Further Thoughts on the Problem of Suffering

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As a follow-up to my essay *Popular Misconceptions About the Problem of Suffering*, I'd like to address the problem's strongest critiques. The effort again is to present the matter on its own terms, engaging it according to its own internal consistency. The first essay laid much of that groundwork, and now I'll further delve into the real substance of the things in question.

In the previous distinction of natural vs human-caused suffering, there is room for criticism on both counts. First – even if free will explains moral evil, why do we also have natural predation, disease, and tsunamis? Second, and more galling – why is there such intensity and *excessiveness* of suffering, as we see it in genocide, torture, and abuse of children? I will deal briefly with the former before focusing more attention on the latter. Then I will speak further to the prospect of heaven and faith in general, with an overarching view of how truth, love, and moral order pertain to human context (and vice versa) when understood through God.

Natural suffering again needs to be considered in and of itself, without the compounding problem of human misalignment. Our species would be incomparably better equipped to deal with natural challenges if we were unified in spirit and action. Our coordinated efforts would vastly mitigate the *intrinsic* difficulties of events like famines or earthquakes. We would be more insulated against such occurrences and respond communally in their aftermath. And we would better treat disease and cope with death, in our support for each other and in our personal and shared acceptance of these parts of life.

In all this, we must turn our understanding of resources being a source of competition on its head, instead seeing resources as an occasion to provide for mutual needs. This is quite the different picture of humanity historically. Yet still today, we could easily meet the bodily needs of each person globally and fail to do so. Human infighting is at this point the sole cause of starvation or inadequate housing. We have the means to address the challenges of this world physically, psychologically, and morally. Yet their persistence confuses for us the extent to which they are intrinsic vs being secondary, societal effects. In other words, our failure to unite blurs the line between what is natural and what is manmade.

That being said, I am not overlooking or insensitive to natural suffering: the death of loved ones in a natural disaster, the death of one's child to illness. I have children; I have not lost a child, though I have lost a close friend at a young age. The death of loved ones becomes more bearable in solidarity, in shared grievance, however singular and devastating such loss may be for us. To endure the hardship of this life alone – that seems unbearable. For someone lacking such support in such instances of intense personal grief, it is hard to translate the difference that would be made by a hypothetical-sounding community. It is hard to envision community beyond that which we've experienced, which for many people may be all but absent. Yet this difference is not so much a hypothetical as a counterfactual community, something we are meant to have as a foundational part of the human condition. We don't know what we've lost in this respect – family in its best

sense, and an extensive community as family in a real sense. We take for granted what it would be to have a village, a physically proximate network of relations, close friendships, and long-shared life history. But it is the very thing that is needed to cope with the kinds of loss that challenge the meaning and basic worthiness and goodness of this life (hence, questions about God).

The point thus far has been to consider suffering as it is inherent to human life, without all the extra suffering we make for ourselves. These respective sources of affliction are difficult to disentangle, largely due to the ways we've estranged ourselves from our natural wherewithal and strength to address suffering in and through community. And now we find natural suffering untenable and meaningless. As I said in the first essay, manmade affliction is more incongruous with our nature – yet we have arranged society in further incongruity to face the natural difficulties of life. We've structured life against our source of meaning as it's derived from our intrinsically relational nature, in favor of individualistic self-sufficiency.

The concern remains: if natural suffering isn't our fault, why should we have to suffer it? Why wouldn't God eliminate suffering rather than redeem it? My answer will be taken up in the next sections, as we move from natural suffering to that which we create.

In order for the effects of evil to be intelligible within a theistic view, we must attempt to comprehend the full gravity of what it is we're discussing, again according to its own internal consistency. When we speak about God, we speak about being itself, the source of all being and life, whose essence is truth, goodness, and beauty. As scripture succinctly puts it, God is love (1 John 4:16). This essence is inviolable. There is an extremity and absoluteness here that cannot be exaggerated. Yet as difficult as it is to fathom, it must be our starting point and foundation: what we call evil is a transgression of the supreme good, a stepping outside of the essence of being, into unreality. This is figurative – we cannot literally step outside being – yet real in its effect, partaking (as it were) in the nothingness, the darkness and irrationality of anything separate from God.

