**SIN AND SUFFERING**

Christianity teaches that God is love. This is the fundamental basis for the Christian understanding of God and His providence. Far from the being the pious vacuity it appears to be in the context of much popular devotional literature and preaching - not to mention the writings of contemporary theologians - it is a rich conception reflection on which is a depthless source of insight into the nature of divine providence.

For example, the very existence of the universe is a consequence of divine love. God, being perfect, has no lack or need which requires Him to create the world in order to complete Himself. Nor is He compelled by the perfection of His nature, as Leibniz thought, to produce the best of all possible worlds. Traditional Christianity teaches that God’s act of creation is a free and gratuitous act of love; the world and everything in it was created for its own sake, not God’s. Furthermore, God made the best of all possible worlds in the only sense in which that term can have a determinate meaning: He created a universe containing finite persons, i.e., individuals with reason and free will who are thereby capable of knowing and loving God and entering into a relationship with Him. This is the highest goal to which any creature can aspire, even in principle. God made us to know, love and serve Him and be with Him forever in heaven. Of the untold billions He could have created, God chose to create us because He loved us, and the fondest wish of His heart, for our own sakes, is that we should love Him back.

God created persons with free will. He did not endow them with this capacity simply because it would ennoble them, or so that they could exemplify moral good will or develop virtue, however true these things may be. No, the primary reason God created persons with free will is that freedom is a necessary condition for a loving response. Love cannot be forced or compelled, nor can it be genuinely real if it results from psychological compulsion or some purely biological process. It has to be freely and passionately chosen by a rational being who knows who he is and what he is about, hence capable of binding himself in genuine commitment. It is for the sake of this that our moral powers are worth having; for the essence of morality lies neither in doing good for its own sake nor even in achieving our finite perfection as rational beings. Rather, it is part of pursuing the relationship with God, part of our loving response to Him. In making a free, loving submission to the divine will we attain not only the greatest good of all, life with God, but realize the end for which we were made as well as attaining these other, lesser goods in the bargain.

Traditional Christian orthodoxy teaches that God created the world with the intention that human being should freely choose to love Him. To that end, He placed the first human beings in an optimal environment in which His presence was evident and palpable. Nevertheless, they misused their free will and fell from grace. This original sin, whatever it was, had two related consequences. First, human nature, in particular the standard human motivational structure, became radically disordered. Secondly, and as a consequence, suffering and death entered the world. This crucial point bears some extended discussion.

First of all, by saying that suffering and death entered the world with the Fall I am not suggesting that physical pain and death entered the world for the first time. Neither of these things, considered in themselves, are evil. Pain, obviously, has epistemic value, especially for non-rational creatures but even for rational ones; it allows us to know when we are injured or ill and to discover what things are harmful to us. Furthermore, as Paul Draper has argued, there is a strong connection between the pleasure/pain mechanism and reproductive success, the motor of natural selection. If that is so, and natural selection is, as it appears to be, the only likely way in which complex beings such as ourselves could be produced by natural processes, God would be more than justified in permitting the development of such mechanisms, even if dysteleological pain were a foreseen though unintended consequence of the operation of such a mechanism.

Nor is it true that physical suffering and pain are inseparable. I have heard that there is an experimental pain controlling drug, which, when administered to test subjects, leaves their awareness of pain, both in intensity and quality, unaltered but which relieves their distress about it - they simply have no desire to have it stop. Perhaps human beings before the Fall experienced physical pain in this way but with a full rationality which did not ignore pain’s epistemic aspect; perhaps this is the way that non-rational animals (who lack self-consciousness) experience it now. Nor would the first humans, who walked with God in the garden and had blessed assurance of their salvation, have found death, with its prospect of becoming even closer to God either fearful or a source of loss. No, the suffering and death which entered the world are spiritual in nature, and both are the natural concomitant of disordered human nature resulting from original sin. For we each of us inherit the effects of this original sin in our own persons; it is, so to speak, part of our genetic inheritance.

