

Have you ever wondered.....Why there is so much suffering?

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He was desperately thirsty. The sight of a fat icicle hanging outside his hut in Auschwitz concentration camp caused Prisoner 174517 to reach out his hand in the hope of assuaging his thirst. But just before he could place it in his mouth, one of the guards snatched it out of his hand and ground it into the dirt with the heel of his jackboot.

‘Warum?’ – ‘Why?’ the prisoner cried in astonished disbelief.

‘Hier ist kein warum’ replied the guard, ‘Here there is no ‘why’.’

The prisoner in question was Primo Levi who later wrote, ‘If there is an Auschwitz then there can be no God.’ Does experiencing such monumental evil and suffering necessarily entail atheism- there is no ‘why’?

Someone else who was in Auschwitz was Victor Frankl who came to an altogether different conclusion: ‘The truth is that amongst those who actually went through the experience of Auschwitz, the number of those whose religious life was deepened-in spite, not to say because of this experience-by far exceeds those who gave up their belief.’

Frankl made the observation that as a weak flame can easily be blown out by a small breeze, so a weak faith might be extinguished quickly when it encounters suffering and evil; by the same token, real faith, like a strong flame, can be fanned into an inextinguishable flame by a storm.

When we come to what is called the ‘problem of evil’ and the suffering it occasions, we can’t think about it in the abstract, as if it is a question which hangs all by itself in mid-air. How we try to understand it will be dependent upon the beliefs we already hold: whether there is a God or gods, what that God is like, the nature of reality (for example, *is* there such a thing as suffering?). So depending upon what we believe and how we believe, as Frankl points out, when confronted with suffering either that ‘belief’ will be snuffed out or fanned into a brighter flame.

People talk about ‘the *problem* of pain.’ What do they mean?

First, let it be said quite plainly that for the thorough going materialist, the one who believes there is no God or spiritual dimension, that we live ‘in a world without windows’ to use the phrase of Peter Berger, there is no problem in that suffering does not count against his or her *beliefs*. Suffering like a throbbing headache, or the nightmare of the Gulags are simply phenomena of existence. Pain is just an aspect of reality like the redness of a sunset or the wetness of water. It may be a problem for the atheist in that he, like the rest of us has

to endure suffering and cope with it in some way, but it does not bring into question any of his core beliefs.

Suffering a pointer to God?

Having said that sometimes suffering does cause the atheist or agnostic to want to shake their fist at somebody- even if it is the God they don't believe in! So might it not be a possibility that when faced with suffering which is considered evil, it brings to the surface a deep seated instinct that there is a God after all?

Let me explain what I mean.

Suppose you want to lay a square patio of crazy paving in your garden, so you go ahead and order a load of broken flagstones. Once they have been delivered there begins the tricky business of piecing them together. You will not be surprised in the least to discover that when you have finished you are left with a few pieces which can't be placed anywhere. You are not taken aback because you never thought that random, broken pieces were *designed* to fill up your square. It would not cross your mind to contact your supplier and complain that he didn't send the right type of flagstones for your particular garden!

Now imagine that you buy a jigsaw puzzle from a shop. You fit it all together carefully and thoughtfully, but at the end you are left with some pieces missing, more than that you have some pieces which do not even belong to your puzzle. Now you *do* have a right to be offended and complain. Why? Because underlying your complaint is the belief (rightly so) that there is intention, purpose and design behind the jigsaw puzzle, that is what makes a jig saw puzzle different from crazy paving.

A similar situation exists when we come to the question of suffering. Suffering, we feel, doesn't quite fit in with the scheme of things. There would be no cause for complaint if underneath it all we didn't believe that the world *was* consciously designed by a good God. Paradoxical though it may seem, the fact that we feel we have a right to complain is evidence that we really do believe there is a God to complain to, that our world is more like a well-designed jigsaw puzzle with some pieces missing rather than a pile of crazy paving we are expected to put together somehow. Do you see?

The trilemma

The problem of suffering is a problem for the *Christian* because it appears to count against what he or she *believes*, namely, that God is good and Almighty.

It has been put in the form of a trilemma by the late Professor John Hick: 'If God is perfectly loving and good he must wish to abolish evil; if God is all powerful he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists therefore God cannot be both perfectly good and almighty.'

