
God and the Cost of Freedom

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'Let us quietly and deliberately admit that no man has yet explained the reality of evil in a world created and sustained by an all-powerful, all wise, all-good Spirit, by God'¹ So why try to understand a reality which, though empirically accessible, is at the same time an impregnable mystery, a mystery which brings humanity to the point of self contradiction: 'For ... evil is absolute meaningless and perversion'²

When applied to the claim that *it is impossible for God to give certain benefits without the existence of evil being inevitable*, the mystery begins to unravel. This claim goes right to the heart of finite humanity's search for self-realisation, the search to *become*, to transcend limitations, to be a *question* which ultimately seeks fulfillment in the Absolute *other*. This *other* is God, the source of human existence, the One in whom every mystery is known but not yet fully realised.

The journey of self-realisation is fraught with the struggle against evil, the undeniable contradiction of the suffering of the innocent; for the hand that feeds, is also the accused hand that poisons. One must question the authenticity of God as either a fraud whose existence is doubtful, or a God of vulnerable love who has created humanity with incarnate freedom to act, to deny, to choose, and to find the limitless One within the limited self — the *I in us*.

For human activity to go beyond mere survival and propagation there must be an ability to transcend the immediate, to remain free from the strictures of a corporal reality of life that ultimately brings obliteration and nothingness. From time immemorial and in all cultures people have sought an answer to escape this nothingness, to seek the meaning of human existence, by asking *Who am I?* Essentially, the answers to this question have found expression in the form of metaphysical and religious conviction. Though varied and not limited to one pattern of thought, this question of ultimate meaning raises the question of God, the absolute ground of being. As the claim suggests, God is the source of all being, the creator who gives meaning to existence. Therefore the *word* God in this context is not a mere void, nor an identity with the subject and the world (pantheism), but an experience which is an encounter with mystery. Driven by this search for meaning and value, humanity stands before this *word* as a *question* about God.³ As a *question*, humanity seeks to transcend its reality as a finite, corporal and incomplete self. The *question* is drawn to its source of being, to the God who cannot be fathomed, who is beyond understanding and knowledge. How then can the human consciousness begin to perceive that who is unperceivable? The answer is found within incarnate freedom, as *self* searches for meaning beyond the boundary of human existence to a horizon of infinity. This search to have meaning must find fulfillment in relationship with the *other*. Yet God as *other* does not impose will over human freedom as would a master puppeteer on his objects.

This freedom, as Lobo suggests, is not an instrument for meeting specific needs, but rather the choice to *become who we truly are in relationship with God*.⁴ It is from God that humanity draws the *benefit* of freedom — a freedom to act or not to act. In every choice of action there is an opposite course, even when great difficulty or rejection of self remains a possibility. This incarnate freedom is not absolute, but limited by various natural and physical events: by culture, prejudices and self-understanding. It is a freedom which invites the conscious self to grow in understanding of what can be neither comprehended nor possessed, to help dispel the darkness of the horizon of human history which has no meaning. For this freedom to be real, God does not make the universe and person within it act, rather God makes the acting universe and person be.⁵

As humanity is *free* (albeit limited), how can knowledge of *other* be possible since God is beyond humanity's horizon of *being*? Aquinas clearly understood the difficulty of searching for meaning and the inadequacy of language when speaking of God. To overcome this impasse he applied the *Analogy of Attribution*.

Aquinas readily acknowledged that he would never be able to understand the good in God, but could grasp the good in God's creation and, though not absolute, this revealed something of that unfathomed good which is God.⁶ So it is with the totality of human experience — language, community, art, worship, science, technology, politics and nature all create the means by which humanity can discover the foretaste of what is eternal, for '... God is the cause of being of everything.'⁷

From this understanding one can draw the conclusion that God is benevolent, transcendent and imminent as creator. God is not simply *initial cause* devoid of relationship, but open to *finite becoming*, addressing the whole person as an historical and communal being in all the dimensions of imagination, affectivity and sensitivity. This does not contradict God's omnipotence as unlimited; rather it acknowledges that God can do everything that is logically possible for God to do. Equally, God as all-knowing, *omni-present* in all things, past, present and future, does not threaten the integrity of incarnate freedom. Peter Vardy clearly articulates this view in his work *The Puzzle of God* by concluding that '...God cannot predict with absolute certainty our every future action. However, He can predict that His eventual purpose will triumph.'⁸ That is to say, humanity is free not in spite of God, but rather because of God.

Having established the transcendental benefits that God has bestowed on humanity as a means to self-realisation, God can nonetheless become unhinged, because evil has not been excluded from the equation of life. As the claim states: *It is impossible for God to give certain benefits without the existence of evil being inevitable*. This claim immediately comes under attack from its opening premise, that something is *impossible for God*. God is all-powerful, the creator of the universe; surely if God willed it, then nothing is impossible. David Hume goes further by suggesting that if God cannot prevent evil then God is impotent; if, on the other hand, God can prevent evil and will not, then God is malevolent.⁹ One can only conclude from Hume's interpretation that God's omnipotence is limited, if not in wisdom, then in power.