The words of St. John Henry Newman illustrate this in what may seem to be an exaggeration, which will require patience in unpacking as it grates against our sensibilities. He wrote: "…better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin[1]." Here we must understand sin for what it is, as rebellion against the source of goodness. All the horror of human wickedness, all injustice and cruelty which we now struggle to rectify in the world, all causes of misery and despair that we would wish to avert – it all stems from contravening the substance of God as goodness itself. Newman adds, "I think the principle here enunciated to be the mere preamble…as an Act of Parliament might begin with a '*Whereas*'." Without recognizing this starting point, we lack the moral orientation and direction needed to confront the afflictions and injustice at issue.

There is a balance to strike here, which is key to helping those for whom this line of reasoning lands as quite foreign, or even itself sinister. The point is not in any way to dismiss

[1] From Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.

"temporal affliction," or relativize it, weighed against an abstract good we're calling God. Rather, we must elevate our regard for the substance and fabric of morality.

Within a theistic framework, love and goodness are sacred at the highest order of being – yet that doesn't mean they are invulnerable. We envision God as a remote, invincible, impersonal force of sorts, we envision his sacredness as elsewhere than in the heart of each person. The substance of his love is paradoxically fragile as it is gifted to other beings. We steward that gift of love in our own being and in those entrusted to us. Violating this, whether from weakness, or woundedness, or hard-heartedness, or some combination thereof, occasions the temporal affliction we would wish to avoid. Until we properly prioritize this fundamental moral order (and yes, do so by seeking divine assistance rather than relying on ourselves), we will be helpless in our wherewithal to more fully recognize and follow it.

Viewed this way, the intensity and excessiveness of evil in this world seems to me better explained. That is, sin is a much more plausible cause for the malice, brutality, and coldness that humans are capable of than any naturalistic mechanisms we might consider. The extreme ends of moral monstrosities and pathology we see in the world don't as easily follow as a mere biproduct of human psychology or competition for resources. This holds as well in the less extreme though universal human tendencies towards concupiscence, or moral disorder. As we weigh the moral context of this life, balanced between two extremities in which human society and experience can resemble either heaven or hell, resulting from our intervention as moral actors – it is more credible that real good and real evil is behind it all, as opposed to the relativistic, merely descriptive *appearance* of good and evil. We are not merely *construing* morality in contrasting good and evil. That makes an abstraction of our existence. Life comes to approximate either heaven or hell in how love is either manifested or rejected in each choice of the human heart – how each person draws closer, or not, to the center and essence of being. That is the fullest choice we have in moral freedom, and that which brings us closer to heaven: to see this world and its people as an image and reflection of God, and live accordingly[2].

This choice, as I'll explain momentarily, returns us to the original questions. I hope we can see so far why evil would be so excessive, if it is diametrically opposed to good. We are given freedom to choose God or not, though there is no good outside of him. Yet even if the terrible extent of evil can be understood as a consequence of rejecting God, we are still left wondering: why should the innocent suffer? The response incorporates the previous concerns about suffering as a result of natural causes that seem untouched by human choice. In both cases – whether suffering arises from evil or from nature – the innocent are at issue. There is speculation in the Christian tradition that we would not have natural suffering without the Fall. Nor were we compelled to fall. But that either of these need not have been the case, if only we had followed God's intentions, we can leave to the side. We are addressing the case that the innocent do suffer, it has been allowed by God. There are a few points to work through here; bear with me.

It is important to get the full nature of the question into view, which I will provide different frames for as I go along. In one sense we are wrestling with whether the good ultimately outweighs

[2] This, again, is largely the subject of my work *Right Relationship With Life*.

evil in some sense, whether it is ultimately justifiable, both for humanity at large and for each individual. How could God leave us with free will if such evil can result, again especially as a cost paid by the innocent? Clearly, the answer must be for the sake of the good, and so that good is what we must try to understand. Here care is needed not to presume too much from our limited human perspective. To understand this more from God's view, it is not a matter decided on the scales of temporal, earthly experience, but instead one that is found in the gift of being, in all its substance which is God's love, in what we could consider *real* being, in contrast to the temporal affliction we may endure in this life, however terrible it may be. Goodness alone endures into eternity. There is, in the end, only one evil – and that is to reject God, to be separated from God.

All this doesn't assume or require faith, it is not an attempt to explain away suffering or vaguely gesture at ineffable mysteries. We are asking about God, and so the nature of being as it includes God is integral to the response.

