

Midwest Philosophy and Theology Conference

This papers in this collection was presented October 3-4, 2008 at the inaugural meeting of the *Midwest Philosophy and Theology Conference* at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

AFFECT AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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for Jeremiah

'If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent, then why is there (so much) evil in the world?' runs the problem of evil. Or more forcefully, doesn't the occurrence of (so much) worldly evil actually imply the non-existence of such a God, as the leading atheological gambit, the "argument from evil," contends?

In the context of theodicy or defense against the argument from evil, "evil" signifies both what is wrongly done by humans (moral evil, sin) and what is bad, something we undergo which runs counter to our desires (suffering). Following Aristotle, we may think of the ultimate good as happiness, that which we seek for its own sake and which, as a goal, conditions our choices and

habit formation across the range of human actions and feelings. Happiness is the fulfillment of our human nature. For Christian theism, ultimate happiness is found in relationship with God. That divinely intended good is the final end for humans. In its fullest expression is the end of sin and suffering.

Because the argument from evil primarily concerns suffering, that will be our focus here. We begin by examining the connection between the philosophical and existential dimensions of the problem of and argument from evil as suffering. Next we consider the role of the affect in the constitution and interpretation of experience generally, together with the implications for the argument from suffering. Third, we look at how a key affectual element of the argument from evil might undercut that argument. Finally, we consider a proposal to categorize suffering as a species of moral or spiritual failure, i.e. as affectually wrong.

The apologetic or philosophical problem of suffering, that is, how one may respond to the argument from suffering as a philosophical challenge is often distinguished from the existential problem of suffering or how one's beliefs, attitudes and actions will be affected in relation to God in the face of, say, one's own experience of suffering. The existential problem has also been called the psychological or pastoral or religious or practical problem. Alvin Plantinga and Peter van Inwagen, among many others who address the apologetic problem, disclaim any direct connection between the philosophical and existential challenges. Yet there may be more connection between the two than first appears.

In principle, even slightly negative experiences are logically available to the argument from suffering. Woody Allen joked that he could not believe in the existence of a beneficent creator who would let him get his tongue caught in the typewriter. Were we to adduce such negative experiences to argue against God's goodness, however, the general consensus of what should count as misery would ordinarily disqualify them. A certain experiential threshold is

necessary to really motivate the problem of suffering and especially the argument from suffering, albeit that threshold varies over time and across cultures. So in the context of the argument from suffering, the most serious challenge comes not from the existence of *any* negative experience, but from negative experience in an extreme amount, especially if it looks like gratuitous suffering. Hence John Hick defines suffering as a state of mind “in which we wish violently or obsessively that our situation were otherwise.”¹ So the philosophical problem follows the curve of the existential problem.

When do we reach the appropriately motivating threshold? Here the social context can be significant. If, for example, members of a religious congregation, friends, and family rally round the cancer victim, his or her experience of suffering, all things being equal, will not play in the same register as the one who suffers alone. Indeed, we might equate the lived interpretation of the suffering experienced with its magnitude. The inner, personal argument from suffering the sufferer may begin to consider, in doubt, will be harder to make for the socially loved one. The same might be said where there is a direct inner experience of divine love. Indeed, in both cases, the affectual experience of being loved can bring about tranquility and with it a rationale for our living apart from any intellectual defense against the argument from suffering. Our personal standard of what is rational for us to believe or continue believing seems to contain an affective component, at least in relation to certain kinds of beliefs.

Martin Heidegger noted that every mood or affectual orientation has its understanding and every understanding its mood. That moods have rationales illustrates the point here. If, for example, I am angry at X for losing my book and then discover that it was Y who lost it, my anger at X disperses at once. Facts matter in affective rationales. Aristotle’s account of emotional virtue and vice make sense to us for the same reason: “We can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too

¹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 354.

little.... But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is ... the mark of virtue.”² Were emotion sheer subjective projection or expression, we could make no sense of Aristotle here.