God's very existence is brought into question because the single most persuasive argument against the existence of God is the existence of evil. This is well illustrated in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Ivan rebels against God in protest at all the evil suffering inflicted on the innocent. He cannot justify such suffering even if it brings about a higher good. His response to this perceived contradiction is not to deny that God exists, rather he simply does not want 'to play the game' any longer: 'It is not God that I do not accept ... I merely most

respectfully return him my ticket.’¹⁰ Ivan is not rebelling against the notion that God wills evil absolutely, but that God *permits* it for a higher good. This is not a solution to the *claim*, but more an evasion since, by permitting it, God wills it, and God’s will is absolute.

Taken from the Manichaeian tradition, the dualist theory offers a possible defence in that there are two equal forces at work in the universe — one good and one evil. This supports the *claim* that neither can be present without the other. The weakness of this theory is in the application; the world becomes a battlefield on which one or the other will win. Therefore *the good* cannot be assured of victory and, as God is often understood as *the good*, God becomes relative and subject to the struggle.

Attempts to explain the existence of evil from a theological perspective or theodicy, in most cases, further weaken the *claim*. Many fall under the mantle of *Free Will Defence* which maintains that God allows evil so that humanity is truly free to enter into relationship with *other*. It also exonerates God from blame for evil by placing it squarely at the feet of ‘... dependent beings who have willfully misused God’s gift of freedom.’¹¹

Turning to *The Book of Genesis* (Gen 3:1-24) as a starting point, evil entered the world through the sin of one man, Adam. At first glance this supports the notion that evil is an inevitable reality of God’s positive action in the world. God had offered to both Adam and Eve the *benefit* of incarnate freedom to have dominion over all the earth; they chose self and alienation (Gen 1:26-3:24). This explanation, in fact, does little to support the *claim*. Had the story of creation marked the first steps of humanity’s journey in *becoming*, then the tale would be more plausible. Instead one is saddled with the notion that Adam and Eve, prior to *the fall* (Gen 3:13-24), had assumed *being* and were in a full relationship with God, although there is no mention of this being freely realised. Instead of humanity being in a state of *becoming*, it had been there, done that, and was now in a state of *regression*. As an aside, it is also difficult to reconcile the timeline of humanity’s effect on nature, since nature, according to the creation story (Gen: 1:1-2:7), preceded Adam and Eve. Does this imply that nature had reached perfection before humanity? And if so, then surely nature should hold a higher and more privileged place within the universe than the human race.

Defending the morality of God, prospective theodicies seek to explain the reason for evil in the world by showing that it has a purpose. The individual eschatological theodicy inspired by Irenaeus of Lyon and championed by contemporary

theologians Hick and Swinburne suggests that the presence of evil and sin challenges humanity to grow through adversity to discover self in relationship with God which finds fulfillment in immortality (Jn 6:51). The suffering of this world can be tolerated for the eternal joy which will be experienced in heaven with God. It is within this struggle that humanity overcomes that epistemic distance or hidden knowledge of the Absolute and, in turn, comes to know God through the free interpretive response of faith.¹²

The problem with this approach is that God is perceived as a hard taskmaster. The old analogue — *you have to be cruel to be kind* — is somewhat apt in this context. As a consequence it blindly overlooks the fact that suffering does not necessarily make one a better person; for some it is too heavy a burden to shoulder. It is difficult to accept that the suffering of the innocent is just an unfortunate part of life and, quite plainly, one must ask: is freedom worth the price? Not escaping these criticisms, Hick does give strength to the plausibility of the *claim* by raising a vital point: if humanity is denied the opportunity to engage in the objective world (as a free moral agent) with all its diversity, evil and suffering included, then how can individuals find meaning, subjectivity and a genuine relationship with *other*? This would be a world devoid of the need for virtues or self-sacrifice, and the capacity to love unconditionally could never be fully tested.¹³ In other words, humanity needs to win its stripes, not fall into a dependency model which deprives it of authenticity and leaves it in a state of blind adherence. This is not liberation from, but rather bondage to a *poverty of spirit*.

Accepting that God will only do what God can do, the *claim* does have merit. It stands to reason that God is a God of relationship open to our limitations. For if humans were simply pre-programmed robots or, as J.L. MacKie would suggest, created to always do what is right, what would be the point of a relationship with God?¹⁴ It would more be akin to an arranged marriage. The outward action of God in creating the universe demonstrates that, as an absolute being, God is not self-absorbed; God is a God of outpouring. To suggest otherwise would be absurd, for to create something is to impart self into the object — not that the object becomes the maker, but rather *I made this; therefore this is part of me*. Creating implies that there is a relationship between the maker and the made; one could argue that the maker could ignore or discard the creation. While this is true, God has given humanity the *benefit* of freedom to search for the meaning of *I* which finds fulfillment in the *we*, the *I in us*.

