

out certain alternative accounts of the virtues involved in nursing.

In the face of the modern, western culture the Christian nurse faces anti-religious, religiously neutral, or alternative religious concepts of nursing. It is a battle on several fronts, which requires a shared effort on the part of the members of the body of Christ.

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'Why me, God?' Understanding Suffering

Introduction

One of the greatest acts a person involved in health care can perform is bring relief from suffering. This occurs in many ways, but from a Christian perspective the greatest source of comfort comes directly from God himself. In addition, God uses those who have earlier experienced his comfort to help those currently suffering. As the apostle Paul summarised:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)¹

When Jesus Christ first made his ministry public he announced that he had come to bring relief and comfort to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the downtrodden (Lk. 4:18). Yet what we find in our own experience, as do many others, is that the very existence of suffering casts doubt on the very existence of God. If he is there, some conclude, he cannot be the all-loving and all-powerful God portrayed in the Bible. The tragedy is that those times when we most need the comfort and reassurance of a loving God can be the very times we most doubt his existence and his care and concern for us.

Many of the current ethical dilemmas in medicine revolve around suffering. Those experiencing suffering, and watching others suffer, propose ways to deal with the

pain. Abortion is viewed as a legitimate way to deal with the 'suffering' of an unwanted pregnancy, or of preventing the child from having a life filled with suffering. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are proposed as solutions for those suffering too much. New technology is often developed to help people avoid suffering. But does the relief found with Viagra, for example, warrant its expense, and the broader goals it requires of medicine? The lengths to which society goes to avoid suffering reflects an inability to deal with its very existence and to understand the redemptive role it can play in life.

For those in the midst of pain, illness, or grief, questions about suffering are more personal. People ask such question as: 'Why is such a good person in so much pain?' 'How could such a healthy woman be struck down so young?' 'Where is God in all of this?' 'Why me?' This article will provide an overview of the many reasons given from Christian perspectives for the existence of suffering. Intellectual answers, no matter how reasonable or logical, may not bring relief to some in the midst of the suffering. Comfort, emotional care, and being present with the person may bring more relief.

However, to find comfort in God and his love, it is important to have seriously struggled with this problem and its proposed solutions before our bodies and feelings are screaming at us in pain. We need to think this issue through, and decide to believe that the God of the Bible is loving and powerful, in spite of the existence of suffering. Then we will be better able to cling to him in the midst of our own suffering. It will then be easier to accept in faith the

comfort and endurance he promises. Having dealt with the issue ourselves, we will be better prepared to help others reason through this problem and find God's comfort in their time of need. Having seen God work in our own pain and suffering, we will be more able to bring his comfort to those who need it.

The relentless nature of suffering forces everyone to struggle with this issue and to seek to understand why people suffer. Many great minds over the centuries have grappled with this question and have come to a variety of conclusions. Before accepting any of these, they must be evaluated in light of some authority. For Christians, that authority is the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16–17). However, even this is not a simple task, and some of the struggles in this area have been exaggerated by faulty interpretations of passages in the Bible regarding the causes of suffering. The proposed interpretations must be carefully evaluated since people's pain can be worsened by false solutions to the problem of suffering (Clendenin, 1988, p. 322). When interpreting a passage, proper attention must be paid to the context of the passage, and to the overall teaching of the Bible. This paper will evaluate the different explanations for suffering, and their objections, and particularly how these proposals compare to biblical teaching.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of suffering is usually presented in two ways, with different responses required of each. First of all, there is the claim that the existence of suffering (as one aspect of evil) and the existence of God are contradictory, or logically incoherent. This philosophical and logical problem requires an answer of the same nature. The second issue is why, even if it is logically consistent, God would still allow suffering to exist? What possible reasons could God have for allowing suffering? After considering the logical problem, the bulk of this paper will deal with the latter.

According to most commentators (for example, Plantinga, 1967, p. 116), the five propositions essential to traditional theism are: (a) that God exists, (b) that God is omnipotent, (c) that God is omniscient, (d) that God is wholly good, and (e) that evil exists. No formal contradiction exists between these, so another proposition must be added which is either necessarily true, or an essential part of theism. This is usually done by spelling out the meaning of the terms good, evil, or omnipotent. J.L. Mackie provides one example of how this is done:

These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. (Mackie, 1955)

At the outset, Mackie's principles appear logical, especially when today good actions are often considered to be those which cause no suffering or pain to others, and bad ones those which do. But, a closer examination reveals that this is not always so. Sometimes the choice of an action which

causes suffering is judged as good if there is some greater good which is then achieved. For example, a physician causing pain by giving an injection is viewed as doing good if the substance injected brings a greater amount of relief. Similarly, if the consequences of relieving suffering would be an even greater evil, the good thing would be a lack of action. For example, when children are learning to walk, parents stand back from them, even though this may bring about suffering when the child falls. The greater good is that the children learn to walk, in spite of the suffering involved. Thus it is not necessarily true that to relieve suffering is always the most loving action for a person to take.