Suffering is the fundamental feature of life lived apart from God. It is what becomes our lot when we go it alone or are left to our own devices. Christians can agree thoroughly with Buddhists that the root of all suffering is in craving and attachment to the objects of craving. Suffering consists not primarily in physical pain, though this is one of its occasions for us, but the frustration and anguish that comes what not getting what we want, or wanting what we get, or not being able to hold onto what we want to keep. This frustration is the inevitable consequence of the fact that our motivational structure is fundamentally irrational. Craving is itself a source of suffering all on its own. But our suffering is exacerbated by the fact that the things we crave we crave out of proportion to their actual value. Augustine says that if we consult reason, then things are to be loved according to their objective importance relative to each other. Thus, God is to be loved most of all, then others, then ourselves, then the things of the world. But in fact the opposite ordering seems to characterize our inherited motivational structure; thus, desire and reason conflict and we cannot obey reason either with regard to morality or even our own long-term self-interest. Worse than this, our desires conflict among themselves and cannot all be reconciled. The ones we forego torture us; the ones we pursue we do not always attain; the ones we attain do not always satisfy and even those which do are never as satisfying as we expect them to be. We want to have it all, we cannot, and it drives us mad - worse still, the grass is always greener on the other side.

It is our natural lot to have the soul of Plato’s tyrant, and to spiral down into the inevitable disintegration of personality which is the tyrant’s fate. This is the spritual death, the irredeemable loss of self which Christians call hell, and which is the final consequence of sin. Most fundamentally, sin is our free decision to love ourselves more than God and to put our own wants and desires ahead of our relationship to God. Its primary expression is in our refusal to submit to and obey the will of God, which is partly expressed in the moral law. Furthermore, given original sin, actual sin cannot be avoided if we give in and follow our natural bent, and this in turn is something which, given the strength of our appetites relative to that of our reason, is as a practical matter impossible to avoid. The wages of sin are spiritual suffering and death, and most of us (yes, even nice people, even many Christians) are working hard every day to earn those wages. We are all afflicted with original sin and all of us who have attained the age of reason are actual sinners in grave danger of eternal death. More than this, God has no obligation to save us from the consequences of our folly. This is a point which requires further expatiation.

Sin, says traditional Christianity, is the root cause of spiritual suffering and death in whatever form it comes. From this point of view, the traditional distinction between moral and natural evil makes no odds - if the root cause of suffering and death is sin, then it matters not whether the instrument through which suffering and death obtrude into our lives is the action of a moral agent or a purely natural event. The world of suffering, this vale of tears is world we have made through our own free choices. To impugn the justice or moral perfection of God because the world contains evil is like a smoker, fully apprised from the first of the health risks involved in this activity, suing a cigarette company because he smoked for forty years and got lung cancer. It is clearly a case of bad faith, which refuses to acknowledge that the initial choice to smoke, the acquisition of the habit and the persistence in it are all one’s responsibility as are the consequences of these choices. The only blame accruing to the tobacco company was that it made the choice to smoke possible in the first place, which is likely little or none. At any rate, unlike the cigarette company, God has to make the choice to sin a real possibility in order to make the choice to love Him possible as well and thus make possible the only ultimately satisfying good for beings like us.

So, on the Christian view, the existence of evil, i.e., spiritual suffering and death as we have described them, in no way impugns the moral perfection of God. God bears no responsibility for the sufferings we endure, hence has in strict justice no obligation to prevent or mitigate them; for Him to do so is a gratuitous act of mercy, not a duty He has. There is no basis, then, for constructing “the argument from evil” with the perspective of traditional Christianity. Its substantive doctrines do not permit that problem to arise within its religious scheme. The problem of evil, in Christian tradition, is a pastoral, not a theoretical one.

At the same time, I realize that many persons will be inclined to reject this seemingly facile answer. Surely, a loving God would *want* to prevent evil, even if He did not *have* to prevent it due to some moral obligation He possesses with regard to His creatures. Of course. But this is an essentially Christian insight; if God were merely morally perfect as this notion is generally characterized by philosophers of religion, we would all be going to Hell and the doctrine of original sin would entail a pessimism which would make Schopenhauer’s look shallow and phony by comparison. But God is love, and even though we have rejected Him through sin, Christians believe that God still desires to confer the great good of heaven upon us. But God cannot save us from ourselves by intervening in the natural order to prevent suffering, the consequence of sin. No, since it is sin which is the root cause of suffering and death, it is this for which God must find the solution.

