

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE 'WHY' OF PHYSICAL EVIL

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1. Introduction

Recent earthquakes in Turkey and in Taiwan claimed thousands of lives, left tens of thousands maimed and homeless, wreaked havoc and destruction. The bloody wars in the erstwhile Yugoslavia, Timor, and Rwanda have left a scourge of misery and anguish. The ghastly effects of the Chernobyl disaster and the Bhopal gas tragedy continue to unfold years after they occurred. The list of horror and suffering is endless; the media tell a sordid story every day. This manifold experience of evil and suffering elicits that inevitable question, 'why?' It is an instinctive cry in response to the devastating and disturbing agonies of our existence.

The existence of evil and suffering has intrigued and baffled people down the ages. It is a major concern for theologians and philosophers. It is a recurring theme in poetry and song, in film and drama. The existence of evil torments and fascinates the human mind.

Why does an all-powerful, all-loving God allow evil and suffering in the world? This, in a nutshell, is the problem of evil—a problem that theodicy attempts to answer, a problem that poses a great threat to the Christian belief in an omnipotent, benevolent God. In the face of the threat, the Christian cannot afford to sit back either in passive resignation

or in agnostic silence. For this is a question that confronts every Christian, sooner or later.

It is true that we may never comprehend why God allows suffering, but we must make an attempt to understand the reason for this. It is true that a rational analysis does not really touch and benefit the suffering person, for whom the fact of evil is not a problem to be solved but—in the words of Gabriel Marcel—a mystery to be lived through. Yet, one can endure this evil better if one understands its relationship with God, if one sees—however dimly—the ‘why’. Reason cannot create faith; it can sustain and even build faith, despite the existence of evil and suffering. Understanding the ‘why’ will enable us to see some meaning in the evil that befalls us, and will help us live more significant lives.

It is in this light that I have chosen to tackle the problem of ‘physical evil’. It is a fact that today most articles and papers treat the related problem of ‘moral evil’. However, I find the ‘free-will defence’—which explains moral evil as a consequence of the misuse of human freedom—quite tenable. Second, for the average Christian, the more pressing question is not the ‘why of sin’, but the ‘why of suffering’. I am aware, as stated above, that rationalizing does not help the suffering person. Yet the aim of the reasoning process is to build the right attitude towards suffering, to find some rationale for the misery that torments humankind.

This, then, is the purpose of my venture into the immense, seemingly inexplicable aspect of our existence: that I may understand the ‘why’ of physical evil, develop the right attitude towards it, and find some meaning in the suffering in my life. This, I hope, will enable me to share what I have learnt with others and help them to discover the ‘why’ for

themselves.

2. The Problem of Physical Evil

2.1 What is physical evil?

Our venture into the problem of physical evil should begin with an understanding of the term. We may begin by distinguishing it from moral evil. 'Moral evil' is the evil that results from willful and deliberate human actions. It includes both the intentional, disordered act called 'sin', and the pain and suffering caused by it. 'Physical evil' is the evil that affects or alters the integrity of the nature of a being—either corporeal or spiritual. It includes instances of pain and suffering, and disadvantageous states of affairs caused by unintentional human actions or by non-human causes that destroy the harmony and equilibrium proper to a sentient being.¹ Some scholars categorize pain and suffering caused by intentional human actions as physical evil; I prefer to treat it as moral evil.

A host of non-human causes of physical evil can be listed: (a) diseases like poliomyelitis, cancer, (b) degeneration and senility, (c) congenital and genetic disorders such as Down's syndrome, Huntington's disease, (d) cataclysms like tornadoes and earthquakes.² Very often, cataclysms are included in the category of physical evil. However, the evil does not lie in the natural calamities themselves, rather in the pain and suffering that follow in their wake.

2.2 The formulation of the problem

Given the immensity of physical evil, it seems

incredible that an infinitely good and omnipotent God should have designed such a world for his creatures. This constitutes the core of the problem of physical evil.

The traditional problem of evil lies in the apparent contradiction in asserting the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God, and the existence of evil. The existence of evil questions the rationality of the belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God.

Beginning with the Greeks, the problem of evil has often been expressed as a dilemma. “If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, He must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful.”³

As with all fundamental questions, the problem is easily and quickly stated, but far from easily resolved. Yet, if there is a problem, it admits of a solution—a solution that the theist is challenged to find.

