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THE PROBLEM OF PHYSICAL EVIL

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Statement of the problem

The basic form of the problem of evil is as follows :

1. Evil exists.
2. An omnipotent God could destroy evil (or not have allowed it).
3. A good God would want to destroy evil.
4. Therefore, since evil is not destroyed, God is either-
 - a. Omnipotent but less than all good.
 - b. Benevolent but less than all powerful.
 - c. Less than all good and less than all powerful.
 - d. Non-existent.¹

When specifically applied to physical evil, the above reasoning produces the following syllogism.

1. If suffering is justifiable, it may be wrong to work against it.
2. It is not wrong to work to eliminate suffering.
3. Hence, suffering may not be justifiable.
4. But if suffering is not justifiable, then the theistic God does not exist.
5. For God's existence is incompatible with unjustifiable suffering.
6. And there is unjustifiable suffering.
7. Therefore, the theistic God does not exist.²

Premise six is the crux of the problem. If it is accepted as true, then it is believed by many that there could be no Christian God, or that it is at least probable that He does not exist. The latter conclusion is drawn from the Doctrine of Meticulous Providence, and may be expressed in the following way.

1. Christians claim that an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good God exists.
2. An omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good God would prevent or eliminate the existence of gratuitous evil.
3. But gratuitous evil exists.
4. Therefore, it is probable that the Christian God does not exist.³

The above syllogisms seriously challenge the Christian world view. How can a God characterized by omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness be either directly or indirectly the cause of diseases, natural disasters, and inherent genetic defects? Since God is directly responsible for the existence of the world, is He not somehow responsible for the physical evils of His creation?

These questions have posed a serious challenge to orthodox Christianity over the centuries. Theologians and laymen alike have produced various theodicies defending both the goodness and greatness of the Christian God.

However, not all theologians believe that "defending God" is necessary at all. The great Karl Barth in his exposition on the book of Job comments that Yahweh does not ask for Job's "understanding, agreement, or applause. On the contrary, He simply asks that he should be content not to know why and to what end he exists, and does so in this way not another."⁴ For Barth, the need for a theodicy is itself a symptom of man's enslavement to moral and logical reasoning and notions which are irrelevant to the conduct of the divinely unique God.⁵

Barth does introduce his readers to a speculative account of evil in his discussion on "das Nichtige" (uncreated Nothingness) which is evil in the strongest possible sense, that which is inimical to God and His creation.⁶ Nevertheless, Barth's treatments of evil emphasize its utter incomprehensibility. "Das Nichtige" eludes man conceptually and existentially. Evil is supramoral for Barth, and it is inexplicable and inaccessible to the human creature, and only the divine subject,

God, can comprehend and overcome it.⁷

Unfortunately, the consequence of Barth's teaching is that it conceals the final alternatives facing all theodicies, because every position that holds to the perfect goodness of God *must* let go His absolute power and/or freedom, or else maintain that evil exists ultimately within God's good purpose.⁸

Furthermore, when someone is undergoing intense suffering and is having doubts about God, I agree with Hans Kung that speculative and philosophical rationalizations are "about as helpful to the sufferer as a lecture on the chemical composition of foodstuffs to a starving man."⁹

The fact is that the answer, or lack of one, to the questions Why do I suffer? and How is physical evil justifiable in view of the Christian concept of God? is critical to Christian and non-Christian alike. As Kung points out, "Our attitude to suffering is connected at the deepest level with our attitude to God and to reality as a whole. Suffering constantly proves to be the crucial test of trust in God and of basic trust, provoking decisions. Where is trust in God more challenged than in wholly concrete suffering?"¹⁰

Since the Christian worldview is seriously challenged by the problem of suffering, and honest questions posed by suffering people struggling with doubt should be reasonably answered, this paper will attempt to provide a rational theodicy, after first defining physical evil.

Definition of Physical Evil

Carnell defines natural evil as "all those frustrations of human values which are perpetrated, not by the free agency of man, but by the natural elements in the universe."¹¹ Plantinga appears to agree with this definition, but broadens it by asserting that it is any kind of evil that does not result from free human activity.¹² Hick reiterates this concept when he says, "Natural evil is the evil that originates

independently of human actions: in disease, bacilli, earthquakes, storms, droughts, tornadoes, etc.”¹³

However, this writer agrees with Peterson that it is not always possible to completely separate physical evil from moral evil. There are *complex* evils, such as a wrongful action (moral evil) and a painful result (natural evil) effected by that action.¹⁴

