

## HOPE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING AND EVIL

The kinds of evil and suffering that I have just referred to give rise to the question Why? Why is there evil and suffering in a world that is supposed to have been created by a good God who seeks the best for his creatures? That is a question that has been wrestled with by people of faith for thousands of years, while the alleged impossibility of providing any satisfactory answer has been used by many as an argument in favour of atheism.

In the Greek philosophical tradition, we find people wrestling with the problem at least as far back as Epicurus, who lived three centuries before Christ (341–270 BC). In the Hebrew tradition, the struggle of faith and doubt that is prompted by the existence of suffering goes back at least three hundred years earlier, to the books of Job, Isaiah and some of the Psalms. Much more recently, however, the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) formulated the problem in its most distinct form. Hume asked,

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Why then is there evil?

The attempt to reconcile the reality of suffering and evil with the existence of a loving and all-powerful God is called theodicy.

It is important to note that there are two distinct ways of framing the question about suffering and evil. The first way, encountered in philosophy textbooks and often favoured by proponents of atheism, treats the problem as essentially theoretical. The problem of evil and suffering is posed as a logical puzzle that needs to be solved, by

college students, perhaps, in their first-year philosophy courses. Contrast this with the problem of evil and suffering posed from out of the midst of actual suffering. In this case the question is put as an agonised cry against God, and requires not only philosophical consideration but also pastoral response. This is the question of the Psalmist, for example, who pleads, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer; and by night but I find no rest' (Psalm 22). In this case the question is framed as a cry for help to a God who does not seem to answer. We come across this plea often enough. What can be said about God, for example, to the parents of a child dying of leukemia? What can be said to the parents who are woken in the night with news that their son or daughter is dead? What can be said about God to those wives and husbands and children who are left fatherless or childless or motherless after a missile fired by their enemies has reduced to rubble the streets in which they live? This is the theological and pastorally oriented question about evil and suffering that looks not for the resolution of a logical difficulty but for a more profound theological response about the presence or absence of God in situations like this when darkness descends and one's world seems to be falling apart.

We have no space here to consider in extensive detail the responses typically discussed in the philosophy textbooks. There are, however, four typical responses. The first is **the karma theory or the just deserts theory**. This is the view that suffering is best understood as a punishment for sins committed. On some accounts it is God who dishes out the punishment, while in others, as in the karma view, there is simply a law of the universe in which people get what they deserve in the end. There is a grain of truth in this otherwise hopelessly inadequate answer. The grain of truth is that sinful or even foolish actions often have consequences that the offender him- or herself is likely to suffer. The link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, for example, provides an intelligible account of that particular form of suffering, but only a very small proportion of suffering falls into that category. The karma theory fails to account for a vast amount of innocent suffering that clearly exists.

A second view is called **the harmony view**. This is the idea that the suffering and evil that weigh heavily upon us now will in the

total context of history be of greatly diminished significance. We might understand this view by considering the analogy of a beautiful painting. Concentrating on only a small segment of the painting, we might see the colour and content as dark and depressing, but when we stand back and view the work in its entirety, we see the dark and depressing portion as contributing to a beautiful whole. By analogy, when we see the big picture of life itself, it is argued, and appreciate everything in its proper perspective, we will understand that the suffering we currently experience makes for a richness and harmony in life that we do not as yet understand. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Christian philosopher, provides a powerful response to this line of argument. Following the death of his son in a mountaineering accident, Wolterstorff says:

But please: Don't say it's really not so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance, away from me. Over there you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation.

(Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, p. 34)

A third way in which people try to defend God against the presence of evil in the world has been called **the soul-making theory**. Advocated in recent years by John Hick (1922–2012), the soul-making theory offers the view that suffering may be turned to God's good purposes of bringing human beings to perfection, and that this constitutes a good enough reason for its existence. While people often testify to certain benefits that may be derived from suffering – they may speak, for instance, of how it has made them a better person – the soul-making theory has numerous problems, not the least of which is the disproportionate suffering endured by many. That suffering might be good for you seems to be a desperately inadequate, even obscene, response to offer the victim of rape or genocide, for example. The soul-making theory is famously opposed by the character of Ivan in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan protests that he doesn't want any part of God's plans for human happiness if the suffering of innocent children is a necessary means of attaining happiness in the end.