An objector may reply that this analogy with human actions fails because of human limitations. An omnipotent God would be able to figure out a way to remove the suffering without having to remove these greater goods. These arguments view an omnipotent God as one who can do anything. But this is not how omnipotence has traditionally been defined by Christian theists. It has been taken to mean that God has the ability to do anything which is not self-contradictory (Lewis, 1940, p. 16). Thus omnipotence does not mean that God can do something like creating an uncreated person. In relation to suffering this means that it would be impossible for God to make a world with certain types of good without at the same time allowing for the possibility of some types of evil.

Harold Kushner has responded to this issue somewhat differently. He concluded that God cannot be omnipotent, but is limited by the laws of nature and human moral freedom (Kushner, 1981). While Kushner finds it more comforting to believe in a God who wants to relieve suffering, but can't, this view is not compatible with the biblical description of God. But for most people it is not enough just to show that logically an omnipotent, loving God could allow suffering to exist. The existence of suffering and evil is not merely a problem of logic, but is a problem in our daily experience.

If truth is a legitimate philosophical interest, then pastors and philosophers, believers and sceptics, theists and atheists all share a common problem of evil—the need for insight into the mystery of human iniquity and tragedy. (Wetzel, 1989, p. 6)

To turn to an all-loving and omnipotent God, who also allows us to suffer, requires that we truly believe he has some very important reasons for allowing suffering to exist. There must be some greater good that would not be possible in this world if God were to eradicate all suffering. Christians have made a number of proposals concerning what this greater good might be.

Theodicy

A theodicy is a justification for the existence of suffering and evil. A number of theodicies have been developed by theists, the most popular of which will be examined here. Each theodicy does not necessarily seek to explain all suffering, or claim to be better than all the others, but seeks to explain certain instances of suffering. One simple answer to the problem of suffering does not exist. But, when taken in combination, these theodicies provide many reasons for

believing that an all-loving, all-powerful God does exist and that he wants to comfort people and care for them in the midst of their suffering. However, Christians need to evaluate each of these theodicies since they are not equally consistent with the Bible.

1. *The Free Will Defence*

The most common theodicy is that the world is a better place because it contains moral agents who are free to choose between good and evil, even though this requires the possibility of evil occurring. The alternative is a world with agents who are not free to choose, and would therefore be more like robots than humans. It is taken as generally accepted that a world with only robots would be less good than one with moral agents. We see this in the desire many people have to raise children instead of buying robots. Children are morally free agents, and thus we cannot guarantee their choices. The same action performed by a freely choosing child and by a robot are regarded very differently. The child's action could be seen as morally good while the robot was simply performing its programmed task. Morality is not an issue with a robot. Thus, in our own lives we regard the existence of morally free agents as better than the existence of only robots.

To have a world where moral agents love one another, there must be the freedom to choose whether or not to love. If God created agents who were not free, then they would love others because they had no choice in the matter. It could even be argued that without freedom there could be no love. The good that comes from people loving one another, and God, outweighs the evil that results from people choosing not to love one another.

One objection raised to this theodicy is that if God could create people who could choose either good or evil, why did he not create people who would always choose good? But, this situation implies one of two things. (1) God could have created people who were free to choose good or evil, and then ensure that they always choose good. In this situation, God would be responsible for all actions, and not people, and thus we would not have morally free people. (2) God could have created people who always choose to do good. But this contradicts the idea of freedom, which entails that when faced with a choice either the good or the evil can be chosen. People who always choose good are not free to make moral choices. Therefore, this objection actually creates a contradiction. As C. Stephen Evans states:

If God creates beings who are truly free, then whether they do right is at least sometimes up to them and not to God. (Evans, 1982, p. 136)

A second objection is the claim that God could have created people who were better able to resist temptation. Thus, while having the freedom to choose good or evil, they would have a greater ability to resist evil. Jesus is usually given as an example of just such a person. Although he was tempted in every way, he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15), and Christians are challenged to be like him (Philippians 2:5). John Hick admits that there is no contradiction in God making people who always choose to do good 'so long as we think of God's purpose for man . . . exclusively in terms

of man's performance in relation to his fellows' (Hick, 1966, p. 310). But God's purpose also includes people entering into personal relationships with him. For a relationship to exhibit the attributes of trust, love, faith, obedience, etc., it must 'arise in a free being as an uncoerced response to the personal qualities of others' (Hick, 1966, p. 309). For this reason, each person must be able to choose whether or not to be involved in a relationship with God. If it has been predetermined in any way that a person must have a relationship with God, that relationship would not be viewed as authentic.