Moods tune us in to our environment in particular ways, highlighting certain features and directing our purposeful action. They contain interpretations of ourselves and others. Parental love, for example, configures a whole world of relationship; it creates a teleology according to its own intrinsic logic. It makes certain courses of action rational and others irrational. Hence rationality in the case of the typically hedonic agent of so-called rational decision theory, affectually and ideologically determined in its individualism as it is, cannot count as rationality *per se*; it offers one rationale among many other possibilities.

Altogether then, without the affective contribution we could not live, since nothing would count as significant or important to us, nothing would move us to act. So, far from being a stumbling block to dispassionate reason, the affective contribution to the constitution of human experience is a *sine qua non*. In that sense the affect’s role resembles the contribution of Kant’s a priori categories to sensory inputs in the synthesis of experience. At least to some degree then, an experience of suffering, like all human experiences, is an interpretation constituted by an affectual understanding. As Heidegger puts it, human existence is care, about ourselves, others, and our environment.

Particular intellectual constructions of suffering, then, have their corresponding moods and vice versa. So, for instance, accepting the free will response to the problem of suffering intellectually can also bring emotional solace. And as we saw earlier, immediate powerful experience of love can directly evoke a new self-understanding and rationale for decision-making. But, in addition, the affect is or can be made subject to the will or intellect directly in

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), 43.

important ways. Hence classical Stoicism aimed to achieve serenity by withdrawing all affect from what exceeds the individual's control, namely everything in the world but one's attitude about it. Yet when the experience of suffering is denatured by *apatheia*, what remains of existence falls short of what most consider life. Even so, the fact that affect partly constitutes our experience and is at least in part subject to the will shows that there is no fixed, objectively determined quantum of suffering. The morose boyfriend who kills himself over a breakup with his girlfriend may suffer more than the person with end-stage cancer who is loved deeply and has the hope of faith. Circumstances where the will or intellect is no longer intact would pose a special case here, as would the cases of children and animals. Such suffering requires a different kind of accounting.

For the one who develops wisdom and virtue through the challenge of suffering, that suffering is not of the average "amount." Indeed, on balance, it may be felt and understood as a good. This is the crux of the soul-making defense against the argument from suffering. And it is nowhere more relevant than with the affect. It is under the pressure of suffering that key virtues develop. For if there were no bad consequences of our free will, there would be no occasions calling for patience, self-sacrifice, unselfishness, courage, or honesty as virtues or excellences in the world. In fact, as Hick argues, the capacity to sympathize with and love those in calamity actually requires that there be a distribution of evil not in keeping with our deserts since, if it were so distributed, no one would deserve our sympathy. Hick cites Royce here: "Even love shows its glory as love only by its conquest over the doubts and estrangements, the absences and the misunderstandings, the griefs and the loneliness, that love glorifies with its light amidst all their tragedy."³ And the famous discourse on love of I Corinthians 13 speaks similarly of the nature of love in relation to what it overcomes. For Christian theism all of these character qualities are

³ As cited in Hick, 362 footnote.

important preparation for and incipient experience of eternal life with God, a limitless good outweighing all finite suffering.

But those outside any particular religious confession have also seen the soul-making result of suffering. Aristotle's discussion of the development of virtue in the passions certainly includes this overcoming aspect. Or consider Michael J. Fox in his 2002 memoir, *Lucky Man*: "If you were to rush in to this room right now and announce that you had struck a deal-with God, Allah, Buddha, Christ, Krishna, Bill Gates, whomever-in which the ten years since my diagnosis [with incurable progressive disease of the central nervous system] could be magically taken away, traded in for ten more years as the person I was before, I would, without a moment's hesitation, tell you to take a hike [dust jacket]." So what looked like a clear instance of severe, long-term suffering and a premise for an argument from suffering is intellectually and affectually reconstituted as something quite different.

Or consider Mabel and the effect of divine love in her suffering: "One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to one side, dropped one eye, and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly...this woman was eighty-nine years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone, for twenty-five years."⁴ It is probably impossible for those outside such affliction to genuinely appreciate it. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how a well-meaning visitor might even address her.