Up until this point, I've worked through mitigating explanations for why suffering is allowed – moral evil as a consequence of free will, heaven as redemptive. There is some measure of rationale for the problem, either intellectually or as a matter of the heart. But there is a limit to how suffering can be explained. There is no answer that can resolve or satisfy every objection. But we are left with a choice, and in that we find some further answer.

This choice of whether to accept God (or still admit of his possibility) despite suffering that we can't fully explain or understand is in another sense a question about the intrinsic goodness of this world. We are weighing two very different metaphysical options in asking whether suffering proves God's nonexistence, which have the deepest implications for whether, or how, or to what extent human life is intrinsically good[3]. This gets to the heart and crux of the matter, both as a philosophical question and as it pertains to some of the deepest questions for our hearts individually, again in the personal significance of suffering. How do we value our life as well as humanity generally, despite pain, difficulty, malevolence, and wrongdoing – even our own?

We should distinguish these two different pictures of how we might consider human life good. Without God, there remains the good experiences of meeting basic natural needs, such as in relationship or food. This, at least, is empirical, and it is worth noting again that absent suffering, there would be no occasion to question this form of goodness in the first place (suffering is what throws human goodness and meaning into question). But we can also see that this view of the good is both relativistic[4] (based on subjective rather than inherent value) and rather precarious (if it depends on things going well). In contrast, human life is a good in itself, if it derives from God.

So then, another form of the question becomes: does suffering negate or disprove the kind of intrinsic goodness that we could attribute to life as a creation of God? If so, we might affirm the world in its goodness, as goodness prevails, but an otherwise morally neutral scale tips towards cynicism and fatalism the more that evil (or natural suffering) prevails.

We must see these implications clearly and fully in our answer to the problem of suffering. To decide that there is no God because of pain and the evil that humanity commits, is in a way to

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[3] I address this in part two of *Right Relationship With Life: God and Realism*.
[4] Ibid.

concur with the fatalistic view – to confirm it as a truer signifier about the nature of our reality, against the countervailing truth we find in God. I realize that this statement may strike a nerve for some, but it is worth consideration. Does evil seem to disprove to us the fundamental goodness which is presented in God? If so – must it be viewed this way, necessarily? We should notice that this is out of step with our enduring capacity for affirmation. Evil cannot, it seems, destroy the goodness of this life; it can be affirmed even in the worst conditions and experiences. And so it is our capacity for affirmation, despite suffering and evil, that is also at issue.

It will be pointed out that someone can choose affirmation while disbelieving in God. This is true, but to a much more limited extent than we might suppose, either as a matter of metaphysics or for the sake of good in this life[5]. This turns us to the positive side of choosing for God. Affirmation is not merely a coping mechanism for an otherwise bleak picture without God, but a matter of ultimate metaphysical grounding. To choose God is to take him up on the offer of moral freedom – and to emphatically choose good over evil. Our answer to why the innocent suffer is found largely by standing with the suffering, by resisting fatalism, and letting love transform our meaning. Suffering is allowed as a potential cost of freedom in order that we might choose love. That good, in God's eyes, is justified and worthy, even in full view of the consequences of our rejecting him. And we can say the same about our response to natural suffering. How all this plays out in this world is far from the end of the story for God, which we'll get to in a moment. But even in this life, our choosing God is the definitive stance against the evil that we rightly find so objectionable. In contrast, blaming and condemning God can risk deepening our estrangement from goodness, often unwittingly.

But why is responsibility transferred so largely to us? Isn't there some absurdity in God allowing us to have a problem that he could solve? This brings up the issue of divine hiddenness, and how that compounds the matter further, allowing for despair. I'm reminded of the sentiment attributed to Bertrand Russell about how he would justify disbelief in God, asking him, "sir, why did you take such pains to hide yourself?" There is a note of presumption in the question – addressing God as 'sir,' as one gentleman to another, and apparently expecting the inquiry to be unanswerable, or at least a justified alibi. But did he take pains to hide himself?

The possibility of faith, the idea of God, has never been foreign to humanity. Scripture confirms that the specific form of belief in God matters less than the heart, ultimately: "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). Still further, we have ever-present before us the central mystery of humanity in the Christian God, the image and teaching of Jesus. Regardless of our assent to Christianity (or in varying degrees other religions), through it we are presented a God who is personal, loving, and close – even in hiddenness. And while understanding God this way is a hardship for many (often based on life experience), it is for others the norm and default. Humanity is not an abstract, blank slate; we have inherent in human context the conditions of love and beauty and moral responsibility, which reflect God. For one like Russell, the answer would be not so much explained

[5] The latter gets us broadly into ethics, which I hope to address in the future on specific topic-by-topic basis.

as revealed in his understanding, that indeed it was rather he who hid himself from God, as we all do in our sins against love.