A third objection raised against the free will defence is that while God is justified in allowing people to choose to do evil, he is not justified in allowing that evil to come to pass. Instead, God could arrange a coincidental miracle to counteract the intended evil. This view is espoused by Steven Boer and Robert McKim, but has been critiqued (Dilley, 1990). Dilley raises three main objections. (1) A world governed by these constraints would require such a large number of miracles to prevent evil that the natural laws that we now have would need to be drastically revised. The Natural Law Theodicy section later in this paper will show that this type of world would not allow meaningful choices. (2) If evil cannot result from our actions, then the result must be good, and this would divorce outcome from intentions. This would also make intending to do good meaningless. (3) If every intended evil led to a counteracting miracle, the existence of God would be as empirically well-proven as the existence of Europe. It would then be irrational not to believe in the existence of God. But, God chooses to remain somewhat hidden from humans so that they will respond to him in faith, trusting that he exists and is loving (Hebrews 11:6). Otherwise, belief and trust in him would be forced on people in order that they might avoid being seen as irrational.

A fourth objection to this theodicy is the assertion that humans are not morally free in the first place. This view, called determinism, claims there are earlier events and circumstances which combine to be the sufficient causes of every apparent choice. Support for this position is usually derived from the successes of modern science. Physics shows us that the universe runs according to natural laws, while biology and biochemistry show that the physical body does also. It is claimed that all human behaviour can be explained in terms of Freudian unconscious motivations, Skinner's behaviourism, and operant conditioning, or the impact of society. For those areas where free will still appears to exist, it is held to be just a matter of time before science will show how these areas also are completely determined by pre-existing causes.

But this position is not as firmly established as it may appear. Determinism can be taken as a presupposition, but the evidence for it is far from conclusive (Hasker, 1983, pp. 29–55). With the advent of quantum theory, and the randomness seen in subatomic particles, modern physics is becoming less committed to absolute determinism on the subatomic level. Chaos theory is revealing that determinism may not be as valid on the macroscopic level as once was thought. Human behavioural sciences have made many predictions based on determinism which have not been borne out in practice. But most seriously, there is a high cost to holding to determinism. If reality is completely

determined, the experience of free will and moral responsibility must be an illusion. It can even be argued that rational thinking would not be possible in a determined world as even our thoughts would be simply consequences of earlier events. Creativity would no longer be real. Complete determinism can be rejected based on a lack of evidence, and the fact that its implications lead to a discounting of much of what makes human experience unique.

The Bible claims that God places a high value on free will and the choices that humans make. God created humankind in his own image (Genesis 1:27). The precise meaning of this term has been much debated, but in its immediate context it results in humans having dominion over the earth. The Hebrew term translated by image refers to the statues which were left by a king in those regions which were under his authority as reminders of his sovereignty and character. Given this meaning, humans are to serve as the representatives of God, carrying out what God would want accomplished on earth, and also revealing the type of person who God is.

But almost immediately, people rejected doing what God wanted, and decided to do what they themselves wanted (Genesis 3:6). The Fall was the source of the first human suffering. But rather than destroying humanity, which would have brought into question just how free human choice was, God decided to continue to work through humans to further his ways. God chose Israel, freed them from slavery, and gave them a land, not because of anything they had done, but so that he could bless them, and thereby bless all the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). If Israel had responded in gratitude to God, and obeyed his Law, relief from suffering would have occurred, and the world would have been drawn back to God (Deuteronomy 4:6-8; 7:14-15).

But Israel generally chose not to bring peace and comfort to others, but became as selfish a nation as any other. However, God was preparing to send someone who would be able to fulfil his law (Isaiah 49:5-6), and who would bring true healing (Matthew 8:17). This was Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross paid the debt owed by every person for sin (Colossians 2:14), thus restoring people's relationships with God and allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell in each new believer.

Rather than doing nothing about suffering, throughout history God has been preparing the way for true comfort and healing to occur. Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, each Christian can have a powerful impact on suffering in the world. This is what God wants, but he still allows each individual to decide whether or not to pursue him and bring comfort to others. Some may feel that he should have given up by now and taken over control again, but he claims he is being patient so that more can decide to have eternal comfort with him (2 Peter 3:9). By 'holy conduct and godliness' Christians can even hasten the arrival of the day in which God will restore justice and end all suffering (2 Peter 3:10-11). This is a powerful acknowledgement of the significant role God offers to every Christian. God offers help and guidance to anyone willing to bring comfort to others, but the responsibility lies with each person to choose to do so, or to choose to increase suffering in the world, either actively or passively, through neglect or apathy.