John Hick's version of the soul-making theory is a little more moderate than has been suggested above. Hick contends that while God does not ordain each individual event of suffering, he has made this kind of world, nevertheless, because a world in which suffering may be experienced is the best kind of world for perfecting human beings as moral and spiritual agents. One has still to consider, however, whether the sheer scale of suffering can be defended as a means to some good end.

The fourth argument commonly offered in discussions of theodicy is **the free-will defence**. The free-will defence, most carefully stated in recent times by Alvin Plantinga, suggests that because God seeks a free and loving relation with human beings, we must be created with free will. Evil and suffering are the outcome of this policy, as humanity abuses its freedom and chooses paths that lead to suffering and evil rather than communion and love. Of all the theories considered here, the free-will defence has the most biblical support, although it does not offer a comprehensive account of why suffering and evil exist. The free-will theory has the merit of taking seriously our own responsibility for the causes of a great deal of suffering. It suggests also that we must be involved in working towards the alleviation of suffering. But it cannot account for the full range of suffering that is experienced in this world. It does not account well for what might be called natural disasters or for a great deal of illness that seems to have no direct relation to human sin. Plantinga himself readily acknowledges this. His purpose in developing the free-will argument is simply to show that the existence of evil and suffering is not logically incompatible with the existence of a loving and all-powerful God. The pastoral questions referred to above, however, have still to be addressed.

These intellectual responses to the problem of suffering and evil give evidence of humanity's wrestling with the problem, but it must be admitted that **none are entirely satisfactory**. Suffering and evil remain, to some extent, incomprehensible. We have a good understanding of why suffering exists in some circumstances but not in all. Does this make belief in a good and loving God impossible? Many atheists say so, but that conclusion should not be drawn without considering all the other reasons that may be offered for believing in God. The problem of evil and suffering is a troubling one, but it is not intellectually irresponsible to say that while I do

not understand why it is that suffering and evil exist on such a scale, there are many other things that persuade me of the existence of God.

Christian theologians have commonly acknowledged that while the intellectual problem remains, the problem of suffering more commonly encountered is the urgent pastoral questions to which suffering gives rise. Where is God to be found, in the face of suffering? How long must this pain be endured? Why does God not come to our aid? The most powerful answers given to these questions in recent times have come from those who have themselves endured great suffering. In the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, in the slums of Latin America and of Asia, and in many other places of deep anguish and suffering, voices have emerged that testify to the presence of God in the midst of terrible human suffering and degradation. One finds testimony to this presence of God in the theology of liberation theologians, for example, working in slums with the poor and the oppressed. One finds it in the testimony of those who have been tortured and persecuted for their faith, for their political views or for the colour of their skin.

One such testimony can be found in the work of Brazilian artist Guido Rocha. Unjustly accused of being a member of a subversive group, imprisoned and tortured, Guido Rocha sees Christ as the brother who has himself known the suffering that the poor of Latin America now endure. When crying out in pain in prison, Rocha remembered the cry of Christ on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This cry of Christ from the cross became for Rocha a great promise. He began to model many images of the tortured Christ, their faces often resembling those of Rocha's fellow prisoners as they cried out under torture. For Rocha, the crucified Christ was an image of hope, that even in the hell of a Brazilian torture chamber God is present. **There is no place where God leaves us without his presence.** Even in the deepest abyss of human suffering, God is there, taking the burden of it upon himself. To the question of how God relates to human evil and suffering, Christian theology tells the story of one who took upon himself the suffering of the world, who identifies himself with the victims of suffering. In the suffering of Christ, it is revealed that there are no limits to the compassion of God; **there is no place that the love of God cannot reach.**

Christian theology has no definitive answer to why it is that suffering and evil exist. But it offers testimony to the God who does not remain remote from suffering, who enters into its midst, who sides with those who suffer even to the point of death. The resurrection of Christ from the dead is the promise that suffering and evil have no future. They will in the end be overcome. That hope provides the motivation to protest against suffering and evil wherever its cause can be attributed to human action, and to work in solidarity with all those who struggle against it.