There are, of course, some simple solutions to the trilemma which essentially involve the removal of one or more elements of belief so it ceases to be a problem at all.

One option would be to deny the existence of suffering, viewing it as 'illusory' in some way. This is the position of Theravada Buddhism which considers suffering (*dukkha*) as part of 'Maya'- belonging to the vale of illusion, only having a reality like a dream is a 'reality' to a person asleep. Similarly the sect 'Christian Science' considers pain to be the 'product of the mortal mind' with no external basis. I am reminded of the limerick: 'There was once a faith healer from deal who said although pain is not real, when I sit on a pin and I puncture my skin, I dislike what I imagine I feel!' But most human beings don't see it that way but as something objectively real.

The second alternative is to deny that God is all-powerful which is what the Process theologian, David Griffin does when he states quite unashamedly that his solution is found by 'denying the doctrine of omnipotence fundamental to it'. In other words, God is not almighty, his experiment of 'creation' has got out of hand.

Thirdly, there is the denial of God's goodness which is expressed to great effect by Archibald MacLeish in his play, *J.B.*, an updated re-presentation of the story of Job. At various intervals throughout the play there is the haunting refrain, 'If he is God he is not good, if he is good he is not God'. In the play a clergyman tells J.B. that his suffering is caused by the simple fact he is a man, that it is all part of the human condition, to which J.B. responds, 'Yours is the cruellest comfort of all, making the Creator of the Universe the miscreator of mankind, a party to the crimes He punishes.' That is, God is like some Dr Frankenstein who has created a monster he can't control and then blames the monster!

The traditional Christian claim, however, is that God is good, almighty, and that evil and suffering are realities to be reckoned with. The 'problem', therefore, turns on how to relate these two articles of faith (the goodness and omnipotence of God) to the fact of suffering, without compromising either of these tenets of belief or trivializing human anguish.

Suffering as evil

In turning to the question, 'What makes suffering *morally* reprehensible?' a prior question needs to be addressed: 'Is all suffering evil or does it only become so in certain contexts?' Just think about it: whilst *psychologically* most pain might be considered to be disagreeable, it is not necessarily the case that it is morally so, especially if the pain endured is part of *means* to a recognised good. For example, biologically pain serves as part of the body's defence mechanism preventing further injury through, say, a reflex action. Touch a hot plate and your pull away to prevent further burning. That is 'good' pain. In some contexts it is morally neutral, like the 'healthy' pain after long exercise, or morally good, as in the case of corrective punishment.

What makes suffering *morally* objectionable is when it occurs in a form which is *wholly* negative, apparently devoid of any conceivable purpose. It is this which lies at the root of so many tormented human cries - 'Why should my ten day old baby die?' 'Why should such a gifted man be reduced to a mere shell through Alzheimer's?' It is this seeming lack of purpose which provides the twist which calls for such pain to be viewed as evil: *pointless* suffering.

When we ask the question, 'Why suffering?' we could be straining in one of two directions.

First, we could be looking backward for some *cause*: 'What is the cause of suffering?' Both in terms of an *ultimate* cause - 'Where did it come from in the first place?', and in the more *immediate* sense, 'What is the cause of *this* particular suffering?' Now the Christian faith has something to say about these things in terms of human beings rupturing their relationship with God which throws all other relationships out of joint, with suffering literally being a painful reminder that all is not well with ourselves and our Maker. Someone has suggested that we think of it like this: "What would happen if our sun lost its place in the solar system?" The answer is that there would be chaos. You might have Mars spinning off into endless darkness, Saturn's rings beginning to crumble, or Mercury flying right into the Sun, and there would be bits of the solar system strewn everywhere. It is because they are rightly related to the Sun that it works.' The Bible tells, especially in Romans 1, that morally and spiritually speaking, that is what has happened to humankind. God is like the Sun in the solar system of our lives, and if he is removed from the centre of our thinking, then our thinking and behaviour get out of control and soon the whole of society begins to collapse.

Tonight, however, I want to focus on the second possibility, looking forward and asking 'What might be the *purpose* of suffering?' What good, if any, can there be in suffering? Of course I have already mentioned one, it can act as a severe wake-up call that we need to get right with our Maker. But the idea of focusing on other purposes is important.