2. Punishment Theodicy

Given this link between people's choices and suffering, the punishment theodicy claims that suffering is sent by God to punish people for their sin. This can be viewed either as punishment for one's own sin, or for sin in general. The Bible does teach that all human suffering ultimately stems from sin since God allowed suffering to enter his creation because of the first sin (Genesis 3:16-19). But this only begs the question as to why God would choose that consequence as opposed to some other one not involving suffering.

However, the link between sin and suffering is often expressed in a more individualised way. Some claim that God inflicts suffering on a person as a punishment for a specific sin. This is the sense in which this theodicy will be discussed here. In the face of suffering, reactions of the type 'What have I done to deserve this?' or 'Why is God punishing me this way?' reveal this belief. This belief is also revealed when people expect suffering to diminish in their lives as they mature in Christ or simply become 'better' people.

This view is often claimed to be presented in the Bible. The Old Testament repeatedly states that God will reward those who obey his law, and punish those who do not (e.g. Deuteronomy 11:26-28). But many of these rewards and punishments were promised to the nation of Israel as part of the covenant which they willingly entered into during a period when God's kingdom was geophysical, in addition to being spiritual (Deuteronomy 5:27). These punishments were given for specific actions, often after many warnings, and did not have the random character of general suffering. They should not be taken as the normative way God deals with all people at all times.

The Bible does say there are blessings for those who obey God (Psalm 128). While miracles may still occur, the blessings which are promised are linked predominantly to spiritual health and growth (3 John 2). Yet the abundant life promised by Jesus will include overall good health (John 10:10). The quality of our lives as Christians should always be improving, but this does not guarantee immunity from sickness or suffering. What is promised is a better way to deal with those times (Philippians 4:10-13).

If the Bible did teach that suffering occurs in this life in proportion to the wickedness of people, one quick look at the world would reveal the fallacy of that argument. The wicked obviously do get away with many things while apparently good people have to suffer their whole lives. This corresponds exactly with the type of world described in the Bible. Ecclesiastes 3:16 notes that wickedness has replaced justice and righteousness. Psalm 73 makes the same observation, which briefly led the author to wonder if he was keeping his heart pure in vain. The apostle Paul, in his desire to follow God and do his will, lived a life filled with suffering to a degree which most do not have to endure (2 Corinthians 11:23-33). In fact, Christians are promised that their suffering will increase simply because they are Christians (Hebrews 12:5-11).

This theodicy can also be objected to if punishment without explanation is viewed as retribution, not true justice. If suffering comes as punishment for particular offences against God, we do not usually get an explanation for it. Much of the anguish in holding to this theodicy comes from

trying to figure out what we did to merit this particular pain or suffering. Instead of randomly inflicting punishments on us, a just, loving God would explain why each punishment is being inflicted so that we can amend our ways.

Another objection is that if suffering is punishment for sin, how have children born with congenital diseases sinned? The only obvious answers were raised by Jesus' disciples when they asked him this same question (John 9:2). (1) The person sinned in the womb. This is discounted by Jesus, and the doctrine of the age of consent (Isaiah 7:16). (2) The person sinned in some earlier life, as various reincarnation doctrines hold. This doctrine is opposed to biblical teaching (Hebrews 9:27). (3) Children suffer for the sins of their parents. Some passages (e.g. Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 79:8) refer to the iniquity of parents being passed on to their descendants, which is viewed by some as support for this teaching (Reichenbach, 1982, p. 92). Reichenbach mentions that other passages teach that parents' punishment will not be passed on to their children (Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:20), but discounts them as being fewer in number. However, the Hebrew² and Greek³ words most commonly translated by 'iniquity' do not represent the judicial punishment for sin, but the painful consequences of sin (Martin, 1969, pp. 34–5). These are manifested in the guilt which a person feels, destruction of community, and separation from God (Isaiah 59:2). Jesus' reply to his disciples in John 9:3 makes it clear that all suffering is not a form of punishment, and offers an explanation which will be considered shortly.

Two other passages in the Bible make it very clear that suffering is not usually sent as punishment from God. In the Book of Job, Eliphaz tried to convince Job (Job 4:7–8; 15:24–25) that his misfortunes were the result of his sin and that if he repented all would be well. But Job denied that this was the case, and was later vindicated by God (Job 42:7). In Luke 13:1–5 Jesus denied that the Galileans killed by Pilate and those killed by the falling tower of Siloam had died because they were worse sinners than those who had survived.

