THE PROBLEM OF EVIL
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The problem of evil is as old as Job. How do we account for evil in a world created by a good God? After all, in the creation story in Genesis, we are told after each day’s creation - “and God saw that it was good.” Yet we know there are evils - hideous evils of man’s own making through his hate and violence and inhumanity to his fellow man - but, there are also the evils that seem a part of God’s basic order of creation - earthquakes, tempests, famine and plague. And so, we are faced with the classic dilemma. Either God is not good or not all-powerful. Either He wills the good and cannot achieve it, in which case He is not all-powerful, or He does not will the good and so is not all-good. The fact of evil reflects on His goodness or His power.

There are some obvious solutions. Blame the evil on an evil God, Satan, or the devil, who opposes the good God. This was the view of the ancient Persians. There are two cosmic powers, a good God and His powers of light and an evil God with His powers of darkness, and the world of men is the battleground for this cosmic struggle. The Bible shows the influence of this thinking after the Babylonian captivity. Belief in angels and demons struggling for men’s souls became popular. But the Biblical belief in one God makes a counter force, an opposing God, unthinkable. And we see in Job that Satan has to take orders from God. So this solution of Gods is not available if we are to remain in the Biblical tradition.

We can, of course, play down the evil and say it all turns into good. In the famous lines from Alexander Pope’s poem, “Essay on Man”, we can argue, “All nature is but art, unknown to thee; all chance, direction, which thou canst not see; all discord harmony not understood; all partial evil, universal good; and spite of pride, in erring reasons spite, one truth is clear, whatever is is right.” He’s saying we need the discords for the resolution of a grand harmony - just as we need the shadows to enhance the highlights of a great painting to produce an aesthetic good. But why are some lives all shadows or discord? And we say pain is good - it warns us of something wrong so that we will take care of it. But need it be so severe? And some diseases, like glaucoma, come without any warning of pain, like the thief which comes at night. It may be comforting to think God never gives us pain greater than we can bear, but it is not a comforting thing to say, I think, to someone really hurting on a bed of pain or someone suffering the loneliness and pain of grief, trying to make a new life when a beloved partner has died. No, we cannot accept the optimism of Pope’s lines. When we consider the realities of suffering, we are more likely to agree with Dryden who wrote, “When I consider life, ’tis all a cheat. Yet fool’d with hope, men favour the deceit; trust on and think tomorrow will repay. Tomorrow’s falser than the former day; Lies worse, and while it says we shall be blest with some new joys, cuts off what we possest. Strange cozenage! None would live past years again, yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain.”

Then why believe in a good God at all? Why not accept the truth that life is a cheat, as Dryden said, and fools us with false hopes? The answer, I think, is the very hope that Dryden points out, that we will find pleasure and good in spite of the evil. The answer is, I think, that without a good God, we would be hard put to explain the goodness we do find in existence. There are
sunsets and symphonies, love and joy, laughter, great beauty, inspirational personalities, triumphs over hate and ignorance and disease. These are hard to account for in an evil world or even one that is mechanistically neutral. The mystery of evil is great when we think of a good God, but the mystery of goodness is unresolvable if there is no good God at all.

If, then, the problem of goodness and the promise of goodness encourage us to cling to belief in a good God, how, then, do we explain or account for evil?

The Biblical answer to this in general is very clear. All suffering is the result of sin. The children of Israel were liberated by a good God, but they became unfaithful. They worshipped the Baals of the land of Canaan. They made burnt offerings to brazen idols. And they suffered for it, God using Israel’s enemies to punish the people. When the people, or individuals, withdraw from God’s guidance, when they no longer follow His commandments and obey His rule of righteousness, then evil befalls them. The basic dogma is that suffering is the result of sin.

Now this is a pretty good dogma. When we think of the terrible sins of man’s inhumanity to man, we see that the gross sins of greed, hate, lust, violence, exploitation and oppression do create almost all the misery and evil and suffering that we complain of. Moral evil causes suffering. The problem comes in insisting that all suffering is the result of sin. What sin could that baby have committed to have perished in that apartment fire yesterday! Why do the innocent suffer, and the righteous be served with a whole train of trouble, when everyone knows that the wicked seem to flourish? This is where the dogma wears thin. And this is why it is challenged. The Psalmist asks the question - but Job argues it. After all, Job is a righteous man, and yet God permits him to be so sorely tormented by Satan that he wants to die. Now why?

There are many suggestions in this marvelous book. The old dogma is stoutly maintained by Job’s friends, and it may well be that Job’s insistence on his own innocence and righteousness, and his demand that God justify His actions toward him, makes Job guilty of spiritual pride. This is perhaps the meaning of God’s saying to Job at the end, in effect, “Who are you to challenge me? Where were you when I made the world? Who are you to make demands of God?” In a sense, the dogma is still maintained in the face of the inscrutable Will of God. And so when Job repents in humility, we know that the evils are past. Yet the issue remains unanswered clearly and is still a challenge. Jesus obviously had questions about it when in the Gospel of John he refused to speculate on whose sin caused the blindness of the man born blind.