This way of looking at the question was in fact taken up by a certain school of psychoanalysis called logotherapy, headed by Victor Frankl, who, as I have already mentioned experienced the horrors of Auschwitz. It was there of all places that he noticed the positive way in which some people approached their situation. This observation in turn led him to quote Nietzsche with approval when he said that 'Men and women can endure any amount of suffering so long as they know the why to their existence'. In other words, if that suffering can be placed within some wider context of meaning and belief, much, but no means all, of the sting is taken out.

How might Christians face suffering and why?

A number of years ago I was a fellow trustee of a charity with a very remarkable woman, Baroness Caroline Cox, former deputy speaker of the House of Lords. She has been

described as ‘the Mother Teresa of the war-torn poor,’ for, as a former nurse, she personally supervises Christian relief to many of the war ravaged areas of the world and actually goes to the front line and helps out with the distribution of food, clothes and medicine. Often when she arrives people greet her with these words: ‘Thank God you’ve come. We thought the world had forgotten us.’

Once she was asked to relate both her worst and best moment during all her journeys of mercy. The worst? She thought for a moment and then described what it was like to enter a Dinka village after the Sudanese government-backed soldiers had left. The stench of death, she said, was simply overpowering. More than a hundred corpses lay where they had been butchered. Men, women, children, even cattle had been cut down or people had been herded into captivity as slaves. Straw huts were set ablaze- devastation and death affronted eyes everywhere. Worst of all was the knowledge that the militia would return. “Genocide is an overworked word”, Baroness Cox said, “and one I would never use without meaning it. But I mean it.”

What of her best moment? This, she said, came straight after the worst. With the raiders gone and the results of their cruelty all around- husbands slain, children kidnapped into slavery, homes ruined, the women brutally raped-the few women still alive were pulling themselves together. And their first instinctive act was to make tiny crosses out of sticks lying on the ground and to push them into the earth.

What were they doing? Simply fashioning instant memorials to those they had just lost? Not at all, Baroness Cox explained the crudely formed crosses were not markers of death, but symbols of hope. The crossed sticks, pressed into the ground at the moment when their bodies reeled and their hearts bled, were acts of faith. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, they served a God whom they believed knew pain as they knew pain. Blinded by pain and grief themselves, horribly aware that the world would neither know nor care about their plight, they staked their lives on the conviction that there was One who knew and who cared and that they were not alone.

Here we see the difference Christianity makes from all other beliefs. In contrast to secular humanism which views suffering, in the words of Richard Dawkins, as just ‘damn bad luck’- necessary for the evolutionary process; or Theravada Buddhism, that it is the result of desire which binds us to the wheel of samsara and the process of reincarnation until we are eventually released to become nothing-Nirvana- Christianity recognises that the world could have been otherwise but for human sin, and God has taken steps to do something about it.

The first important point to make is that Christians unswervingly hold to the belief that God is *all good*. His response to suffering and the sin which occasions it is not ‘detachment’ as in Eastern religions, but ‘engagement’, he comes *into* the mess in order to deal with it. In fact it is more than that; it is ‘en-fleshment’ which is what the word ‘incarnation’ means

describing how God became a man without ceasing to be God in the person of Jesus Christ. The Christian writer Dr John Stott reflects on this truth in this way: 'I could never believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross'. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune from it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have turned away, and in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.'

The second point to make is that Christians, because of Christ, hold unswervingly to the belief that God is *all powerful*, but his power is not always shown in the way we might expect. He is all wise, but his wisdom is not always manifest in the way we might hope. The paradox is that divine power is shown through human weakness, good being brought out of the most appalling evil, and we are again back to Christ of the cross.

It is at the Cross where we are presented with the paradox running throughout the mysterious relationship between the evil of suffering and God's good purposes. From one point of view, the Cross was the worst thing that could have happened (the murder of the divine Son, pinpointing so forcefully our rebellious attitude towards God). Yet *at the same time* it was the best thing that ever happened (the Divine means of rescuing us). Here we see God taking sin and suffering seriously because he tasted it first hand in his Son, suffering physically and spiritually of a magnitude beyond our comprehension. It was this which shaped the New Testament writers' attitude towards suffering, the belief that the outworking's of what God had achieved by Jesus' death and resurrection in time would be brought to completion at the end of time, ushering in the new heaven and the new earth.