All the suffering in this world cannot be explained as punishment for sin. However, God has at times punished people for their sin by inflicting suffering. He did it at the Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Flood, and a number of times to the Jewish people. When disease or suffering are sent by God as punishments, they are usually specifically warned of ahead of time. Many wonder how God could have done such deeds to so many people, but he looks at things differently. The Bible teaches that we all deserve death because we have all sinned (Romans 6:23). Instead of asking why God can be so cruel as to kill some people, we should be asking why God can be so merciful as to withhold the death penalty from many of us for so long.

Sickness may still sometimes be connected to some sin, which in that case should be confessed (James 5:13–16). Suffering may come as the natural consequence of sin, such as when sexual immorality leads to disease or emotional pain. But sickness is often completely unconnected to illness (John 9:1–3). Many godly people mentioned in the New Testament became ill without any suggestion that it was due to sin (Acts 9:36–37; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Philippians 2:25–30; 1 Timothy 5:23).

When we suffer from pain and illness, we need, in general, to look elsewhere than to God for its cause. He may choose to allow it to continue for reasons that are explored below. This was the essence of Jesus' response to the questions in Luke 13. He told his audience that there was no particular reason why those people died. However, those listening to him should examine themselves and note that they deserved the same fate. In light of that, they should turn to him and ask for his mercy and forgiveness. God's normative way of dealing with people is not to punish them with suffering every time they sin. We are told that God will punish individuals for their sin, but often not until the Day of Judgement. Those who appear to be getting away with evil will be punished at that time (1 Thessalonians 1:6–10). This truth allows us to bear with the apparently unjust distribution of suffering in the world.

3. Repentance Theodicy

This theodicy introduces the first of a number of possible beneficial effects of suffering. God designed people to be in intimate relationship with him and empowered by him for everything. But this has not been people's natural tendency since the Fall. We now want to be in control of our own lives and destinies, and are thus blind to our true needs (Jeremiah 17:5–8; Revelation 3:17–19). God wants to woo us back into his care (Jeremiah 31:20; Matthew 23:37). But often it takes suffering and need to get us to the point where we will turn to God. C.S. Lewis put it this way:

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. (Lewis, 1940, p. 81)

This appears to be part of Jesus' response to his disciples in John 9:3 concerning why the man was born blind. He says that 'it was in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him'. In John 10:38 Jesus claims that the purpose of these works is that people might come to know the Father.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God allowed the righteous person to suffer an untimely death, while the evil person lived on (Genesis 4:1–15). God went to great lengths to rescue Cain because he was in danger of eternal death, while Abel's acceptance with God was secure (Stump, 1985). God's numerous interactions with Cain revealed that he was committed to helping Cain get right with him, something God wants for all humans (2 Peter 3:9). God even allowed his own Son to suffer terribly and die on the cross so that the greater good of many people coming to know him personally became possible (John 3:16–17).

Pain and suffering can be used to show us that our lives are not as they should be. They can awaken us from our pursuit of material things and worldly happiness. They show us that we are not really in control of our lives, no matter how much we think we are. They can cause us to turn to God in repentance. We may grant him the control of our lives we should have given him in the first place. This pattern is often heard in the testimonies of Christians. Many people have accepted Christ only after going through some type of bad experience: death of a friend or family member, illness, divorce, career failure, or a

life-long dream being put completely out of reach. It is also revealed in one of the common jibes thrown out against Christianity: that it is a crutch for people who can't make it themselves. In many ways this is actually true; Christians have come to see that we cannot make it in this world without God.

4. Character Building Theodicy

The positive effects of pain and suffering do not stop with the initiation of a relationship with God. God can use times of pain in our lives to mature us and deepen our relationship with him. For Christians, this also includes God's discipline. Just like a parent God sometimes allows his children to suffer, or even does things which feel painful to his children. Always, this is done for the good of the one disciplined:

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Heb. 12:11)

C.S. Lewis explains in great detail how God's love for people is the type which is committed to making them into the best people that they can be. This involves pointing out our faults, and empowering us to change. This is, by definition, going to be painful. But because of the good that comes from it, God is justified in allowing this type of suffering.

You asked for a loving God: you have one . . . not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. (Lewis, 1940, p. 35)

This explanation is also given in more philosophical terms when it is claimed that many positive human attributes develop only in the face of pain and suffering.

Courage develops amid danger, perseverance in difficulty, honesty defying temptation, charity confronted with privation and need, self-sacrifice in the context of struggle, self-esteem in the face of challenge, confidence against uncertainty, love where obstacles abound. (Reichenbach, 1982, p. 97)

An objection raised against this theodicy is that while the suffering may sometimes lead to good character development, it often doesn't. For example, poverty may lead to charity, but it may also lead to indifference and even exploitation of the poor. In this area alone, who is to say whether the existence of poverty in the world leads to more evil or more good? Illness may bring some people closer to God, but others have rejected God because of sickness and disease.

