

Theodicy: God and Human Suffering

From Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*

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Theodicy

- Theodicy. God (*theos*), justice (*dike*). To “speak justly of God amid the awesome fact of suffering...to vindicate the divine attributes, especially justice, mercy and love, in relation to the continuing existence of evil.”
- “Divine purpose seems most implausible and questionable...amid suffering.”
- Dealing with suffering while maintaining (and growing) faith can be the most difficult dimension of pastoral work
- Coalescence of God’s power, love, and human suffering.

The Perplexing Triangle and Some Premature Solutions

- The triangle
 - God is unsurpassably good
 - God is incomparably powerful
 - Suffering and evil nonetheless exist. Why?
- The three premature and deficient solutions:
 1. Failure to look candidly at the reality of evil. Pretending that evil does not have any psychological power or social resilience or durable reality. To affirm the power and goodness of God and look away from pain, or pretend that suffering has no power to demoralize.
 2. Prematurely giving up on the Christian affirmation of the insurmountable goodness of God. Beaten and demoralized by the wearing power of sin, evil and suffering.
 3. To limit God’s power. To say that God does not have the final power to overcome evil.
- Each “grasps two sides of the triangle, but misses full affirmation of the third.”

The Question Biblically Stated

- God suffers with us (Heb 2:9)
- We are not alone (2 Cor 1:1-8)
- God is present (Phil 3:10)
- God promises victory (Romans 8:18)
- Made known in suffering, death, resurrection of JC (Matt 27,28)
- We are witnesses to God’s almighty power amid the darkest evils (1 Peter 4:12)
- Our historical community has long thought deeply and prayed for “disclosures of providential meaning amid our seemingly absurd struggles” Should we deprive ourselves of the “benefit of

Things to think about

If God is good, and if God’s creation is “good” or “very good” (Genesis 1) then philosophers, theologians, and just plain people ask how can there be so much suffering?

In other words, “Why is God doing this?”

No easy answers to this.

So-called “progressive” theology can be deficient here.

“Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never, Never, Never, Never give up.” (Churchill)

The book of Job is a treatise on this. If you have time and want to read more, see Hopson and Rice. *The Book of Job as a Resource for Counseling*. J Pastoral Care Counsel 2008;62:87-98.

the reflection of those who have gone before us, or should we learn to listen, pray, and think out of the rich matrix of this historical experience?”

- “Why do the wicked prosper?” (Jeremiah 12:1,2)
- Alone and alienated (Psalm 22:2; Mark 15:34)
- Despair about the brevity of life (Psalm 90)
- Rage about misfortune (Exodus 5:22,23)

THE PASTORAL CONSOLATIONS

- The consolations aren’t intended to end suffering. They “speak accurately and justly of God amid suffering.” Not to speak amiss of God, or ‘in an unbalanced, thoughtless, or impious way under circumstances that stand as an apparent challenge to God’s goodness and power.”

1. God Does Not Directly Will Suffering

- God does not directly will suffering. It occurs by the divine permission as a consequence of finitude and sin.
- What God gives is good. Evil emerges as a result of sin. God permits the suffering caused by it (for how could human freedom otherwise be affirmed) even though it is not God’s original intention or direct will.
- In each situation God works “in a perverted and changed world” (Origen).
- God’s original wish for us is unmitigated good. In the light of personal and social sin, guilt, anxiety and suffering enter into the otherwise good world. This is not what God directly wills. God responds with healing and “proportional goods that still can be received”.

2. The Free Will Defense

- We speak well of God’s goodness and power amid suffering.
- The gift of freedom carries with it the possibility of abuse.
- How could moral accountability be required if all free wills were protected against falling, or if sin should be made impossible.
- God wished for humanity to share in his freedom, power and goodness.
- You can’t have freedom without risking the abuse of freedom.
- God does not create evil; human freedom spawns the evils from which suffering occurs.
- Even though we suffer from the consequences of social evil and our own sin, that evil in itself points back to the great gift of free will.
- God honors us with that gift, even if we abuse it, even though it’s subject to potential abuse

In the health care professions, you will frequently encounter people asking these questions.