Therefore, it is best to consider natural evil as falling under four categories. First, there are physical evils that are attributable to human agency, such as fires or physical handicaps caused by something that one agent inflicts on another. Second, there are physical evils caused by genetic malfunctioning, such as physical deformities or retardation. The third category consists of all natural disasters produced by some process in nature that is outside of man (e.g., earthquakes, floods, droughts, etc.). Finally, diseases belong to the realm of physical evil.¹⁵

Now, physical evils due to human agency, genetic malfunctioning, natural disasters or diseases did not occur absolutely independently of moral evil. God's original creation was *very good* (Gen. 1:31). It was not until man sinned that both he *and* the earth were cursed (Gen. 3:17-19). Jeremiah 12: 4,11 and Romans 8: 20-22 make it abundantly clear that *all* of creation was adversely affected by the willful disobedience of man.¹⁶ The continuous present tense of the verbs *συστηναξει* and *συνωδινει* in Romans 8: 22 indicates that this affliction of the earth even now persists. Thus, a theodicy for physical evil necessarily pivots upon one's view of moral evil.

Moral Evil and the Free Will Defense

Before we address this issue directly, it is important to note that even God has certain “limitations”. First, He has logical limitations. Of course, God is logic, mind, and intelligence. But even He cannot do what is logically self-contradictory (e. g., make a square circle or

a cubic sphere).

God also has moral restrictions. Since He is perfect goodness and rightness, the Lord cannot contradict His nature by doing what is not right ; He is compelled to always do what is best and right.

Finally, God has certain self-imposed restrictions along with logical and moral limitations. He cannot do things which contradict what He has previously decreed. Once God decides to do something, He is obligated to carry it out.¹⁷

The latter restriction, also known as that which is accidentally impossible, is highly significant in that if God had good reasons to create this world and these could not be accomplished without excluding the possibility of evil, then He could not have done otherwise. It is the contention of the writer that this is indeed the case. It was accidentally impossible for God to have created this world without allowing for evil, given His purposes for the world.

Augustine's Free Will Defense

Augustine taught that "if man is good, and cannot act rightly unless he wills to do so, then he must have free will, without which he cannot live rightly."¹⁸ Free will was not given to man that he might sin, but only that he should live rightly. That this was God's intention is proved by the fact that God punishes free-will sinning, which would be a contradiction of His just nature unless the free will was only meant to do good. Therefore, if man had no free choice of will, "how could there exist the good according to which it is just to condemn evildoers and reward those who act rightly ?"¹⁹ Actions may be deemed either sinful or good only if they are done voluntarily.

Two conclusions may be drawn from Augustine's proposition. The first, known as the law of double effect, is that free will was given for the good effect of right actions being done by free moral agents, but this *necessarily* requires the *possibility* of choosing either right or

wrong.

The second conclusion, the law of proportionality, maintains that the effect of moral goodness is only achievable through free will, and any evil committed by the free will is justified in light of the greater good that God intended to have free moral agents do.

Thus, God must have given man free will since it is required to achieve moral goodness, and He ought to have created such a world as ours because a world with moral good (and evil) is better than a world with no moral evil (or good). The possibility of maximizing the good outweighs the fact that evil may also be maximized in a free world. In all this God is absolutely justified; the responsibility for moral evil, and the resulting physical evil, in the world therefore belongs to the free moral agents themselves.²⁰

Refinements of the Free Will Defense

Alvin Plantinga asserts, "It was not within God's power to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil."²¹ Man could not be considered to be significantly free if God completely controlled all of his actions. Since free agency could not be absolutely determined in all of its actions by God, then moral evil could not have been eliminated as a possibility either.

Furthermore, it may be that the proportion of moral good and evil in the world is the best one possible. It is feasible that God could not have created a world containing a better mixture of good and evil.²²

Peterson also appeals to the free will defense as an explanation for evil, but he refines the argument to include even *gratuitous* evil (such as some physical evils appear to be). He comments

Among the possibilities open to man is that of freely choosing to bring about an utterly gratuitous evil. For God to prevent or eliminate all gratuitous evils in a meticulous way would be for

Him to jeopardize the only kind of free will which can allow the human endeavor the highest significance... if the conception of human free will is taken to involve the possibility of bringing about really gratuitous evil, then God cannot completely prevent or eliminate gratuitous evil without severely diminishing free will. That would be logically impossible.²³

Peterson, Plantinga, and Augustine have shown that the moral evil in the world is due to the actions of free moral agents. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and good, but the very fact that He created free agents in order to maximize the good allowed for the possibility that they would choose evil. That they did so is, nevertheless, not an indictment upon God, but upon the moral agents themselves.