Her life also seems to be paradigmatic evidence for the argument from suffering. Yet to a visitor who asks her what she thinks about while lying in her bed, she replies: 'I think about my Jesus. I think about how good He's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you

⁴ William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2003), 110.

know.... He's all the world to me.'⁵ And with her experience of Christ, Mabel not only preempts a personal argument from suffering, but also makes her suffering unavailable to the outsider for a more general argument from suffering.

Of course alternative rejoinders to the argument from evil from an affectual angle are possible. William Hasker, for example, finds an apparently self-thwarting element in the argument from suffering based on our moral sentiments. He notes that the argument from suffering depends on a moral sentiment which, when violated, gives rise to moral protest. Extreme and/or gratuitous suffering seems unjust. Without some moral feeling, apparent discrepancy between evil done and evil received would not issue in protest. Even the philosophical challenge depends on this sort of moral care. Yet can the indignant one be existentially authentic in his or her protest? Hasker argues that this is impossible.⁶

He begins by asking the objector whether he or she is glad to exist, a person-relative appeal to each one's core value sentiments. Next he proposes that my existence depends on the coming to be of my body. If I am glad I exist, I cannot be sorry my body came to be. But if my body is a necessary condition of my existence as a person, then whatever my body needs to exist, I also need. To be the person I am requires particular parents at a particular time. Many contingent causes played into my parents meeting, marrying, and conceiving me at a given time. Were I to trace back through their ancestors for the same sorts of contingent causes, I would very likely find that war, famine, sickness, disease, betrayal, even murder and adultery all played a role in making my existence possible. So Hasker concludes: "Had major or significant events in the world's past history been different than they were, then in all probability neither I nor the persons whom I love would even have existed."⁷

⁵ Ibid., 111-112.

⁶ Michael Peterson, *God and Evil* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), cf. 114-120.

⁷ Ibid., 117.

Here is where the moral protest against evil becomes self-thwarting. If I object that no good or just God would have tolerated the manifold suffering of the world yet I am glad for my own existence and its necessary conditions (the manifold suffering), I have a contradictory will. On the other hand, if I am not glad I exist, perhaps even leaning to suicide, this argument cannot be made. Altogether, then, Hasker very intriguingly suggests how the affectual component of the argument from suffering might be turned back upon itself.

Does Hasker's argument work? If his premises were all true, it would be a powerful argument speaking directly from and to the existential element of the problem of suffering. Yet his principal move is suspect. If I will my existence, even my body, am I thereby committed to willing, say, the abduction and rape of my great-grandmother, had that led to the conception of a grandparent? Or, alternatively, must I will the suicide of her fiancé so that she could come to marry my great-grandfather? If my German parents met and married in the US having fled as children with their parents from WWII, am I committed to willing Hitler?

Here a question of personal identity arises. Abstracting away from all but biological conditions for my existence, I might have to commit to a certain genealogy. But that just means my parents meeting, marrying, and conceiving me, for example. I am just as consistent to will this having happened in Germany as in America. I can will that my great-grandmother decided to drop suitor number one in preference for my great-grandfather rather than suitor one killing himself. It isn't easy to see why I must commit beyond a set of sufficient historical conditions of my coming to be, why I must commit to the actual historical sequence. For that actual sequence is not necessary in principle for my existence. Alternatively, I could consistently will that God create me like Adam, *de novo*, without any human progenitors, without any history.

Finally, let us consider John Hick's claim that suffering just is sin. In that case, the problem of suffering is successfully met by a changed affectual understanding away from our

self-centeredness and toward God. As Hick puts it: "If we were fully conscious of God and His universal purpose of good we should be able to accept our life in its entirety as God's gift and be free from anguish on account of it."⁸ There is clearly something to this for Christian theism. Hick could garner significant support for this claim drawing on the pertinent biblical sources, as also for his claim that Christ suffered for others. Yet protest Psalms are also part of the canon. And Christ appeared to suffer for his own part as well. On the cross He cries out to God as having forsaken Him. He is clearly full of anguish in Gethsemane with his disciples, sweating blood over his coming crucifixion. Is He weeping only for others at the tomb of his friend Lazarus? If the existential problem can be solved, perhaps the drama of suffering en route is a necessary condition for that solution

⁸ Hick, 355.