Theodicy: “To speak accurately and justly of God amid suffering.”

These consolations are based on conservative theological reflection on the Holy Scriptures. They are the “basic science” that underpins pastoral care in crisis situations.

Know them well, and use them. Don’t use them academically, though. A patient having a heart attack doesn’t need to know details of cardiac electrophysiology.

3. God's Power Can Draw Good Out of Evil

- Felix culpa. A happy fault, blessed disaster that Adam fell, to become the occasion of a greater redemption. No fall, no Jesus.
- God draws the greatest goods out of the greatest disasters. This challenges the human spirit to re-seed and re-root.
- The goodness of God would not have permitted evil to exist in the first place if God had not foreseen that a greater good could come out of it than if freely chosen evil had not been permitted to emerge at all.
- This doesn't imply individual greater good, or immediately (viewed egocentrically). The mystery of evil is a social reality, an affair of the whole of humanity seen together.
- God sees possibilities for humanity that we see dimly if at all.
- It's wrong to state that God directly sends suffering on us, as if it were God's absolute, unambiguous, original will for us.
- God permits a set of conditions to emerge such that, given free will, the suffering that comes from freedom is permitted by a divine grace that sees farther than we can see.
- God's permission allows natural causality to be felt at times as suffering.
- God does not will evil, but permits free agency. It is only from a good freedom that evil deeds emerge.

4. Evil Does Not Limit God's Power

- Does permitting sin limit God's power? A less powerful God would not have permitted other challenging powers, such as freedom, alternative freedoms.
- God is so unsurpassably powerful that he is willing to "risk" living in intimate dialogue and communion with a foreseeably fallen, sinful, self-alienating creature, without threat to God's own identity or holiness.
- Permitting free will does not threaten God with loss of self. A parent can't prevent all possibilities of sinning at the cost of destroying the freedom that a developing personality needs
- The Biblical idea that God "hardens our hearts" doesn't deny human freedom. It allows freedom to the extent of putting itself in bondage.
- God showed his power through the perversity of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's power had come from God, but God allowed Pharaoh to misuse it.
- God permits free will to act irresponsibly, but does not stand by and "watch history deteriorate". God continues to work through the consequences of abused freedom.
- God wishes to call us back to his original intention, before our self-chosen fallenness of freedom.

5. The Lessons of Affliction

- “Evil and suffering are at times experienced as a purgative, like a needed medication that clears out our system, or a regimen that in the short run is rigorous but in the long run promotes health.”
- Awakening of conscience, strengthening of spirit, toughening of the moral fiber.
- “At ease in Zion”, we do not grow. Through trial and testing we may grow. We are asked to trust in providence even when we don’t see immediate benefits.
- Growth through suffering
- Our own suffering increases our compassion for others who are suffering. (This point can be distorted.)
- God never intends suffering to be an end, but a means. A means to become aware of our own limitations, leading to greater trust in God’s power and benevolence amid worldly loss.
- God gives grace sufficient for every need.
- God can work through medical technology, surgery, nursing (Goulooze). With suffering comes the temptation to unbelief, despair and bitterness; the trial of affliction is never greater than the grace of God.
- A fellowship of suffering. With the apostles and martyrs; the poor, the sick, the hungry

6. The Cleansing and Educative Elements of Suffering

- A chastisement is not direct punishment; it is meant to purify, cleanse, or make chaste.
- In Scripture, to chastise does not mean to hurt, it means to help by cleansing.
- Suffering isn’t meant to increase pain, but to increase our capacity for joy.
- Luke 13:4-5. The falling of the tower of Siloam. A call to repentance.
- It’s wrong to imply that sickness is punishment for sin. Through suffering, the Spirit works toward the cleansing of the human spirit
- The root of “discipline” is discere, to learn. Suffering, as a discipline, is an inner education.
- Chastisement cleanses, discipline teaches.
- Suffering should not be sought masochistically, nor is to be compulsively avoided.