Two radical approaches have been attempted to resolve this problem. The first, absolute acosmism, asserts that the world, and consequently all evil in it, is mere illusion. However, our experience affirms the terrible reality of evil. The second, absolute atheism, denies the existence of God.

Neither of these extreme positions is an answer to the problem. They are not so much ‘solutions’ as ‘dissolutions’ of the problem. For if one denies either the existence of God or of the world, the problem does not arise in the first place.⁴

The dilemma cannot be tackled at this level. The co-

existence of God and evil has to be affirmed, and the problem lies in reconciling the two truths. Whatever the difficulties, we must “always hold tight to both ends of the chain, although we do not always see where the links between go to.”⁵

3. Towards Understanding the ‘Why’ of Physical Evil

3.1 The aesthetic theme

Notwithstanding the immensity of pain and suffering in the world, there are too many beautiful things and experiences in the world for us to despair of the human adventure as a whole.

The affirmation of the aesthetic perfection of the universe is an important theme in Augustinian theodicy. Augustine holds that since the universe is an *ex nihilo* creation of an infinitely good and omnipotent God, the created world is good in its totality; the evil in the particular order contributes to this perfection of the whole. Augustine “never tires of realizing the beauty... and fitness... of creation, of regarding the universe as an ordered work of art, in which the gradations are as admirable as the contrasts.”⁶

He sees the universe as a work of art or a drama in which the discordant elements contribute to the overall beauty and appealing power of the work. These elements appear ‘discordant’ to our untrained senses, but not to the artist, not to the one who looks at the picture as a whole. Likewise, in the universe we consider certain elements discordant because they are not in harmony with other particular elements. From our limited, utilitarian perspective we consider them evil; yet each contributes to the universal order in its own way. From

God's perspective these are means or occasions to good or parts of a good whole.⁷

St. Thomas Aquinas also uses the aesthetic argument. "God [makes] what is best in the whole, but not what is best in every single part, except in relation to the whole."⁸ God allows particular evils to obtain the universal good that is more important and greater than particular goods.

Further, evil lacks subsistence and hence can exist only as an aspect of some good. Though God does not will evil, He permits it lest with the evil some good is also destroyed.

Critics like McCloskey argue "that if evil is justified in this way, we ought never to exert ourselves to eliminate any evil, for we should then be detracting from the aesthetic excellence of the universe";⁹ further, if evil is an occasion for greater good, we ought even to desire it.

At first glance these implications seem valid, but they are naive and miss the point. Suffering is not a casually necessary means, but a logically necessary pre-condition in the fulfillment of God's plan. Therefore it is pointless to argue that we should never exert ourselves to eliminate evil lest we destroy a greater good that might result from it. Moreover, using the analogy of art we can assert that just as the removal of the 'discordant' elements in the work of art will not lessen its beauty, so too the elimination of evil will not detract from the aesthetic perfection. Further, though suffering is an occasion for good, it is nevertheless evil in itself; it becomes good only through the omnipotence of God.

3.2 The argument from natural order and law

Modern scientific research indicates that the universe was not created complete, but in a 'state of journeying' towards its ultimate perfection. Scientific studies enable us to trace out the development and evolution of the universe from pre-atomic matter to the complex, multicellular beings of today. The universe, as we see it, has evolved through a dynamic, organic process "in which order arises by a sort of miracle in the midst of many endeavors and setbacks and any number of frustrated attempts."¹⁰

In fact, scientists like Albert Einstein are at a loss to explain how, despite numerous disharmonious elements, there exists order and harmony in nature—an order that points to an intelligence far superior to all human thinking.¹¹ Having created the world, this superior intelligence—in our terms, God—regulates the process of evolution according to his providence, and uses the energy of the world to make it develop and perfect itself so that lower life forms evolve into higher ones.

The process of evolution necessarily involves a mixture of construction and destruction. "A world, assumed to be progressing towards perfection, or 'rising upward', is of its nature precisely still partially disorganized. A world without a trace or a threat of evil would be a world already consummated."¹² The theory of evolution enables us to see disease, decay and destruction as inevitable in the progressive movement of a world towards its ultimate fulfillment.

According to the 'natural law theodicy', the universe is governed by natural laws. Physical evil results as an inevitable by-product of these natural laws. A uniform

operation of these laws is necessary for rational and purposeful human living.

