



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Why? me?

This article, the first of three parts, examines the age-old question: Why is there suffering in the world?



SUFFERING IS NOT PUNISHMENT: Faced with the problem of the suffering of a man born blind, his disciples asked him: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind? Jesus replied: Neither he nor his parents sinned."



WHY THEN DO PEOPLE SUFFER? St Thomas Aquinas teaches that good is the cause of evil. In other words, that there is no principle of evil. There is only one principle of goodness, namely, God; and all evil is somehow derived from such goodness.

A FEW decades ago, in what is now called the Killing Fields in Cambodia, more than two million people were executed mercilessly. Among them, babies who were murdered in front of their mothers by having their heads smashed against trees. Where was God? Why was He silent? Why didn't He intervene?

As unspeakable as this and other genocides can be, they are also a striking, perhaps scandalous proof of the firm commitment of God to respect our freedom of choice, no matter how horrible these acts might be. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that "God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it because He respects the freedom of His creatures." (CCC 311)

We are not merely humans, we are persons; and that means we are endowed with freedom to choose what we believe is good so that we become the lords of our decisions and our lives, a kind of lordship that we share with God Himself. In this lies our dignity - being persons means to be God-like.

But what about suffering that is not the result of human behaviour? Sir David Attenborough has frequently been questioned for not mentioning a word about God, in spite of being an outstanding witness of the beauty and perfection of nature in his TV famous documentaries. Then, he relates the episode of a worm that is burrowing through the eyeball of a little African child making him blind for life. We should suppose, he claims, that the God who created the hummingbird created this parasitic worm too. Is that the action

of a benevolent Creator who cares for each person individually?

A common theory to explain away such mystery interprets suffering as a punishment from God. The problem with this is that reality belies it and the Bible confirms this. The psalmist notices that bad people often enjoy a good life while good people suffer unfairly: "My feet were on the point of stumbling... Look at them: these are the wicked, well-off and still getting richer!" (*Psalms 73: 2-14*)

In fact, the book of Job tries to come to terms with this fact: the innocent suffers and so his suffering cannot be a punishment for his sins.

Jesus also belied the theory of suffering being a punishment. When 18 Galileans were killed when a tower collapsed, Jesus rejected the assumption that it happened because of their sins. (*Luke 13:4*) On another occasion, faced with the problem of the suffering of a man born blind, His disciples asked Him: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?" Jesus replied: "Neither he nor his parents sinned." (*John 9:2-3*)

Pope John Paul II clarified this in his document, *On the Christian Meaning of Suffering*: "Job challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin. It is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of punishment. The figure of Job is a special proof of this." (*Salvifici Doloris, 11*)

So, if there is a suffering that is neither a human fault nor God's punishment, why is there this human suffering? Why do we live in a world where parasites make innocent children blind and tsunamis destroy hundreds of thousands

of human lives?

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Let us illustrate it with an example. Cars are a good invention. They help us to move farther and better. However, cars also cause air pollution and traffic jams, which are not desirable. Then, we invent traffic lights to solve the problem of traffic jams. Having traffic lights is then generally good but we tend to find red traffic lights particularly annoying.

To suffer pain, like having to stop at the red light, is bad. Still the fact that both pain and traffic lights exist is wonderful. Unlike us, trees lack the nervous system to feel pain and cannot do much about it when something hurts them. We, on the other hand, rush to the dentist when a toothache tells us that something is wrong. So it is good that the capacity to feel pain exists even if it is particularly bad to experience it.

St Augustine noticed that if we were to eliminate all evil, then many goods would disappear. Lions need to kill prey to exist. The good of the lion implies the suffering of the prey. We could think of a world where animals don't need to kill each other to survive but that would make for much impoverished ecosystems.

People often wonder at the beautiful mountains and might be inspired to raise their thoughts to their Creator. However, the same tectonic plates that move to make those mountains might have created earthquakes, which may have caused untold suffering. And yet, earthquakes

don't kill people; mostly, collapsing buildings do. If we did not love each other, mothers would not be devastated at the death of the children in earthquakes. In a world with complex levels of goodness like mountains, tectonic plates, collapsible buildings and loving mothers, suffering is likely to happen when people are at the wrong place at the wrong time. In this sense suffering has its origin in the goodness of a complex and interacting creation.

Of course, we could ask if God could have created a world with no undesired side-effects. St Thomas reply is reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "With infinite power God could always create something better. But with infinite wisdom and goodness God freely willed to create a world 'in a state of journeying' toward its ultimate perfection... With physical good there exists also physical evil as long as creation has not reached perfection." (CCC 310)

Why is there human suffering? Because God created good things. God created a human freedom that gives us personal dignity and created a world with complex and interacting goodness. However, along with human freedom, comes the consequences of evil decisions that inflict unspeakable suffering and along with a good creation that is full of complexity and interaction comes physical pain and suffering.

But answering the question of the origin of evil and suffering does not satisfy yet all our questions. We should still ask why God seems to be impassible and dispassionate about it? Why is God not intervening? To answer that question we will need another article. Stay tuned.