While the points raised by this objection are valid, they do not invalidate this theodicy. It is the necessity of suffering for character development that is proposed, not the necessity that good must result. The outcome is

ultimately determined by people's choices, which leads back to the free will theodicy. Much suffering exists because of the way people treat one another. God offers a way to bring good from this by changing people's characters, which will lead to less suffering. In this way, God can cause all things to work for good, for those who love him (Romans 8:28).

Another objection to this theodicy is that the characteristics said to be formed as a result of exposure to suffering could be developed in other ways. For example, courage and fortitude could be developed in light of a difficult or demanding task like space exploration, as opposed to being developed while in search for a cure for AIDS; help and co-operation could be developed in training for an Olympic team event, as opposed to carrying out complicated surgeries (Kane, 1975).

In response, Christianity claims that the problem with humans is not the characteristics they portray, but their will (Stump, 1985). As a result of the Fall, humans no longer have the capacity to will what they ought to will (Romans 7:14-21). This makes union with God impossible, and what is needed is the repair of our wills. God has left open the possibility that we can desire him to repair our wills, which an omnipotent God can do. Our experience of suffering is often what it takes to get us to the point of desiring this.

Things that contribute to a person's humbling, to his awareness of his own evil, and to his unhappiness with his present state contribute to his willing God's help. (Stump, 1985, p. 409)

This is not a complete, instantaneous repair. As we experience God's healing in one area of our lives we are inclined to ask him to do more. The goal, then, is greater conformity to the divine will which allows greater union with God and leads to character traits more in accordance with those of Jesus (Galatians 5:16).

The character building theodicy has also been criticized for not explaining how evils like the suffering of a child can contribute to the child's salvation or character (Fales, 1989). This issue will be addressed later under Gratuitous Evil.

5. Demon Theodicy

The theodicies discussed so far deal with suffering which comes as a result of human choices, i.e. moral evil. But there is also much suffering which cannot be directly connected with the actions of humans, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and many diseases. These are collectively known as natural evils, and different explanations are often proposed for these.

Some evils which are often classified as natural evils may actually be moral evils. For example, famine may be regarded as due to a lack of action on the part of those who have abundant resources. One of the oldest theodicies treats all natural evil as moral evil by claiming that these are caused by Satan or his demons. Since the devil is the one in control of this world (1 John 5:19), he is able to use it to inflict suffering on people to push them away from God. For example, Jesus states that an illness he had just cured in a woman was inflicted on her by Satan (Luke 13:16). Conversion of natural evil into moral evil makes it susceptible to the theodicies covered earlier.

The main limitation with this argument is that there is very little evidence to support, or negate, it. Unlike Jesus, we humans cannot confidently declare that Satan caused an instance of suffering. While we must affirm Satan's continued involvement in causing suffering, the Bible gives few guidelines to allow discernment of this in actual situations. Anthony Flew claims that this is 'just another desperate ad hoc expedient of apologetic', to which Alvin Plantinga replies that 'to rebut the charge of contradiction the theist need not hold that the hypothesis in question is probable or even true. He need hold only that it is not inconsistent with the proposition that God exists' (Plantinga, 1967, p.151).

As such, this claim passes the test of logic. But for many people it does not provide a satisfactory explanation since it removes the discussion to a realm where we have little information, and in this sense makes theism a less realistic view. Therefore, other explanations for natural evil have been proposed.

6. Knowledge and Experience Theodicy

One of these theodicies is that God is justified in allowing natural evil because it is one of humanity's principal sources of moral knowledge (Swinburne, 1987). Through observing predictable events in nature people learn what actions cause or prevent pain, and thus what are morally bad or good actions. For example, from seeing the results of a fire started by a bolt of lightning we can deduce that it would be a bad thing for a person to start a similar fire. In addition, through experiencing the pain of natural evil, we can learn to sympathize with others experiencing similar pain, and also view inflicting that type of pain on others as wrong.

If man is to have a free and responsible choice of destiny, he needs to have a range of actions open to him, whose consequences, good and evil, he understands, and he can only have that understanding in a world which already has built into it many natural processes productive of both good and evil. (Swinburne, 1987 p. 165)

An objection to this theodicy is that God could have given this knowledge in some other way which did not involve suffering. God did this in the past when he used prophets (Jeremiah 42:1-16), visions (Daniel 8-10), animals (Numbers 22:21-35), and inanimate objects (1 Samuel 23:9-11) to warn people of the consequences of their actions. But, even when it was widely acknowledged that these people brought knowledge directly from God they were rarely heeded.