Perhaps he rejected the dogma; it seems so; perhaps he found it irrelevant. Like the Buddha who said that when one is wounded by an arrow, it is idle to wonder whence it came and why, but important to remove it. Jesus refused to discuss the possible cause of the man’s blindness, but proceeded to heal him. “Neither this man sinned, nor his parents,” said Jesus, “but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” He was born blind so that God’s power might be shown in curing him. This probably does not mean that God causes evils so that they can be the occasion for wonder working. But rather the problem of evil is not a theoretical one, requiring a rational answer. The problem of evil is a practical one. Evil exists so that with the power of God we do something about it. Jesus said in the world we will have troubles. He did not go on to say, “but I have explained why this is so.” He said, “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”
Yet, the questions don’t go away. Why must there be evil? How do we reconcile the existence of evil with a good God? I think there are some considerations which help to account for it. And I should like to explain them briefly.

First, there is man’s moral freedom. We are not automata. We are not machines, reacting to causal forces upon us. We can choose - at least within limits - what we are to do, how we are to behave, how we are to respond to certain situations, what we are to value and seek in life. And this power of moral choice can be misused. We choose the wrong things, react in the wrong way, give way to violent passions that we later regret. And how much suffering comes from this! This is the truth in the old Biblical dogma. Man’s evils and sufferings emerged when man (at Eve’s bidding - the sexist dogma is here, too - the woman is always to blame) — anyway, human suffering emerged when man ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge - the knowledge of good and evil. Man moved from innocence to moral freedom of choice. And he does make the wrong choices and he suffers. But consider, would we have it otherwise if we were God and could rearrange things? Would we really prefer to act like machines, with no choice over the input which makes us go? Isn’t it better to be able to choose, even if we do make terrible mistakes, than not to be able to choose at all? Isn’t it the very meaning of being made in the image and likeness of God, that we share His power of creative choice of the good?

A second consideration is the fact that our world operates according to law. There are physical laws that we must learn to live with and understand. We break them at our peril, because we break ourselves against them. We cannot violate the law of gravitation. We cannot speed around a curve slick with rain and avoid a spin-out, if we have exceeded the forces that hold the car on the road. We cannot violate the laws of health and remain healthy, abuse our bodies with drugs and remain unaffected. And some of us believe that moral laws represent a cosmic regularity that can never be violated either. There is the basic law that deeds determine destiny, that acts have consequences. The mills of the gods may grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. How much trouble comes from this fact! We cannot be unfaithful and have fidelity as a result. We cannot be dishonest and inspire credibility. We cannot be insensitive to the feelings of others and have them be sensitive in return. And we cannot sow hate and reap harmony; spread deceit and get trust in return. And yet, when we consider the evils that come from the regular laws of nature and the inexorable moral law, would we really want it different? If we were God and could change the arrangement, would we want a world without law? Could we even live in a world that we could not trust to operate in a regular way? Would we want a world in which moral acts had no reliable consequences? Would morality then make any sense?

A third consideration. Life is a process and represents a kind of evolutionary progress, and a lot of suffering comes from this. We are born weak, ignorant, and we have to learn, painfully at times, to grow up to the spirit of mastery and maturity. There are growing pains - skinned knees, injured pride, bent noses on the way to growing up. All life represents a process from small beginnings to something larger or better. Our world has moved from slavery, ignorance and superstition to a point where we see the necessity of overcoming the poverty and war which keep peoples from living together in peace and plenty. We are born in an unfinished world and are called upon to complete it, to better it, painfully to bring about what is good. How much suffering in world history has come from this?
But again, if we could change things, would we wish this different? Looking back on growing up, weren’t the obstacles - even the bumps - essential in the process of learning? And isn’t life itself of value because it is an on-going process of growth over weakness and ignorance, a dynamic business of meeting challenges, overcoming problems, sharing in the creative processes of God? And would we want a static world, one that is not amenable to change or progress? One may wish for more political and economic stability today. We may be living the life which is the subject of a Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times”. Our times are indeed interesting, but their very volatility is the promise of change and the chance of progress. And surely we would hate to have to live without that promise.

Finally, there is the fact of human inter-relationships. We do not stand isolated as Fosdick once said, like milk bottles standing in the rain. We flow into each other. We affect each other’s existence. No man is an island. We are all members one of another. And the new fact is that today we must think in global terms in the sharing of resources and responsibilities. As individuals and as nations, our troubles, our sins, our stupidities spill over and affect others. This is why the innocent suffer. But, would you have it any different if you could? Would you prefer that we be isolated beings and destroy all the ties of human mutuality which make life truly human? Our interdependence, our inter-relationships, can cause suffering, make us vulnerable. But, when creatively affirmed, the ties that bind us together are what make life beautiful, what we value most.

The conclusion seems to be this. The considerations which can be the occasion for evils and suffering can also be the occasion for good. It may be as Job suggests somewhere, that God has a struggle on His hands in evolving the better world. So believing in God is not some neat finished system or creed. It is betting one’s life on the forces of creative goodness and not being beaten by the evils that beset us. It is realizing that God needs our hands to help bring about that which is good. Evil exists so that we do something about it and share in the creative power of goodness that Jesus has revealed. After all, we do not want a theory to explain evil so much as a power to help us overcome it. And Jesus never said, “I have explained the world.”

He said, “I have overcome it.” Let us, with His help, dare to overcome the evils of this world.