Christians believe that God’s answer to sin was the atoning death of Christ. God is love; the cash value of this assertion resides in the belief that God the Father sent His son, the incarnate second person of the Trinity, to suffer and die for our sins though completely guiltless. Christ’s redeeming death gains an infinite merit which provides the means by which our sins may be forgiven and our lives transformed so that we may go to heaven, and does so at a time at which this possibility was something beyond the power of human persons to acquire on their own. The Father loved us enough to send the Son, the Son loved us enough to die for us when we were still sinners, and the Father ratified the Son’s love by raising Him from the dead. That, according to Christianity, is how much God loves us and that is why Christians believe that God is love.

God wants to prevent evil - spiritual suffering and death - and He takes steps to do so by eliminating its root cause, sin. But He cannot do this in such a way that somehow compels us to love Him - that is in any case self-contradictory, since to love of its very nature requires a free response on the part of the lover. Christ’s death makes possible the salvation of all human beings, but in order to realize this possibility in fact we need to accept the grace God offers us, repent of our sins and cooperate with the influence of that grace which, over time, transforms us from sinners into persons for whom eternal life with God is an appropriate reward. More than this even omnipotence cannot do. I conclude that there is no basis within the Christian perspective for laying the charge that the existence of evil proves that God is either morally imperfect or lacking in love for His suffering creatures.

**Suffering: A Christian Perspective** Although my main argument has been completed, it is not entirely out of place here to supplement that argument by some further reflections of suffering from a Christian point of view. I shall confine myself to three points. First of all, I shall explore the issue of our duty to alleviate, to the extent that we reasonably can, the pain and suffering of others, and why this duty does not apply to God. Secondly, I shall attempt to clarify the sense in which pain and suffering may be construed not merely as the consequence of sin, but also as justly deserved punishment for sin. Thirdly, I will discuss what it could sensibly means to say that God endeavors to bring good out of evil, and the role that God’s love plays in all of this.

One reason many people have for doubting that God loves us is God’s failure to intervene to prevent evil in the world, especially the suffering of the innocent. An even moderately good human father would do anything to save the life of his dying child, yet the heavenly Father seems largely indifferent to His earthly children’s’ fate. Any merely decent human being would act, if he had it in his power, to prevent the Holocaust, the rape and murder of innocent children, their deaths in floods, earthquakes and epidemics, and the many other egregious tragedies one reads about in the newspaper every day. Yet God does not raise a finger in order to prevent these things. Worse than this, God enjoins on us a duty to prevent these things from happening, to intervene to stop them when they do or at least do our best to mitigate their effects; how, if He approves these interventions, can He possibly be exempted from this obligation?

A Christian answer to this question must, I think, emphasize that it is primarily by and through suffering, both our own and that of others, that God’s transforming grace operates to fit us for our heavenly inheritance. We do so by imitating the example of Christ, who showed us the proper attitude toward suffering in his reactions to it. First of all, in his supreme endurance of the sufferings of the Crucifixion, he provides the paradigm of fortitude in the face of suffering. Secondly, in the compassion he displayed to repentant sinners, whose sins he forgave, and to the suffering who turned to him in faith, whom he healed, he is the model for compassion. Our common lot as suffering sinners makes us responsible to and for one another, and in tending to each other as Christ taught us we become like Christ, that is, become saints. Indeed, Christians recognize those who sacrifice themselves in lives of service to others (especially the poor) as paradigms of Christian discipleship and charity, the true representatives of the Christian ideal of selfless love. Seen with the eyes of Christ, the daunting prospect of suffering and tragedy in the world is transformed from a hopeless, irredeemable surd fact into an opportunity for helping one another pursue and achieve salvation. The sufferings of others provide opportunities for me to do what I can to alleviate those sufferings and prevent their recurrence hence to grow in grace and compassion. In responding charitably to the needs of others and working to alleviate their sufferings, in challenging the injustices which hold people back from bettering their lot and so on, we are cooperating with God’s grace and being transformed into sons and daughters of God. Likewise, in my own vulnerability and suffering, I provide similar opportunities for others to do the same and thus make salvation possible for them as well. Of course, some tragedies go unredeemed, or occur under circumstances in which no human agency is well-placed to intervene, and while Christians believe that God sometimes intervenes miraculously to prevent suffering and death this is the exception rather than the norm. Perhaps an *a priori* divine guarantee that nothing really bad could ever happen beyond a certain (arbitrary) limit would seriously undermine our responsibility to and for one another and the need for vigilance and diligence in working to overcome the suffering of the world, perhaps even tempting us to abrogate our responsibilities and thus “force” God’s hand. It seems likely that unless the stakes are high and the risks real, the ultimate seriousness and urgency of the fundamental choice between spiritual life and death cannot be appreciated. In that case, the foregoing might not be able to serve as the vehicle for salvation.