Is this reasoning simply collapsing into William Paley's *Design Argument*?¹⁵ Perhaps it is; but more to the point, one is free to debate, to search or to ignore relationship with the *other*, not as some mental gymnastics but out of a desire to find meaning.

The action of God within creation is not limited, since creation is in a state of *absolute* becoming. God is not diminished by God's work in progress, for it is a revealing foretaste of what it will become — God is both the beginning and end of all created being. This invites the conclusion that God as *selfless absolute being* is open to relationship. True relationship is built on selfless love which is *vulnerable* in that it does not seek to control, it longs for the other; it is silent because it gives no reason for itself; *in communion* by uniting two without the loss of individual identity; *present* in accepting the I in other; *self giving* so that the other can reach fulfillment in self; and *reciprocal* in that the meeting of the I and the *Thou* results in a *We*.¹⁶ For this vulnerable love to be realised, humanity must be given freedom, the freedom to choose and accept responsibility as a communal being despite, as the *claim* suggests, evil being inevitable.

As much as the *claim* helps to explain why freedom to *become* cannot be devoid of the inevitable existence of evil, it struggles to justify the negative effect of evil — suffering. Humanity must face it on two fronts: *natural evil*, a destructive power produced by nature in flux — wind, fire, movement and rain destroy property and life. *Evil done or sin* — the absence of *other* in a person's life, born of self-centeredness, which not only destroys property and life, but *self in relationship with other*. Suffering is a paradox of mystery; without it there is no freedom to choose, but suffering itself can enslave and destroy. Evil, the source of suffering, was understood by Aquinas as the *deprivation* of the good in a person or thing, that which prevents realisation.¹⁷ Efforts to justify unmerited suffering as a means of *purification* or an opportunity to *grow in faith* collapse under the weight of innocent suffering. How can the torture of an innocent baby be purification or a means of growth? God, by giving humanity the benefits of freedom, has also saddled it with the negative effects of evil. This is somewhat akin to Einstein's discovery that $E=MC^2$, used wisely, has the potential to uncover the secrets of creation (*The Big Bang Theory*). But, as a means to destroy, it may equip humanity with the means to finally bring about its own annihilation.

This brings one to the inescapable truth — that all theodices and arguments to justify the creative action of God and the presence of evil cannot be reconciled against the suffering of the innocent. Where to from here? While religion does not provide a clear, reasoned answer to what is a mystery, Christianity nonetheless

does offer a cure.¹⁸ For the Christian, evil is a double paradox. On the one hand its presence in the world created by God cannot be understood. On the other hand, God has broken into human history and, through the redeeming action of the Cross, sin and death have been conquered (Lk. 24:45-47, 1Cor.15:3-5). Humanity in all its frailty is, in turn, promised a share in the glory of eternal life. Blind faith perhaps, but the alternatives seem far less inspiring. One can rebel and revolt against God as did Ivan Karamazov; escape from it to the Buddhist's passionless *Nirvana*; preach a stoic indifference; or fight against it with all one's strength in the knowledge of faith, that fulfillment will be found in God's salvific plan for humanity, the *I in us*. ■

Endnotes

- 1 H.P. Owen, 'Evil' in A Dictionary of Christian Ethics, J. Macquarrie (ed), SCM Press Ltd, Suffolk 1984, p. 121.
- 2 W. Kasper, Jesus the Christ, Burns & Oates, London, 1985, p. 55.
- 3 R. Viladesau, The Reason for Our Hope: A Theological Anthropology, Paulist Press, New York, 1984, p. 43.
- 4 V. Lobo, Guide to Christian Living: A New Compendium of Moral Theology, Christian Classics, Westminster, Maryland, 1989, p. 360.
- 5 B. Davies, 'The problem with evil' in Philosophy of religion: a guide to the subject, B. Davies (ed), Cassell, London, 1999, p. 192.
- 6 P. Vardy, The puzzle of God, HarperCollins, London, 1995, pp. 38-43.
- 7 Davies, 'The problem with evil', p. 197.
- 8 Vardy, The puzzle of God, p. 128.
- 9 J. Hick, Evil and the God of love, Collins, Norfolk, 1974, pp. 360-67.
- 10 F. Dostoyevsky, 'Rebellion' in Teaching Philosophy of Religion: THL251 Readings, compiled by J. Hall, Charles Sturt University, Albury-Bathurst and Wagga Wagga, 2006, p. 137.
- 11 P. Vardy, The puzzle of evil, HarperCollins, London, 1992, p. 37.
- 12 Hick, Evil and the God of love, p. 354.
- 13 Ibid., p. 361.
- 14 Davies, 'The problem with evil', p. 170.
- 15 M. Palmer, The question Of God, Routledge, London, 2001.
- 16 A. Fagothey, 'Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice', The C.V. Mosby Company, Saint Louis, 1972, pp. 161-68.
- 17 Vardy, The puzzle of evil, pp. 23-24.
- 18 Owen, 'Evil', p. 121.