

Theodicy

**A Paper
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**by
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Theodicy, defined, is the practice of defending God, and more specifically, His Eternal, Total Power, and Goodness, in light of suffering and evil in the world. In Weisel's, Night, we hear his despair coming to us from Auschwitz in 1945:

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: 'Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?' (p.64)

and through the words of a bent old rabbi, "I've got eyes, too, and I can see what they're doing here. Where is the divine Mercy? Where is God? How can I believe, how could anyone believe, in this merciful God?" (p.72-73) Some will say that God is all powerful, but not all good. Others will say that God is all good, but not all powerful. Both of these professions seem to logically deal with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Neither adequately consider Scripture, which professes that God is *both*, in spite of the evil and suffering we see. We will attempt to reconcile these three Scriptural Truths while seeking a practical response to those who might be questioning in times of sorrow.

The God-fearing man does not have a problem accepting death in this world. He sees it all around him and has been assured that the end of his own existence here is the

beginning of his eternal state of existence with his Creator. He understands this life is temporary, and to each a body is granted, to each a body is due.

This man also does not seem to have a problem accepting imperfection and injustice in this world. He has various reasons for justifying its existence, and is quite content, when cheated out of his place in queue, to rest in the knowledge that God will someday repay the wrong-doing. We will give a more philosophical argument concerning the presence of injustice in the world, later, for those not easily contented with God's future judgment of it.

Physical suffering can basely be defined as the process of physical death over a period of time that makes the victim extraordinarily uncomfortable. Mental suffering is usually caused by a perception that things are not going the way one feels they 'ought' to go. These are very distinct from each other, but sometimes occur congruently. I often feel that things are not going as they should when I am extraordinarily uncomfortable.

In practical ministry, the issue of theodicy often raises its head when the *degree* of injustice or suffering reaches a level which we have decided crosses a line God should not have allowed. A man dying for a crime in a gas chamber may not cause us to think of

theodicy, but a man dying in one for being a Jew, immediately draws the question. Both men may have died a fairly painless death, but the level of *injustice* involved in one was beyond our threshold of toleration. A child may be discovered to have contracted brain cancer and die on the operating table surrounded by loved ones, all in a 24 hour period. Another child may survive but lose the motor control of his extremities for the rest of his life. The former may eventually be dismissed with, “Well, at least he felt no pain. I might hope to be so lucky when it's my turn”, but the later is not so easily dismissed. So we have 2 problems: the level of evil a human free-agent is allowed by God to exercise, and the level of physical discomfort we are allowed to experience or mental incongruity observe. We shall examine these each independently.

That God has created us free moral agents is not often questioned. There is, at a minimum, an appearance of such in Scripture: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deuteronomy 30:19) The moral laws which God has established appear to be for our own protection from the very things done in the world which cause us to think of theodicy: Don't lie to each other, Don't kill each other, Don't steal from each other. When a free agent chooses to disobey the moral law that God has decreed to protect us from suffering, this disobedience, by

very definition, causes a degree of suffering to another; otherwise, the act would have likely not been decreed against. Free moral will, by definition, intrinsically carries with it suffering. Remove either one, and the other goes also. If we concede that the gift of free moral agency intrinsically contains suffering, then we must not ask God to completely remove suffering without accepting the removal of the other.

Thus far, we have been concerned, exclusively, with the *how* of the issue of theodicy. To address the *why* takes us into much less charted waters. A contemporary poet has written, “God is all knowing and all powerful and all loving. Without eating the sour grape we would never know just how sweet and wonderful the ripe sweet grape truly is. With no dirt you get no soft grass.” (Blake Thompson, *The Elliots*) To give us this sense of understanding of His Goodness, by Him brightly standing before a world living contrary to Him, may very well be why God has chosen to let evil exist-- if in fact it could have been any other way. But at the risk of not learning the lesson of Job, sometimes it is not our place to declare the *why*.

Next we consider this idea of *degree* of dissent from my understanding of how things ought to be. How can God allow such incongruity to what I think should-- or would like-- to be? A logical, but unsatisfying, answer might be: How can you attribute

to God an Omniscient Understanding and Wisdom beyond our own, and also complain when He does things beyond our understanding? Indeed, this argument comes directly from Job chapter 40. Another answer to our discouraged heart comes from our Lord in Matthew 6:19-21, where He offers a practical remedy, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” When our heart is livid, or broken, over the destroyed or stolen, let it be a warning symptom to us where our heart is, and may we remember the antidote for what ails our broken, sandcastle dreams.

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

(I Corinthians 10:13)

“The steps of a man are established by the Lord,

And He delights in his way.

When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong,

Because the Lord is the One who holds his hand.”

(Psalms 37:23-24)

“We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven-- a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves', and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all'. Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.”

(C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, p31-32)