But, critics argue, could not God have created a perfect world to start with, a world without evil in it? God could not have created a perfect world, for apart from God nothing can be perfect. A created world will have some degree of imperfection; the creation of a perfect world is a logical impossibility. The fact that God has not created such a world, therefore, is not against his omnipotence.

Let us grant that a perfect world is uncreatable since there cannot be two perfect realities. Could not God have created a better world? H.J. McCloskey argues that it is “to ascribe a serious limitation to God’s omnipotence to suggest that He could not make... natural phenomena with different laws of nature governing them.”¹³ This would entail the creation of a different world with different laws to govern it. This contention seems plausible.

The atheist cannot understand how and why a benevolent and omnipotent God creates a world like ours, and argues that He ought to create a ‘better world’. Now, it appears that the theist must prove that it is impossible for God to create a different world that is still inhabited by sentient life. But the burden of proof lies with the atheist. To pose a serious challenge, the atheist will have to conceive an alternative world system with a certain degree of concreteness. It is not enough for him or her to state how an event or group of events would be better, or to state which phenomena would not occur in the ‘better world’. Natural events influence one another to such an extent that the problem is to show how the elimination of certain phenomena, by altering their laws, does not result in other undesirable events. The atheist would have

to develop an entire, concrete world system, and show that it is better than the present world. Clearly, this is a task impossible for an imperfect being. Therefore, “the notion that God ought to have created a world with different laws is more a speculative fantasy than a concrete, intelligible possibility.”¹⁴ This does not imply that a different world is impossible. The atheist cannot conceive of such a world, and the theist does not have to show that it is impossible for God to create a different world.

Critics of the ‘natural law theodicy’ argue that God should intervene to prevent physical evil. McCloskey, for example, argues that “if, by intervening in respect to the operation of His laws, God could thereby eliminate an evil, it would seem unreasonable and evil of Him not to do so.”¹⁵ One must assert that God does intervene in His creation. No theist will dispute this fact. However, the contention that God must intervene is objectionable. A constant divine intervention would be a violation of the natural laws established by God Himself, and hence would be against His perfection and design. Moreover, what McCloskey seems to be arguing for is a systematic intervention. In such a world there would be no necessary connection between cause and effect; there would be no regularity of sequence. Without such regularity our reasoning faculties would not have developed; without rationality, morality is impossible. Thus in a world of systematic divine intervention, rational and moral action—which are an essential part of our being human—would be impossible.¹⁶

Hence, for human persons to have morally significant lives, a uniform operation of natural laws is necessary even though this is the source of physical evil. In view of the good achieved, God is justified in creating the world as it is and

without constant and systematic intervention.¹⁷ Moreover, what is God bound to do by virtue of His infinite goodness and omnipotence? He is not bound to create a perfect world, but to create a world where good ultimately triumphs over evil; He is bound to create a world that is good overall.¹⁸

3.3 The 'soul-making' theodicy

This teleological theodicy proposed by John Hick has its basis in Irenaean theodicy. Based on Irenaeus' distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' of God, Hick argues for a two-stage process of creation. Created in the image of God, the human person has to grow to the likeness of God. In modern anthropological terms, the first stage of creation would correspond to the human person's evolution as *homo sapiens*, and the second stage to his or her spiritualization.¹⁹

The human person's *telos* or end consists in the realization of his or her nature and potentialities, and finds its fulfillment in an abiding relationship with God. This journey towards perfection takes place in the ambient of the world.

Hence, when critics argue that an omnipotent and benevolent God ought to create a paradise, and since the world is not this He is not omnipotent or benevolent, they fail to understand the purpose of the world. The world was not created to be a hedonistic paradise, but an environment suitable for 'soul-making', for human growth to perfection.

Hick likens the love of God for humans to the best parental love. Parents who truly love their child and want him or her to grow into a mature adult do seek pleasure for the child, but not at the cost of moral integrity. The moral development of the child, and not pleasure, is the supreme

goal of life for such parents. If this analogy is correct, then we ought to view the world not in terms of the amount of pain and suffering present in it, but rather in terms of its suitability for its prime purpose of 'soul-making'.²⁰

From the scientific aspect, pain has a positive biological value. It acts as a warning system in times of danger, injury or disease, and stimulates the functioning of the body's defense system. Many of our self-preservation instincts are learnt due to experiences of pain that enable us to adapt ourselves to live within a material ambient.