Furthermore, since physical evil is traceable back to moral evil, man is responsible for it also. The presence of evil, even physical evil, does not compromise the character of God, but points to the dire consequences of sin.

Unacceptable Solutions to the Problem of Physical Evil

There are a number of simple solutions to this problem for the theist who is content to modify his concept of the Christian God. He can assert either (1) that God is not powerful enough to make a world without physical evil, or (2) that God created only the good in the universe and some other power created the evil, or (3) that God is omnipotent but imperfect and chose to create an imperfect world.²⁴

Rabbi Kushner, whose son died of progeria ("rapid aging" disease) at age fourteen, chose option (1) as his solution to the problem in his popular book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. In his analysis of Job he concluded that God was not powerful enough to prevent Job's suffering; God is just and good, but not omnipotent. He comments, "God *wants* the righteous to live peaceful happy lives, but

sometimes even He can't bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims."²⁵

He goes on to say that many events happen at random and do not reflect God's choices. Since the world is still evolving, not all of the chaos (=randomness) at the beginning of creation has been eliminated, so random evil occurs "in those corners of the universe where God's creative light has not yet penetrated."²⁶ So God wants justice and fairness in the world but cannot arrange for them; He is simply impotent to achieve His purposes. But He is compassionate and loving and comes to the aid of those who are afflicted so that they have the strength to cope with their problems. Herein lies the true value of religion. God is seen as the Great Inspirer who gives the strength to overcome tragedies, even if He cannot prevent them.

Though many have accepted Kushner's "solution" for physical evil, it is profoundly flawed at three levels. The first level is exegetical. Job 38-42 clearly affirms God's power and sovereignty, rather than denying it. Job's response to God's speeches was, "I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (42: 2, NASB). Furthermore, it was God who permitted Job's suffering in the first place (1: 6-12; 2: 1-6; 42: 11 b), and Scripture elsewhere teaches that sometimes it is God who brings physical disaster upon people (Isa. 31: 2; 45: 7; 47: 11; Amos 3: 6). Clearly, then, God is omnipotent in the Bible (cf. Jer. 32: 17; Matt. 19: 26).

Secondly, Kushner's view of man is unbiblical. Genesis teaches that "to be human is to be moral (you ought and ought not do certain things), free (Adam and Eve had authentic freedom to choose), and responsible (whatever you do has life-and-death consequences)."²⁷ But man freely chose to do evil and became depraved, so no one can be called a morally "good" person apart from God (Psa. 14: 1-3; Jer. 17: 9; Rom. 3: 23).

Finally, what real good is a God who is impotent? What *can* God do? To say that He is controlled by creation rather than the other way

around not only contradicts Scripture, but robs Him of the ability to work anything toward His desired goals.

Of course, the Bible also teaches that God is holy and perfect (1 Pet. 1 : 15 ; Matt. 5 : 48), and that He is the only God in the universe (Isa. 43 : 10 ; 45 : 21-22). Therefore, it must be concluded that anyone who holds to the authority of Scripture is forced to reject any of the solutions to the problem of evil which deny God's omnipotence, justice, or moral goodness.

A Personal Solution to the Problem of Physical Evil

It has already been stated that physical evil was a result of moral evil, and that the latter was a result of the free will choices of free moral agents. God is not morally culpable for the presence of evil in the world, since He must have given man free will in order to achieve the maximum moral goodness, and He ought to have created a world where moral goodness was possible, even if it meant allowing for sin.

It is the contention of this essay that a world with the greatest number of moral virtues is better than one with fewer of them, and that a world with a higher attainment of moral virtues is better than one with a lesser attainment of them. Virtues like courage, mercy, and forgiveness are only attainable in a world where sin is present, and some virtues are further perfected by the presence of evil (e. g. love and kindness ; Lk. 10 : 25-37). Indeed, the perfect man, Christ, was "perfected through sufferings" in an evil world (Heb. 2 : 10). The cross itself, God's highest expression of love (Rom. 5 : 8), would not have been possible in a world with no evil.²⁸

Virtues like perseverance (James 1 : 2-4) and sympathy would be absent from a world without physical evil, and the highest degree of other virtues cannot be obtained without the presence of some evil. One understands justice better if he has suffered injustice, appreciates love more after having been hated, etc. Therefore, the presence of

physical evil may be explained in the following manner.²⁹

1. It is necessary for God to do His moral best (if He chooses to do anything moral).
2. A world with the attainment of more virtues and/or the highest attainment of each virtue via suffering is morally preferable to one that has no suffering but has fewer virtues and/ or a lower attainment of them.
3. It is necessary to have physical evil in order to attain some virtues and in order to obtain the highest degree of other virtues.
4. Therefore, it is necessary for God to permit physical evils (or the condition) by which He can produce the morally best world.³⁰