Personal experience appears to be a better teacher than another's advice (Stump, 1983). It is important that people come to some understanding of right and wrong on their own so that they develop responsibility for their own decisions (Moser, 1984). If God had delineated right and wrong for every circumstance people 'would be so suffocated by God that they had little real choice of destiny' (Swinburne, 1987, p. 157). God's existence would become so obvious that it would be irrational not to believe in him. The problem with this situation has already been addressed.

This theodicy may give some helpful insight into the meaning of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis

2:17). Humans were tempted to become able to understand good and evil, and thus disobeyed God. The consequences were that humans were banished from the Garden of Eden and began to suffer pain. The knowledge of good and evil would then come through the pain which people would suffer. This would come from natural evil, but also moral evil, which would proliferate as a result of people's inherent sinful nature.

God accommodated the human desire to know good and evil apart from him. But this could be done only at the price of suffering. In his grace and mercy, God still instructs us about good and evil through the Bible and the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). But even this requires that we have some moral concepts with which to see the goodness of God's ways. Suffering teaches us enough about good and evil to enable us to judge that God is good, and that what the Bible teaches is good.

7. Natural Law Theodicy

Another explanation given for natural evil is that it is a necessary product of an orderly universe governed by natural law. In a world where choices are to be judged as good or bad, there must be a significant amount of predictability. Based on how things normally occur, a person can know with a good degree of confidence what the outcome will be. Therefore, they can be held accountable for the moral nature of their decisions. This can occur only in a universe bound by certain laws of nature which are independent of the desires of the involved parties.

So, when a boulder moves on a mountain-side we know that it will roll downhill. When it hits a larger boulder, it will probably be broken into smaller pieces. But when it rolls on to a road and hits a passing car, the car will probably be smashed and the passengers hurt or killed, causing grief to their relatives and friends and fear in other motorists. If the boulder was to stop rolling simply because its path could result in suffering, or if it was to cause no damage upon hitting a smaller, weaker car, we would lose much of our predictive powers. This would eliminate accountability and true moral choice, thus making natural evil amenable to the arguments of the free will defence. Therefore, God is justified in creating a world of this type and placing humans in it. However, when personal beings are introduced into a world based on natural law, natural evil and its accompanying suffering are inevitable by-products.

Some have argued that God could have made a world with different natural laws which would not have led to natural evils. However, natural laws are not abstract mathematical equations, but descriptions of how natural objects act and react under certain conditions (Peterson, 1982, pp. 111-7). To change these laws would require changing the very nature of objects. For example, water would have to become something in which people could not drown. That would involve changing all its related properties which make it the compound we are familiar with and which make it so essential for life. To change the natural laws would require changing almost all objects to such an extent that they would not be recognizable to us. Thus, we have no way of predicting what such a world would be like, and certainly no way of being assured that it would be a world

with less natural evil. In this case, the burden of proof is on the objector to provide a model of a universe with alternative natural laws. It remains reasonable to believe that God was justified in choosing the natural laws we have.

Another objection raised against this theodicy is that a loving God would protect his creatures from the negative effects of these natural laws by suspending them whenever evil was about to occur. So, for example, as the boulder continued on to the road it could become elastic and bounce over an oncoming car. But these types of 'miracles' would have to happen so often that people 'could not entertain rational expectations, make predictions, estimate probabilities, or calculate prudence' (Reichenbach, 1982, p. 103). The result would be a world 'in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; . . . evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them' (Lewis, 1940, p. 21). Therefore, moral choices would not be possible, which would not be desirable for the reasons given under the Free Will Defence.

8. Evidential Form of the Problem

This form of the problem admits that it is possible for God and evil to co-exist. This is treated as a hypothesis which is tested, based on the evidence available to support and refute it. Many people experience God as a loving God. They have read in the Bible that he is so, and believe he has acted in loving ways at many points in history. This counts as strong evidence for the theist (Evans, 1982, pp. 137-40). So, even though we may not be able to reconcile all the suffering we see, it must be remembered that our finite minds will not be able to comprehend everything. We must examine all the evidence, and though we may see the existence of evil as a difficulty; we can take it on faith that God is loving and has his reasons for allowing suffering.

This argument has the advantage of making use of all aspects of religious experience. It accepts the incompleteness of each theodicy. But taken together, they constitute a strong argument. It shows that there is an element of faith in people's willingness, or otherwise, to accept a resolution to this problem. On the other hand, it legitimizes the atheist's attempt to accumulate evidence and testimony contrary to the existence of a loving God, and boils the solution down to a choice between two arguments.