Further, evolution and development would not be possible in a pain-free world. There would be no need for creatures to adapt to survive, and hence the world would still be in its primitive stage with only elementary life forms. A pain-free world would not goad humans to action. There would be no need for industriousness, resourcefulness, creativity and the like. In short, if the aim of the world is 'soul-making', a pain-free world would not serve the purpose.

It is true that the amount of suffering in our world is immense, yet it would be wrong to underestimate the amount of joy and happiness. The joy and happiness certainly outweigh the pain and misery. However, this does not lessen the gravity of the problem in any way—men and women continue to suffer—and this prompts the inevitable question 'why?'

But would a suffering-free world be a viable alternative? At first glance the answer would be an emphatic 'yes'. A closer look, however, reveals that such an ambient would not facilitate the human journey to ultimate perfection. In a world where wrong actions have no ill effects and careless deeds have no harmful consequences, moral virtues would

lack value. Courage and selflessness would be missing in a world without danger and need. Most important, love would never come into existence. For real love manifests itself in times of hardship and suffering. Love and all the other moral virtues can exist only in a world like ours—with obstacles, dangers and suffering. A suffering-free world will also be a ‘value-less’ world.²¹

Critics argue that this justification of physical evil is not valid because we cannot exercise the virtues so developed in heaven. “All the evils in the world are justified as a means of developing traits of character which it will be impossible to maintain thereafter in heaven.... Why should we value a process which results in a character which cannot be manifested?”²²

In the first place, Christian theology does not claim to know much about the next life and hence we cannot emphatically state that these virtues are irrelevant in a post-mortem realm. Second, these virtues are dispositional states and can influence a person’s life even when conditions for their exercise are absent.²³

However, is suffering really necessary for the development of moral virtues? Stanley Kane thinks otherwise. He cites two examples—training for an athletic competition and writing a doctoral thesis—and argues that it is possible to develop virtues through these. One must admit that this contention is true. However the afore-mentioned activities require a high degree of talent and are restricted to a few individuals. Were these to be the primary means of developing virtues, we would have very few individuals of character. Further, isn’t there suffering inherent even in these? Who can conceive of an athletic competition without the possibility of

injury and pain, and who can conceive of writing a thesis without fear of rejection and failure?²⁴ Do not these activities involve hardship and struggle?

Thus the presence of physical evil is necessary for the acquisition of moral virtues, which contribute to human growth and progress towards the *telos*. The purpose of soul-making is not primarily the development of virtue but is the establishing of an abiding relationship with God.

Hence Hick's justification for pain and suffering is valid only if the soul-making process is successful. However, as he himself admits, "so far as we can see, the soul-making process does in fact fail in our world at least as often as it succeeds."²⁵ Hence he asserts that it is essential to posit a post-mortem realm wherein all people will eventually reach their perfection, and all suffering will be a phase in the fulfillment of God's plan. This affirmation is necessary to assert God's infinite goodness and omnipotence in the face of physical evil in the world.²⁶

4. Conclusion

The crux of the problem of evil is reconciling God's existence with the existence of pain and suffering. The three approaches treated in this paper attempt to do just that.

The *aesthetic theme*, based on the analogy of the visual arts, stresses that the world is good as a whole. The physical evil in it is an occasion for greater good or parts of the good whole.

The danger in such an affirmation is that evil tends to

disappear, and its virulent power, obscured by the perfection of the whole, gets diminished. Though pain and suffering are occasions for greater good, they are evil in themselves.

Further, for a person who suffers, it does not make an iota of difference whether or not his or her suffering contributes to the perfection of the universe. As a person he or she is “a universe to himself [or herself]; to suffer that pain as part of the universe in the perspective of nature or of the world taken as God’s work of art, does not do away with the fact that as far as the person is concerned it is an utter anomaly.”²⁷

In the light of modern research and increased scientific findings, I think that the argument from *natural laws* gives a reasonable and fairly adequate answer to the problem of evil. It explains physical evil as a result of the uniform operation of natural laws, an operation that is necessary for sentient and human life.

Critics of this argument have raised many objections. These objections, I feel, arise out of an incorrect and naive understanding of God’s attributes. I have tried to show how theists have responded to their objections.

However, this approach fails to treat the resolution of evil which, I think, is an important aspect of theodicy.

Some scholars regard *Hick’s soul-making theodicy* as the first clearly defined alternative to the Augustinian-Thomist theodicy. His insights are indubitably a major contribution to the debate on evil.