Christians often construe suffering not merely as the consequence of sin but as justly deserved punishment for it. We naturally tend to scoff at the claims of Christians of earlier ages that fateful events (such as, e.g., the Lisbon earthquake of 1755) were visitations of the divine wrath upon sinners, both because we now know that such events are purely natural and need no supernatural agency to explain their occurrence and because there is no non-arbitrary reason in most cases to pick out the victims as particularly deserving of their fate. (Were the people of Lisbon *so much* worse than those of London or Berlin that they, and not these others, should have suffered so?) Nevertheless, there is a point worth salvaging here, and that is that it is the state of our souls, not external circumstances, which determines the significance of these events for individual lives.

Considered in themselves, earthquakes, tornados and viruses have no moral quality whatsoever. In a world lacking rational creatures, their occurrence would be neither good nor bad. We call these events natural evils because they are sources of suffering and physical death, which given our distance from God we fear as an ultimate loss of good. Even so, from the Christian point of view, we can construe these events like the boulder in Sartre’s story, which means nothing in itself and different things to different people, except that it is not a subjective reaction but the objective state of one’s soul which determines the meaning of the event for one’s individual life.

The occurrence of an earthquake affects everyone who experiences it, but not all in the same way: some live, some die, some are injured, some emerge unscathed. From the spiritual point of view as well, people are affected differently by cataclysmic events. To the good and those imbued with charity, it is an urgent opportunity to to help others and exemplify virtue, and in so doing to provide inspiration and role models for others. For those weak in faith, it comes a trial through, which enduring, greater faith may be gained. For the wicked who suffer, this suffering or loss can indeed be construed as just punishment. For the innocent and good who die, the earthquake is God’s call home and for the wicked who die, God’s judgment. The injured, as we have seen, provided opportunities for others to grow in charity; even survivors, by reflecting on their own vulnerability and the losses of others, may gain a new depth and seriousness about life which may lead them to salvation. At the same time, of course, for some persons the earthquake will represent an opportunity to loot; others, becoming embittered through loss, will lose their faith and fall into final impenitence. Further, not all the injured may be found and helped in time to save them. But these possibilities, which will sometimes be actualized in the course of events, cannot be divorced from any context in which the free will necessary to either accept or reject God’s love is present and do much to add urgency and significance to our decisions and acts. Again, if God has to prevent anything really bad from happening, what need to search the rubble?

The foregoing suggests the Christian account of how God brings good out of evil, i.e., by using our suffering, the consequence of original sin and the only truly evil thing in the world, as the means by which He salvages what He can from the world-wreck. This again is the work of divine mercy and love. God has no moral obligation to save us or to compensate us for our sufferings; He does so out of love and compassion for His creation. The good and the innocent do not receive heaven as compensation for their sufferings, but because of its appropriateness given the spiritual state of their souls; in this sense, it is their due and a just God will not deny it to them. For the rest of us, it may just be that the sufferings we have undergone may have been sources of grace both for ourselves and others, hence a means to salvation. But even the damnation of the wicked, tragic as this is, has a good aspect, inasmuch as it exemplifies God’s absolute justice in the fact of an unalterable refusal to acknowledge and accept His love.

Even given the foregoing, there are many particular evils which remain obscure to us from the Christian point of view and which even deeply and profoundly religious Christians find troubling. This, I suggest, is a pastoral, not a philosophical problem, and in the face of apparently inexplicable tragedy the best thing to do is to cling to the image of the crucified Christ, God’s pledge to us that He is not indifferent to even the least of sufferings and stands ready to redeem us if only we will allow Him to do so, and also to his Resurrection which redeems that pledge. From the Christian point of view, this is more than adequate to make up for our inability to grasp in every case the workings of God’s providence.