7. Individual Suffering Is Socially Rooted and Socially Redeemed

- “Christian faith does not despair over the social mysteries of evil and suffering. It faces them in the hopeful awareness that God, whose complete will is beyond our knowing, has nonetheless

become significantly revealed...in Christ, which gives us the possibility of trusting the unfolding divine will even while portions of it remain stubbornly opaque.”

- The conjunction of suffering, omnipotence, divine benevolence, social sin; theodicy stands at the confluence of many layers of mystery – a partially revealed enigma
- Others suffer from my sins, I suffer from the sins of others
- Sin is not strictly an individual matter, neither is suffering
- Niebuhr: “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”
- We can suffer together for things that happened long ago in our parental or ancestral histories – things beyond our control.
- Solipsism [Latin solus (alone), ipse (self); only one’s self exists] is impossible. Human interaction is essential.

8. Suffering May Put Goodness in Bolder Relief

- Suffering is a creative dissonance in a larger symphony of meaning.
- Evil and suffering are passing incongruities later resolved in a larger concord.
- Suffering puts goodness into bolder relief.
- Suffering should not be sought. When it must be faced, it may increase our capacity for joy.
- This is an incomplete point of consolation.

9. The Values Intrinsic to Struggle

- Opposition, tension, struggle are necessary to growth, development and healthy formation
- For a muscle to grow, it must be strengthened by exercise.
- Toynbee: when a society is challenged, it must either show its mettle or deteriorate
- No growth occurs without struggle
- Hegel: history is struggling reason, discovering itself through conflict. Out of challenge comes a richer synthesis.
- Change does not occur without pain
- The best moral and spiritual learning comes by working through frustrations and overcoming obstacles. Otherwise, free will could not respond to the reality of life.
- Human freedom must be tested by time, toughened by life.
- Perceived evils and suffering do not simply or necessarily corrupt and impede, but form a significant part of human education

10. Proportional Receptivity of the Good

- God gives his goodness in proportion to our ability to receive it.
- Because we are finite, we are unable to comprehend God’s

goodness in its entirety, and receive it only in the limits of our imperfections.

11. Evil as a Privation of the Good

- This is an Augustinian view, distortable and easily misunderstood. A power to console the sufferer who is willing to think deeply. Not empirically verifiable.
- The coupling of the free will defense with the idea of evil as a privation of good (*privatio boni*)
- Because God is good, nature is good.
- Unlike God, nature is not supremely and immutably good. The good in created things can be diminished and augmented.
- Evil is the diminishment of good. No matter how much it's diminished, something of its original nature remains.
- As something becomes corrupted, it is being deprived of its good. If, no matter how much it becomes corrupted, some good remains that can not further be corrupted, then it is an incorruptible entity (*natura incorruptibilis*)
- Corruption cannot consume the good without consuming the thing itself
- Thus, every entity (*natura*) is good – a greater good if it cannot be corrupted, a lesser good if it can. Thus, every being is good (*omnis natura bonum est*). Nothing evil exists in itself – it is only an evil aspect of some entity. Thus, evils have their source in something good; without good, they would be nothing.
- Augustine: “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist.”
- This argument shifts consciousness away from immediate pain and speaks of the nature of being. It's logically impossible for anything to be evil unless it depends on something that is good. This places pain in a different context.
- Some pastoral examples:
 - Bereavement: this malaise depends on something good – the life that has been lost. The loss of something of value produces the pain of bereavement. The evil that one feels depends on good.
 - Immobility in traction: the discomfort felt depends on the good of previous mobility
 - Sickness in general: depends on the good of previous health
- Sickness, suffering, pain, physical limitations exist dependently. Good functions out of dysfunction. This is better than having no dysfunction at all. It is better to bring well-being out of disease than to have a finite condition where disease is not possible or conceivable.
- Our bodies, unlike those of angels, exist in space and time. Our physical bodies are subject to corruption, deterioration of the

good. To potential loss and decay of optimal functioning. God allows our physical to exist, rather than choosing not to let them exist.