9. Gratuitous Evil

A problem with any theodicy attempting to explain every form of suffering is that some suffering seems to be beyond explanation. Foremost among these gratuitous evils is the extreme suffering which some children go through from birth. This, of all suffering, seems to have no redeeming value. This allegedly weakens the case for theism in that new explanations are seen as *ad hoc*. As we have seen, some theists claim that the apparent gratuity of some suffering is caused by the limitations of human reason, while others claim that these types of sufferings are punishments for sins committed. Others claim that it will all work out in the long run in heaven, so meanwhile we should just have faith.

However, some commentators have noted that these interpretations are not necessitated by beliefs about the character of God. Rather, they are based on the assumption that a loving God could not allow gratuitous evil to exist. This involves denying the experience and feelings of gratuitous evil and means that 'theodicy never relevantly addresses the very phenomenon it purports to explicate' (Wetzel, 1989, p. 11).

This assumption has been critiqued in detail (for example, Peterson 1982). This is not just a philosophical point of discussion, but has broader implications:

A theistic case against gratuitous evil casts grave doubt on the reliability of human experience and on the moral and rational categories which condition it, and thus runs the risk of being self-defeating. (Peterson, 1982, p. 92).

Peterson assumes that if God gives people free will with the goal of accomplishing the maximum good, it must also be possible they can accomplish the maximum evil, which, by definition, would be gratuitous evil. Since the world needs to operate according to natural laws which do not seem easily changeable, the gratuitous nature of some natural evils is a consequence of the natural order, and not of a specific reason for that evil. Peterson claims that gratuitous evil is an essential part of God's hiddenness, which agreeing with Hick's thesis, is needed for humans to freely choose whether to believe in God or not. He claims that gratuitous evil is evidence for theism, revealing a God who places a high premium on creativity and moral effort and who wants to transform humans into his likeness. It reveals a God who wants to give the most to his creatures. But in order that this gift can be freely accepted, the environment must be a perilous one.

Theodicy does not explain each particular instance of suffering, but tries to explain the kind of world we have, which allows even the most gratuitous suffering to occur. This view leads to a change in the role of the theodist (Schuurman, 1990). Instead of seeking an explanation for each case of suffering, the theodist shows how suffering in general can be redemptive. This, in itself, can bring significant hope in the midst of pain. It gives someone reasons to cling faithfully to God while weathering the storm. This remains an important way to relieve suffering and spread the grace of God in the world.

Conclusion

Suffering exists, and causes problems for humans in their approach to God. We cannot be confident that we know why God allows each particular episode of suffering. Job never found out why he was suffering (Job 42:1-6). The relentless search for an explanation for each particular instance of suffering can even be a cause for further suffering. False explanations can cause even more pain, for example by inflicting false guilt, offering false hope, or denying the reality or extent of the pain. God does not promise to explain the cause of our suffering, but he does promise to be with us and help us get through the pain.

Not knowing why we are suffering is very different from claiming that suffering is inconsistent with God's existence. It has proved to be very difficult to demonstrate that

God could not allow evil to exist, even gratuitous evil. Instead, some very plausible arguments have been offered to explain why suffering in general does exist, and why God must allow it to exist.

In focusing on the intellectual side of this problem, it is important not to neglect or deny the emotional side of suffering. The Psalms reveal that God is very concerned about people's emotions and their healthy expression. Christianity goes much further than offering rational arguments for the co-existence of suffering and God. Through reflection on these arguments, a person's faith in God and trust in him in the midst of suffering will be strengthened. Having come to a personal conviction on this issue he or she will be less likely to waver at the precise moment when it is most important to cling to God. Our intellect can bring emotional comfort in the midst of suffering.

Through the example of Jesus' suffering we know that we have a God who can empathize with us in every way (Hebrews 2:9, 18). We have a God who wants to comfort us in our sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:3–11). This is accomplished directly by God and the Holy Spirit, but also through other Christians. The existence of suffering should motivate Christians to bring healing and comfort to those who are in pain (Philippians 2:1–8). The Christian also has a great source of hope in the knowledge that this suffering will come to an end, and will lead to a time of true peace and happiness (Romans 8:19–23).

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Notes

- ¹ Scripture references from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, Calif.: Lockman Foundation, 1973).
- ² The most common Hebrew word translated as iniquity is *awon* (Harris, Vol. 2 1980:650–2). The other Hebrew word translated as iniquity is *awen* (Harris, Vol. 1 1980:23–4).
- ³ The most common Greek word translated as iniquity is *adikia* (Brown, Vol. 3 1967:573–6).

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