I like the way the writer Dorothy L Sayers expresses this thought: Dorothy L Sayers: 'For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is - limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death - He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and lack of money to the worst horrors, pain, humiliation, defeat, despair and death. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and felt it was all worthwhile.' What was worthwhile? It was to bring us back to a restored relationship with God and to prepare for something new which is to come in the future and in which he invites us to share.

The third point is that because of Jesus and the cross together with his resurrection which marks his triumph over death, sin and evil, Christians can content themselves that God is *all wise*, that they know why they trust God who knows why even when they don't, that there is *some* purpose in pain.

Let me give you two examples of what this looks like and the difference being a Christian makes.

The first is Jerry Sittser. In 1991 a drunk driver veered across the road into his car in which he and his family were travelling. His mother, wife and daughter were all killed — three generations wiped out in one moment. He writes about his experience in the book, *A Grief Disguised*, which has the rather intriguing subtitle, *How the Soul Grows through Loss*. At one point he says this, 'It is possible to live in and be enlarged by loss, even as we continue to experience it.... Sometimes I wonder about how my own experience of loss will someday serve a greater purpose that I do not yet see or understand. My story may help to redeem a bad past, or it may bring about a better future. Perhaps my own family heritage has produced generations of absent and selfish fathers, and I have been given a chance to reverse that pattern. Perhaps people suffering catastrophic loss will someday look to our family for hope and inspiration. I do not know. Yet I choose to believe that God is working towards some ultimate purpose, even using my loss to that end.' Well, one thing is for sure, God has used his book to strengthen and encourage many whose hearts have been broken.

The second person is Mary Craig who in her book *Blessings* describes how two of her four sons were born with severe abnormalities, one with Hohler's syndrome, the other Down's syndrome, in which she speaks of 'redemptive suffering'. And this is what she says, 'I do not believe that any suffering is ultimately pointless, although it is often difficult to go on convincing oneself. Yet the value of suffering does not lie in the pain of it but in what the sufferer makes of it. It is in sorrow that we discover the things that really matter; in sorrow we discover ourselves.'

Socrates is famously said to have remarked, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' This was given an extra twist by the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, 'A life not put *to the test* is not worth living.' That applies to all of us and especially those who would profess to be Christians. So let me share with you a little thought experiment suggested by Bishop Frank Reteif of Cape Town who knew what he was talking about as his church experienced a massacre one night back in the early 90's: 'Imagine that you had been brought up in the perfect family. You never heard your Mum and Dad exchange a cross word with each other. They were patient and kind all the time. You too were perfect from the day you were born. You never had nappy rash; you never had mumps, you never had colic or measles or any other the other things babies tend to have. Of course when you went to school everything worked out just right for you. You never failed an exam; you were always top of the class, excelled in sports, and were exemplary in behaviour. You never had to go to

the dentist to have a brace fixed because your teeth were fit for a Colgate ad. Then you managed to get to university and there you sailed through with all the top grades, you were even voted student of the year. You never got drunk, never were late for a lecture, you always went to church, and you were just a fantastic person. Later you met this stunner of a girl. And guess what? She came from a perfect family also! She never had nappy rash or mumps, she got all the right grades, had the right hair and perfect teeth. Then you got married and had the most brilliantly paid job, wonderful house and car- no student debts to pay for you. In due time children came along and- yes you've guessed it- they were perfect, never having nappy rash, never having mumps, not a sleepless night. They in turn grow up as Christians; never put a foot wrong and sail through school and university, get married and on and on it goes. At the ripe old age of 107 never having had a day's illness in your life you pass over from this world to the next. Wouldn't that be wonderful? But then ask this question: 'Who would ever know that you were a Christian?' Oh you could say you were. But who would *really* ever know it? The only way people will really see the difference our faith makes, what we are really trusting in, is when the world turns against us, troubles come our way and calamity overtakes us. Only then can we prove to the world (and maybe to ourselves) that we have something better than they have.' Surely, that is right. The 'ideal life' means nothing unless it is also the 'tested life.' And if you are here tonight and not a Christian, what kind of beliefs do you hold which will enable you to face up to the problem of pain?