Hick disagrees with Augustine’s conception of human persons as beings created finitely perfect, being who misused

their freedom and thus fell from grace. He regards the human person as an imperfect being journeying towards finite perfection. His two-stage process of creation tallies with modern scientific findings of evolution, and this is an important contribution. Further, Hick's position conforms with Christian doctrine. The Church affirms that while he was "created in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully 'divinized' by God in glory."²⁸

While Hick does not reject the Fall, he does not highlight it in his theodicy. He sees it merely as a failure in the path of human spiritualization. He prefers to look to the future to explain the resolution of evil rather than focus on the past to explain the origin of evil. The former approach is veritably positive and optimistic, and is an important element of theodicy.

Yet, equally important is the explanation of the origin of evil, the more pressing issue in the 'problem of evil'. Hick fails to treat this adequately. This constitutes one of the deficiencies of his theodicy.

I will try to explicitate my understanding of the 'why' of physical evil by incorporating elements from the various approaches dealt with in this paper.

Our world is a dynamic, evolutionary world. Creation is an ongoing process. Any such process will necessarily have a mixture of growth and decay. Further, this process proceeds according to the uniform operation of natural laws. In such a world, these laws often clash with each other giving rise to 'physical evil'. Physical evil is thus an inevitable and accidental result of the operation of the laws of nature in an evolutionary, dynamic world.

It is only in a world with a certain degree of law-abidingness that rationality and morality—that characterize human life—are possible. Since human life is an essential and integral element of this world, God is justified in creating such a world. Further, it would be logically impossible for God to create an ambient suitable for human life without natural laws; this impossibility is not a limitation to his omnipotence.

Further, as created beings we are imperfect, and we are called to grow in love, to grow to the fullness of personhood. This cannot happen in a hedonistic paradise. What would happen if our world were a hedonistic paradise? Children who never experience want, whose every whim is satisfied, grow up into selfish adults. I think, by analogy, humankind living in an ambient of total pleasure would be a very self-centered, weak-willed, characterless humankind incapable of love. Our world is not a 'vale of tears', but an ambient where we can grow in love.

Moreover, all evil in the world is but a phase in the fulfillment of God's salvific design. As Christians we have a support to fall back on. The Church affirms that even the greatest evil—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—"is part of the mystery of God's plan."²⁹ The enigma of the cross enables us to understand the enigma of evil. Through the suffering and death of His 'well-beloved Son', God wrought the redemption of humankind.

This does not mean that suffering is not evil. It is. And there exist trials and sufferings that—from a human point of view—seem meaningless. Yet there exists a higher point of view, that of a God who calls everyone to life and to eternal communion with Him, though it be through pain, suffering,

and even death.

I am aware that this understanding is debatable and ambiguous. But it is precisely this ambiguity that allows for further, deeper reflection that, in turn, gives meaning to our existence in this world.

Notes

¹ Cf. Bruce Reichenbach, "Natural Evils and Natural Laws: A Theodicy for Natural Evils," *International Philosophical Quarterly* **16** (1976) 179-80.

² Cf. Reichenbach 180.

³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Glasgow: Collins, 1979) 5.

⁴ Cf. Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963) 87-88.

⁵ Bossuet, *Traité du libre arbitre* ch. 4, cited in Journet 59.

⁶ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 3rd ed. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1898, and New York: Russell & Russell, 1958) **5**:114, cited in Hick 88.

⁷ Cf. Hick 90.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1,48,2, cited in Hick 103.

⁹ H.J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) 100.

¹⁰ Journet 127.

¹¹ Cf. Journet 129.

¹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* 65 n., cited in Hick 269.

¹³ H.J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964) 70.

¹⁴ William Hasker, "Suffering, Soul-Making and Salvation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* **28** (1986) 17.

¹⁵ McCloskey, "God and Evil" 70.

¹⁶ Cf. Reichenbach 187-189.

¹⁷ Cf. Hasker 15-16.

¹⁸ Cf. Journet 115.

¹⁹ Cf. Hick 290-91.

²⁰ Cf. Hick 294-95.

²¹ Cf. Hick 361-62.

²² Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 397, cited in Hasker 7.

²³ Cf. Hasker 12.

²⁴ Cf. Hasker 12-13.

²⁵ Hick 372.

²⁶ Cf. Hick 376.

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942) 12, cited in Journet 242.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994) no. 398.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 599.