This world of physical evils is not the best possible world, as Leibnitz argued, but it is the best possible *means* by which God will achieve the best possible world, the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Further Reasons for Physical Evil

Although the above argument may explain why God made the world He created, there are additional reasons for the presence of physical evils in the world, which are listed as follows :

1. Some physical evils come directly from our own free choices, such as one who contracts lung cancer through heavy smoking or AIDS through promiscuous sexual behavior.
2. Some physical evils come indirectly from the exercise of our freedom. If we drive while being tired, personal suffering may result.
3. Some physical evils come to us directly from the free choices of others (e. g., child abuse, wife-beating).

4. Some physical evils come to us indirectly from the free choices of others (e. g., Smoking while pregnant may cause birth defects). Also, the fact that man has chosen to produce airplanes, automobiles, etc. makes injury due to accidents inevitable. This is certainly not God's fault (cf. Eccl. 10 : 8-9).
5. Some physical evil is the possible by-product of otherwise good activities. Swimming is generally beneficial and pleasurable, but drowning is also possible.
6. Some physical evil comes upon us as a result of demonic activity (Matt. 17 : 14-18 ; Lk. 13 : 16).
7. Some physical evils are God-given warnings of greater physical evils. Some pain is necessary as a warning that a more serious physical problem is imminent unless it is taken care of.³¹
8. Some physical evils are God-inflicted punishment upon apostate people (e. g., Sodom and Gomorrah) and may be imposed even upon sinful Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 11 : 30 ; Heb. 10 : 26-27). But this is certainly not the only explanation for physical evil, as some have suggested (cf. Lk 13 : 1-4).
9. Some physical evil occurs so that a greater good can be realized, such as the man being born blind "in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (Jn. 9 : 1-3, NASB ; cf. Isa. 26 : 9).
10. Some physical evils serve as warnings of greater *moral* evils. C. S. Lewis comments, "No doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument ; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil [and allows him to realize his need for God] ." ³² He goes on to say that suffering teaches man obedience to God in spite of his natural preferences, and that sometimes retributive pain can have positive results.³³⁻³⁵
11. Some physical evil is necessary for "soul-making." As previously mentioned, many virtues are actualized or are able to be maximized only in a world of physical evil. Peterson asserts that

“there are some highly valuable traits which God wants each soul to possess” (e. g., ability to act virtuously toward one another) that may only be produced in certain environments.³⁶

Hick says that “a human environment designed to this end must be similar to our present world at least to the extent that it operates upon general laws and consequently involves at least occasional pains for sentient creatures within it.”³⁷ Of course, this writer believes not only that such an environment must be *similar* to our present world, but that it *is* this world, as God must create that world which would best serve His purpose if He creates at all.

12. Some physical evils are the consequences of the outworking of the natural laws according to which God’s creation operates (e. g., lightning-fires, hurricanes, etc.). A natural order in the world is a necessary condition for achieving the higher good. Lewis observes that even an omnipotent God is unable to create a society of free moral agents without at the same time creating an independent and “inexorable” Nature, since the agents must be in an environment where choices can be made.³⁸

Without the regularity of natural laws resulting from God’s providence, rational action would be impossible. There must be a regularity of sequence for free agents to be able to know whether a certain action would be possible, whether it could occur as planned, or what the consequences would be. Without natural order, rational agents could not propose an action or act themselves, but both of these are essential for an agent to be determined to be a free moral being.³⁹

In a world of fixed nature and constant laws, “not all states of matter will be equally agreeable to the wishes of a given soul... nor is it possible for the matter of the universe at any given moment to be distributed so that it is equally convenient... to each member of society.”⁴⁰ The welcomed downpour on the farmer’s parched hilltop land may produce a flood in the valley ten miles away, for example.

Moreover, God cannot change natural laws arbitrarily so as to

eliminate all possible gratuitous effects. If there is a change in the system of natural laws, there must be an altering of the natures of the objects within the system as well, which would lead to unimaginable chaos.⁴¹ For example, if gravity were to be suspended on one block to prevent the proverbial falling piano from hitting the baby below, then what would happen to all the children playing under the power lines ?!