I've said that God sees the cost of suffering as worth the good that he would indeed have us choose. This is not to say that he does not fully appreciate that cost for what it is or is not compassionate towards our pain and grief. To illustrate this, I'd like to quote at another passage from St. John Henry Newman, describing the beginning of Jesus' passion in the garden of Gethsemane. It is long, but most salient in its entirety:

> There, then, in that most awful hour, knelt the Saviour of the world, putting off the defences of His divinity, dismissing His reluctant Angels, who in myriads were ready at His call, and opening His arms, baring His breast, sinless as He was, to the assault of His foe,—of a foe whose breath was a pestilence, and whose embrace was an agony. There He knelt, motionless and still, while the vile and horrible fiend clad His spirit in a robe steeped in all that is hateful and heinous in human crime, which clung close round His heart, and filled His conscience, and found its way into every sense and pore of His mind, and spread over Him a moral leprosy, till He almost felt Himself to be that which He never could be, and which His foe would fain have made Him. Oh, the horror, when He looked, and did not know Himself, and felt as a foul and loathsome sinner, from His vivid perception of that mass of corruption which poured over His head and ran down even to the skirts of His garments! Oh, the distraction, when He found His eyes, and hands, and feet, and lips, and heart, as if the members of the Evil One, and not of God! Are these the hands of the Immaculate Lamb of God, once innocent, but now red with ten thousand barbarous deeds of blood? are these His lips, not uttering prayer, and praise, and holy blessings, but as if defiled with oaths, and blasphemies, and doctrines of devils? or His eyes, profaned as they are by all the evil visions and idolatrous fascinations for which men have abandoned their adorable Creator? And His ears, they ring with sounds of revelry and of strife; and His heart is frozen with avarice, and cruelty, and unbelief; and His very memory is laden with every sin which has been committed since the fall, in all regions of the earth, with the pride of the old giants, and the lusts of the five cities, and the obduracy of Egypt, and the ambition of Babel, and the unthankfulness and scorn of Israel. Oh, who does not know the misery of a haunting thought which comes again and again, in spite of rejection, to annoy, if it cannot seduce? or of some odious and sickening imagination, in no sense one's own, but forced upon the mind from without? or of evil knowledge, gained with or without a man's fault, but which he would give a great price to be rid of at once and for ever? And adversaries such as these gather around Thee, Blessed Lord, in millions now; they come in troops more numerous than the locust or the palmer-worm, or the plagues of hail, and flies, and frogs, which were sent against Pharaoh. Of the living and of the dead and of the as yet unborn, of the lost and of the saved, of Thy people and of strangers, of sinners and of saints, all sins are there. Thy dearest are there, Thy saints and Thy chosen are upon Thee; Thy three Apostles, Peter, James, and John; but not as comforters, but as accusers, like the friends of Job, "sprinkling dust towards heaven," and heaping curses on Thy head. All are there but one; one only is not there, one only; for she who had no part in sin, she only could console Thee, and therefore she is not nigh. She will be near Thee on the Cross, she is separated from Thee in the garden. She has been Thy companion and Thy confidant through Thy life, she interchanged with Thee the pure thoughts and holy meditations of thirty years; but her virgin ear may not take in, nor may her immaculate heart conceive, what now is in vision before Thee. None was equal to the weight but God; sometimes before Thy saints Thou hast brought the image of a single sin, as it appears in the light of Thy countenance, or of venial sins, not mortal; and they have told us that the sight did all but kill them, nay, would have killed them, had it not been instantly withdrawn. The Mother of God, for all her sanctity, nay by reason of it, could not have borne even one brood of that innumerable progeny of Satan which now compasses Thee about. It is the long history of a world, and God alone can bear the load of it. Hopes blighted, vows broken, lights quenched, warnings scorned, opportunities lost; the innocent betrayed, the young hardened, the penitent relapsing, the just overcome, the aged failing; the sophistry of misbelief, the wilfulness of passion, the obduracy of pride, the tyranny of habit, the canker of remorse, the wasting fever of care, the anguish of shame, the pining of disappointment, the sickness of despair; such cruel, such pitiable spectacles, such heartrending, revolting, detestable, maddening scenes; nay, the haggard faces, the convulsed lips, the flushed cheek, the dark brow of the willing slaves of evil, they are all before Him now; they are upon Him and in Him. They are with Him instead of that ineffable peace which has inhabited

