.), why he solicits and panders drugs, why he encourages avarice, why he worships hedonism, why he rapes, murders, steals, lies, and so on? Surely these are contributing factors to the problem of evil that should not be discounted for abstract reasons...

I once heard the following statement: “The optimist believes that this is the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist believes the optimist is right...” Note that both are *believers* — but one is an artist of hope and the other is an artist of despair. Each is responsible for his own vision.

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This brings to light something that is implied, I think, regarding faith in the Christian view of God, namely, that He is *perfect* and that all the universe — from the cosmic events of hyperspace to the motions of subatomic particles, and everything in between — is under His sovereign control.

It is clear from the Scriptures that God is indeed all-knowing, all-powerful and all loving, and also that evil exists. The problem of evil is indeed addressed in the Scriptures, and virtually every page includes indirect reference to it. The *tzaddik* (saint) is commanded to flee from moral evil and is promised retribution if he willingly participates in it (or a reward if he resists it). The entire problem of human sinfulness is centered on the question, and the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is intended to demonstrate both God’s righteousness and also His mercy in light of evil.... As Ziggy once said, “We have met the enemy, and it is us.”



Unlike other theistic religions that hope to placate an angry deity by means of moral reformation (i.e., obsequious rituals, promises for moral improvement, engaging in Jihad or crusades), only Jesus gives grace to those who confess the truth of their condition and surrender to salvation that originates in divine love. Jesus was *ish makhavot*- a “man of sorrows” who suffered unjustly and who directly experienced the full effects of evil firsthand. Not Moses, nor Mohammed, nor Lao Tsu, nor Buddha, nor Confucius, nor any others “went there” (much less came back from the dead to give the antidote to the ubiquitous disease of spiritual death).

Since God is perfect and His ways are perfection, He permits evil in our lives for His own sake and reasons. I am aware of the sorts of objections that can be raised to this idea, such as Ivan’s appeal (in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*) that nothing could possibly justify the torture of a five year old little girl who was chained to an outhouse and left to die in the Russian winter, and I am sympathetic to his problem of being unable to “accept such a universe,” but nonetheless, we can only know the divine reason for such suffering if we possessed the very attributes of God Himself, and therefore we cannot impugn His character or purposes based on our ignorance. Again we go back to the faulty assumption that a perfect God would immediately eradicate all evil, yet this begs the question of whether there is an eschatological dimension, a future redress if you will, wherein “every tear shall be wiped away” and the truth shall be vindicated.

Suffering is a tool in God’s hands used to shape our character. The Chasidic school has said, “man descends in order to ascend,” meaning that the battle with *yetzer hara* (the “lower nature”) is meant to strengthen us and develop qualities that we could otherwise not know. Like Augustine before them, theirs is a “soul building” answer to the question of “why?” in light of evil.

Kierkegaard calls suffering the process of being “educated for eternity.” This world of shadows and decay is not our true home, and suffering is God’s way of calling us away from the allure of its illusions. We only become a person, a self, *in relationship with eternity*, and suffering turns the soul’s gaze away from the fleeting to the truth that unifies and heals us. Or as C.S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Only God has the wisdom to use evil for His own purposes. Unlike human pragmatists and other closet sadists, God’s use of the “mystery of evil” is not tainted with unnecessary sacrifice. Your heavenly Father knows the fate of the lily of the field and whenever a sparrow falls to the ground, and yet despite the transience and fragility of the things of this world, upholds and sustains everything in infinite love.

Above all, God understands and partakes of suffering in the Person of Jesus. “Peel away” all the layers of the universe and, if enabled by hope, you will see the face of God Himself looking back at you.



This is not an impassive face, like some Unmoved Mover of the philosophers, nor is it the “empty” face of the pantheist, but it is rather the Face of One who wore a crown of thorns, whose eyes were once swollen shut from the crack of a cruel whip, whose beard was ripped out of his skin.



Look closer still and lock your eyes upon His. He suffered and died for your evil so that you could experience real hope... He took upon Himself your punishment so that you could be healed from your shame.

Blessed be His Name forever.

– *John*