Speaking on this subject, Peterson says, "God cannot eliminate the frightening possibility of gratuitous natural evil as long as He chooses to sustain natural order which, in turn, sustains a great many natural and moral goods."⁴² Reichenbach concurs, noting that

Natural evils are a consequence of natural objects acting according to natural laws upon sentient, natural creatures... Since the greater good entails the possibility of natural evil and... an individual cannot be held morally accountable or blameworthy for that which it is impossible for him to have done otherwise, God cannot be held morally accountable or blameworthy for natural evils.⁴³

13. Finally, some physical evils may occur for reasons only God is aware of. Being finite creatures, God may have purposes for evil which only He knows (Gen. 50 : 20 ; Deut. 29 : 29 a ; Rom. 11 : 33). Furthermore, even if the above reasons may be sufficient for a particular physical evil, very often man does not know which reason is the correct one. It is dangerous for anyone to believe that someone suffering from a physical handicap is under punishment for sin, for example (Jn. 9 : 1-3). Ultimately man must have faith in the character of God and acknowledge that whatever He does or allows is not contradictory to that character.

Lest We Forget : God Also Suffered

The solution to the problem of physical evil is multifaceted, as can be seen, and often tends to be theoretical more than practical. But many times a person in great need is not interested in philosophy or theories, so this writer feels it is important to include a brief section on the sufferings of Christ in this argument.

Wenham comments, "No Christian dare doubt God's goodness in permitting the most grievous suffering, when he remembers the means which God chose for the overthrow of evil. It was in the depth of agony that Christ 'bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2: 24)." ⁴⁴

It is the New Testament usage of the word *πάσχω* which exposes the full impact of Christ's suffering. This word is used 42 times in the New Testament, with most of the occurrences referring to Christ Himself or the sufferings of Christians for His sake. Such a close connection between Christ and suffering indicates that He was an integral part of the biblical solution to pain and evil. ⁴⁵

Michaelis observes that "the uniqueness of the passion of Jesus is reflected in the fact that *παθεῖν* (the infinitive form or *πάσχω*) occurs only in sayings of Jesus relating to His own person" (e. g., Lk. 22: 15; 24: 26, 46). ⁴⁶ He also notes that this word may mean "to bear" and refer in part to the Hebrew word "sebalam", "to bear a heavy burden", in Isaiah 53: 4. ⁴⁷

Indeed, the entire Isaiah 53 passage emphasizes what suffering and oppression the "man of sorrows" endured. He knew grief and sorrow (v. 4); was pierced, crushed, chastened, and scourged (v. 5); was oppressed and afflicted (v. 7); and He was put to grief, suffering anguish in His soul (vv. 10-11). Jesus did not want to suffer on the cross (Lk. 22: 42), but willingly did so, even to the point of becoming sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5: 21)! The incarnate God suffered for men

so that we might one day be free from suffering.

Surely there is no better example of one who suffered unjustly. If the greater good argument for physical evil is invalid, then God must have been unjust to punish an innocent Christ !

There is great value for the counselor in the fact that Christ suffered intensely for all of humanity. Christ can identify with us because of what He suffered (Heb. 2 : 14-18 ; 4 : 15). God may not protect us *from* all suffering on this earth, but the hope we have of a future where all evil and pain will be eliminated because of Christ's work on the cross protects us *in* all the suffering we endure in this life. We know that even God Himself is a Suffering God who goes with us, "a God who carries us through the chaos of grief and helps us restore order."⁴⁸

Conclusion

It has been seen that man is responsible both for the moral and physical evil in the world. God created morally free agents in a perfect environment so that they might have the potential to maximize the good. They willfully sinned and brought evil into the world, yet even this is being utilized by God. Physical evils are to be seen as consequences, conditions, or concomitants of free choice, which also serve as necessary conditions and concomitants of the best kind of means for achieving the best of all possible worlds.⁴⁹

A number of reasons for physical evil were given, all of which fall into the theodicy provided. The presence of physical evil in no way contradicts God's character, and there is great comfort in the fact that He can accomplish His purposes even in the presence of evil (Gen. 50 : 20 ; Rom. 8 : 28), and in the knowledge that He became incarnate and experienced suffering beyond imagination on our behalf ; He is personally involved in eliminating evil.

This writer fails to see how Peterson can assert that the presence of gratuitous evil actually makes it *probable* that an omnipotent, omni-

scient, wholly good God exists.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, I firmly believe that God does have a purpose for physical evil, and that even apparently gratuitous evils serve a part in God's grand plan for the universe.

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