> His soul since the moment of His conception. They are upon Him, they are all but His own; He cries to His Father as if He were the criminal, not the victim; His agony takes the form of guilt and compunction. He is doing penance, He is making confession, He is exercising contrition, with a reality and a virtue infinitely greater than that of all saints and penitents together; for He is the One Victim for us all, the sole Satisfaction, the real Penitent, all but the real sinner.

This passage does not require belief in Christianity to get a better sense of the kind of God we are evaluating. Certainly, Christianity is unique in the measures God takes in suffering himself, underscoring a point of faith that God really does desire that we find salvation in him. I have sometimes fancied in meditating on the agony in the garden that at that moment Jesus so displaced time as to visit, in a way, each person throughout history – to suffer with each moment of our suffering and sin. This is the God we are envisioning, about whom we are asking whether suffering condemns.

The answer to why we suffer, innocent or not, is provided in God himself. He is the good for the sake of which moral freedom is offered, even seeing the cost of its rejection. The question, then, takes yet a final form – is God sufficient? Again, this is seen most clearly in the implications of the choice we are presented with. But first I'd like to acknowledge the validity of the inclination one might have to maintain disbelief in God as a matter of integrity or conscience, if belief seems to acquiesce to God despite him being responsible for the evil of this world. There is something well-intentioned in this, holding God accountable to a standard of goodness over and beyond his power. This is perfectly depicted in the character of Job, who refuses to capitulate to God as a matter of God's power, but rather insists on divine justice. What biblical commentators overlook is the way in which Job is answered by God's personal presence to him; God's questions to Job not merely proclaiming his power but characterized by parental care for his creation ("Where were you…when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb; when I made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band?" (Job 38:4-9)). And Job answers God: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee" (Job 42:5)[6]. Ultimately, maintaining disbelief based solely on suffering is a misguided response that may fail to serve either truth or healing[7].

On the other hand, following God is to pursue sainthood, to pursue becoming fully ourselves, morally integrated (the Orthodox Church describes this as *reintegration*, regaining what we've lost). As I've said before, we can start with God being a fairly open-ended ideal of love and goodness (though I wouldn't recommend we stray too far from intuitive conceptions); our conscience and understanding are refined in following the highest good with as much integrity and innocence as we can manage. We are paradoxical creatures in how we resist this. Ordering our lives

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[6] All of this is beautifully expounded in Eleonore Stump's *Wandering In Darkness*, as I noted in the first essay.

[7] The point is not that atheism lacks the utility of faith. This gets things in reverse order. Faith benefits us, as I describe in the next paragraph, insofar as it enables pursuit of right relationship with the higher order of being, as that is found in God.

As a separate matter, we may have other questions about God's existence, ethically or otherwise. But suffering in and of itself need not be disqualifying.

to the highest good, however we understand it, is always seen to be so fitting and right. Yet it is strangely difficult not to actively obstruct this. What we overlook in the world is the fact of real saints, and the possibility of becoming such ourselves. There are individuals who have taken God up on the call and offer to sanctity, who are themselves signs of God's intentions for humanity. The choice is whether to accept humanity and ourself as something that can become truly good: seeing it likewise with God as worth any cost we may endure in this world.

Suffering, evil, morality, God – these are the most serious and consequential matters of human existence, they bring us to the heart of everything we most deeply value and cherish. Our predicament is in some ways clear: the opportunity to exist in beauty, love, and community, contends with the precise opposite in war, destruction, anguish, and misery. It's admittedly a strange picture, with these opposite outcomes at stake both individually and globally. Even for those of faith, the scale of suffering in history may feel too vast to comprehend. These are serious objections. Yet they do not erase the possibility that love can still transform how we endure suffering, nor do they close off the horizon of meaning in which God may yet reconcile what now seems irreconcilable. If suffering presses the question of meaning to its limit, it also opens the possibility that love – divine and human – can reveal a goodness deeper than the wounds of history.