

A Brief Meditation on the Christian Meaning of Suffering

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The problematic of evil and suffering, in my personal assessment, is the single most contestable topic between theists and atheists. The main question that is often raised is: *if God is the Supreme Good, why then do evil and suffering exist?* It is not so much of a struggle, however, on the part of the atheists to explain such premise because accordingly it is just how things work in this world: evil exists and because of this people do suffer. Precisely on this point though, in order to further their argument, to say that God exists amidst the evil and suffering that humans have to endure—that out of which a greater good will come—is a seriously disturbing intellectual and moral standpoint. This renders theists to be lacking in moral and social sensitivity. Thus, the weight of the argument is heavy on the theists, most especially on Christians, because they have to reconcile this paradoxical and dilemmatic position.

In trying to understand the reality of suffering, logically, the starting point for atheism must be the experience of evil and suffering itself. By affirming the reality of evil and suffering as its starting

point, subsequently, atheism has to deny the existence of a Benevolent God because to do otherwise would be a contradiction. Hence, to address this proposition more precisely, we may begin by embarking on the classic philosophical distinction between good and evil.

We can first define what evil or suffering is. In the classic Scholastic formulation, evil or suffering is not a form, meaning it does not exist on its own but instead it needs the good for it to 'exist'. In other words, evil is the privation of the good that is supposed to exist. In this regard, what comes first is always the metaphysical foundation of that which exists, the good. There is no such thing as pure evil that exists before the beginning of space and time. Having said that, evil is then a necessary byproduct of creation because createdness or contingency always implies imperfection. Therefore, logically speaking, the existence of good must be directly implied in the understanding of reality, including the 'reality' of evil.

Furthermore, if existence is good then to desire for non-being or non-existence is evil or it is a distortion of the good. God desires that something comes into existence and therefore it is good. However, when it comes to the reality of evil and suffering, we cannot say that God directly wills evil to exist because this will make Him an evil God which is not our definition of God. So the proper way to understand the reality of evil and suffering is that God in His Divine wisdom has allowed evil to exist so that a greater good may come out of it. It is also important for us to consider the distinction between moral evil [directly willed by man] and physical evil [due to the laws of nature] but at the moment we shall not go down to that path.

Going back to the concrete experience of suffering, it has to be made clear that, by all means, Christians, who are also humans like any other, would surely have typically similar response toward evil or suffering. In the truest and fullest sense of the terms, we too are taken aback by the reality of evil or suffering. On a personal note, I know to some extent what it means to suffer because I once fell really ill during my adolescent years due to a bacterial infection. But as imitators of Christ, we have to seriously ask and reflect on this question: *why did our God Himself take the path of suffering?* This is not a trivial question because the narrative of the suffering Lord is so central to our Christian faith. What lesson or message did God want to convey upon humanity? If Jesus is what He claimed Himself to be—that He is God—then His deliberate choice of suffering (as it first appeared in the Incarnation narrative up to His Passion on the cross) must hold a significant meaning that cannot simply be dismissed. If this is the truth then we must submit to it and be liberated by it of our ignorance.

So, what is then the proof that Jesus is what He claimed Himself to be, a God? It lies in the event of His Resurrection. We can always look for the historical evidence of this event in various accounts of scientific and scholarly investigation.^[1] However, the main point that I want to bring to the table is the centrality of the Resurrection of Jesus that becomes the bedrock of Christianity's claim that God has conquered pain, sickness and death: the inevitable facticity of human finitude. In and through Christ's Resurrection, then, our experience of suffering has been transformed into a redemptive event. Suffering, toward which our first natural response is similar to the atheists,

must not be merely seen from its material aspect but instead there is a transcendent meaning in it that goes beyond our experience of its material facticity. In the contrary, left with the choice of plunging into the reality of evil and suffering in a manner that is devoid of Christian spirit, we are always prone to end up in some kind of existential void.

To attend to the transcendent meaning of suffering as a redemptive event is not a form of escapism or a kind of romanticizing suffering but rather it is our humble response to the Divine exemplification with regard to human suffering. Surely not in a dismissive way, in the midst of many sufferings that befell us, Christians would still have the natural experience of fear, trembling and often being reduced to silence. As Christians, we can still be physically and emotionally eaten up by the weight of the suffering that we have to endure. We still do not claim to comprehend in its totality the mystery of evil and suffering. Nonetheless, the invitation is to look always at suffering in the eyes of faith, that there is in the experience of suffering a value that is worth salvaging and such value is not for us to invent but it is for us to discover. The evocative nature of the Christian meaning of suffering awakens us from our existential and intellectual slumber so that we, with all humility, may be courageous enough to take a leap of faith toward the transcendent values. Once again, this is not a deliberate act of intellectual dumbing down of the experience of suffering but a humble acceptance of the limits of human intellect in grasping the Divine truth. We believe in a compassionate God not because evil and suffering in themselves are means for redemption (if such is the case then this will render us to be morally insensitive masochists), but rather *in spite of* the suffering we experience God has decided *to suffer with us* toward our salvation.

One last important point that I need to emphasize: it is also our Christian call for justice and truth that urges us to strive up to the limits of our human capacity—in ways which are morally permissible and doctrinally sound—to take an active part in breaking the torturous chains of evil and suffering especially when inflicted by men upon their fellow human beings. Therefore, the Passion of Christ is also a stern critique toward any forms of injustice and violence which are still prevalent in our contemporary culture, especially those which are committed against the innocent.

[1] There are several notable scholarly work that affirm the validity of the historical evidence of Jesus' Resurrection. Few of these "resurrection literature" can be found in the work of following scholars: Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (USA: Kregel Publications, 2004); Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II: Holy Week From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Vatican Secretary of State (USA, San Francisco: Ignatius Pres, 2011); Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2010); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (USA, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Paul Copan, Ronald K.Tacelli, Gerd Lüdemann, and William L. Craig, *Jesus' resurrection, Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, ed. Paul Copan, Ronald K.Tacelli (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2000); and another interesting debate on the same topic available in *drCraigVideos*, "William

Lane Craig vs. Bart Ehrman – Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?,” May 21, 2011, video, 1:54:52, <https://youtu.be/vRTUrvTTRAQ>.

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