- With a perfect body, time would be meaningless. All decisions could be postponed. Freedom and responsibility would be meaningless. This would be the loss of human existence, which is finite freedom existing in space and time.
- Thus, it is always possible to celebrate that which is good, even when it has slipped into dysfunction. There is not evil that does not depend for its badness on something better.
- This consolation requires a reflective individual, well-instructed in God's goodness, power, will and creation
- The pain of divorce. This differs from physical pain. It's the working through of loss of a relationship, and its pain lies in proportion to the perception of "various perceived goods". This would be a relationship that once bore hope, the interests of children, stability, mutual trust, continuity. All threatened, or gone. Without such hopes, the divorce would be less painful.
- A cancer cell does not limit itself by the usual genetic program. It reproduces without restraint. Its evil depends on the good of normal cell function.

12. Is This World the Best God Could Do?

- Leibniz: God is all-powerful. The world that God chose to create, with its gift of freedom (yet prone to self-alienation) is the best of all conceivable worlds
- This isn't necessarily "best" from a personal or individual point of view.
- God being infinitely good would create a world that is best for the whole.
- In such a complex world, all parts don't function in the same way, or on the same level of consciousness.
- Because there is finite freedom, it is subject to abuse. Otherwise, it is not freedom. "Murphy's Law writ large"
- Summary of Augustine and Leibniz:
 - They affirm natural causation, and do not always look to miracle for a solution
 - They don't dodge the subjective reality of evil or pain
 - They place conscious suffering in a larger order of being, meaning, and value
 - They preserve the triangle of theodicy: God's power, God's goodness, the proximate reality of evil and suffering
- Limitations of pastoral deficits
 - May not be used indiscriminately in any situation
 - Not a substitute for caring, empathy, Christian presence
 - The idea of sin as a deficiency of good doesn't grasp the full

extent of sin; it can undermine the biblical idea that sin is an overt, willful act of disobedience to God, an active negation of divine will. Sin is willed rebellion and rejection of divine goodness.

- Sin is more than a lack of goodness. It is assertive, knowing disobedience. It is self-deceptive egocentricity deriving from pride, lust, self-centeredness, ambition.
- Sin is not merely the lack of knowledge, or limitations on knowledge. It is not a mistaken perception of good apart from willed evil.
- Scripture emphasizes culpable moral will that freely and deliberately falls from grace. It is not fated, but freely chooses rebellion.
- The consolations can come across as impersonal and cold – an insensitive logical debate that ignores the actual suffering of the individual. Metaphysical gamesmanship.
- Subjectively, pain and suffering are felt as a positive assault on the goodness of bodily function, not an absence of value.

PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Correcting Oversimplifications

- The phrase “will of God” is a throwaway. God permits sickness but does not will it. God blesses merciful efforts to reduce suffering.
- Jesus took up the cross not to increase suffering, but to reduce it in the long term.
- Certain illnesses are the direct result of one’s personal sin. But there are many examples of innocent suffering.
- Although God draws good out of evil, and evil is dependent on good, affliction is not desirable in and of itself.
- “Affirm the creative possibilities within suffering without becoming fixated on the value of suffering in itself.”
Beethoven’s deafness. Milton’s blindness.
- The pastor does not tell others how they should feel. One shows how a particular situation corresponds with latent, unrecognized possibilities for spiritual growth.
- “Artificiality backfires...cheap consolation”
- “The hurts are there.” Facing suffering is primarily a pastoral responsibility.
- Loss can increase spiritual awareness – “Blessed are those that mourn”

The Eschatological Note

- Going above the limits of temporality.
- “All things work together for good to them that love God.”
(Romans 8:28a)

- As long as there is history, there will be human freedom. As long as freedom chooses, it is likely to be abused. Only God has the last word in history.
- The hope of resurrection is that God will set aright what has fallen. Evil cannot triumph.

The Blessed

- I asked God for strength...I was made weak
- I asked for riches...I was given poverty
- I asked for power...I was given weakness
- I am among men, most richly blessed