

The Problem of Pain Revisited

The question of why does Jehovah, who is said to be all good and all loving, allow so much injustice, pain and suffering in the world, is one of the most troubling questions a Christian can face. Perhaps it *is* the most troubling of all. The number of people who left the church after being disillusioned can probably never be counted, although I know I was once among their number. Yet I cannot remember having a single discussion with a hostile atheist who didn't come across to me as someone in great pain, and often the pain came, directly or indirectly, from the church he was once attending. I got to know a few skeptics well enough to confirm my suspicions, and so far I haven't been wrong. But I suspect that, even for those not hurt by the church, trying to come to terms with the evil in the world makes God's existence suspect, and the slow journey to skepticism begins.

I have come to wonder if pain is, at least in part, the reason so many Christians turn to the Eastern philosophies. In the Eastern world, pantheism is very prevalent. Perhaps many Christians feel that the faith they have in a power that rises above evil needs to be replaced by a god who can relate to the suffering they are experiencing. They don't want a god who allows pain; they want a god who can, at the very least, relate to their pain. Since pantheism claims that god and the universe are one, they are able to find a god who is just as wretched and miserable as they are. This god can't stop the suffering because the suffering is an inherent part of him. While the pantheist god is unable to end the pain, at least one doesn't have to deal with the idea that God could help, but doesn't.

Of course, Christianity has a God that experienced the same pain we do (and then some), but I do believe it is downplayed to an alarming degree. Protestants, for one reason or another, eschew the crucifixion in favor of a simple cross at best, and many have no image whatsoever to remind the faithful that we do indeed have a God who can empathize with our pain. Furthermore, I am being exposed to an alarming number of toxic ideas on this matter, such as that portraying Jesus at all is idolatry (a corrupted interpretation of the first commandment prohibiting graven images), or that such imagery is insulting to God (if you were a parent whose child was executed, would you want everyone to carry an image of his death?). Songs are still sung about Christ's sacrifice, although they seem to be losing ground to songs that emphasize the power God has and/or the love and joy that come from being saved. All too often, the message is monotonously the same: God is so great and wonderful that we can't help but to be blissfully awed by His presence. So what happens when we are in bitter agony instead of blissful awe? Clearly, God is no longer with us because we would not feel this way if He were. And the next obvious question is, why isn't He with us when we tried so hard to be good?

Even among Catholics, where the crucifix and Eucharist are the focal points of worship, the idea that God became man seems to be secondary during everyday conversations on the faith, if His humanity is involved in casual conversation at all.

But regardless of what the numbers actually are, or why those leaving Christianity for pantheism are doing so, the problem is both real and monumental. The famous dilemma posed by Epicurus -- "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" is well known and often used by skeptics today as "proof" God cannot exist.

But efforts in explaining how Jehovah can exist by using philosophy to explain pain is always problematic, and almost always ineffective. In my own experiences, I try to avoid the problem of pain at first. Not because I don't have a sound, rational and reasonable argument to give on the matter, but

because I know my interlocutor is not in a mood to accept logic. *Pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (logic) are two completely different ways of communicating, and when *pathos* runs high, *logos* has little or no chance of being heard. Instead, I try to calm my interlocutor down. Taking a genuine interest in the other person's anguish not only forces them to articulate what they are feeling (such articulation is conducive to *logos*, and has the added benefit of reducing *pathos* to manageable levels), but helps build one's own *ethos* (credibility) with the interlocutor.

But even then, all the great philosophies that show how God and pain can co-exist ought to be avoided, especially with the skeptic. Even if one can convince the interlocutor that one is correct on the matter, we still have the problem of Jehovah apparently being too far above our pain for Him to really matter. If the interlocutor lost a loved one, or was fired from his job without notice, or was diagnosed with cancer, or any number of other tragic problems, simply being told that God did not create these evils, and that it's man's own fault for the existence of evil, is neither what the interlocutor needs nor wants to hear. And if the interlocutor had doubts about God from the beginning, then any such discussion is simply going to convince them that God is irrelevant, even if He does exist.

And I can't blame them. When I hurt, despite my firm faith in God, I don't want a lesson in philosophy, I want the pain to end. Or, and this is a big "or," to be convinced that this pain I am going through has a purpose that will make it worthwhile. The idea that pain is temporary and that something better is coming has been overlooked by philosophers for millennia, until C.S. Lewis (who wasn't a philosopher at all) pointed it out. Even with his observation, few people seemed to notice. But while Lewis is famous for bringing people to Christianity with books like *Mere Christianity*, it is my humble opinion that the single greatest tool he gave us was to point out that no pain, no suffering, no wrong, is so great that it can't be borne if a hope that something better will come exists. While I found his book *The Problem of Pain* to be disappointing otherwise, this one gem made it all worthwhile.

It is utterly absurd to deny this fact about pain. It is so obviously true that it took millennia for someone to finally point it out. Yet our lives are shaped by it. "No pain, no gain" is the motto of every fitness freak I know. People have willingly died horrific deaths in an attempt to save someone else, especially when that someone else was a child. Women who experienced long and painful labors with their first child are known to be eager to have even more children. And let's not forget the testimony that countless martyrs have given us, as they faced and endured the most painful forms of execution their fellow man could devise. Many martyrs were actually recorded as being "joyful" during their torments, a tradition that started with Saint Steven, Acts 7:55-56, 59-60. Actually, the Books of Maccabees (in Catholic Bibles) were quite explicit in using hope as the answer to pain (2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42 in particular). The martyrs knew from the beginning what the greatest philosophical minds have overlooked. And it is interesting that to note the pain itself need not cause what is hoped for, only that there is something to hope for after the pain.

For too long, the great philosophers have asked the wrong question. They have asked *why* pain exists? And for too long, the common man was content to let the philosophers try and answer this question. For too long, our culture has ignored the question that really needed to be asked: "What do we *do* about pain?" The fruits of focusing on the wrong question are obvious. We put God on trial, and asked Him why He allows it. As long as we are mad at God, no answer from the witness stand will satisfy us. Instead, we should have been placing ourselves on trial, and asked Him to be our lawyer.

God may or may not relieve our pain, suffering or persecution in this world, but Heaven is available to all who honestly ask for it. Furthermore, no Earthly respite can hold a candle to the joys of Heaven. But before one can hope for Heaven, one needs to trust in God. And before one can trust in

God, one has to know about God. I'm not talking about pretending to know God because one has good feelings about God. Feelings and emotions are what caused the crisis of faith in the first place. If feelings, which are malleable, can bring one to God, they can take one away from God. And such an emotional departure is usually accompanied by the additional feeling of betrayal. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that one builds a real relationship with God. Not because God makes one feel good, but because God is trustworthy. Building a relationship requires having curiosity, and a motivation to follow up on the curiosity. Building a relationship with God means accepting that the relationship is not about oneself, but about God. Building a relationship with God means not getting what *you* want, but what *God* wants (namely, to adopt you as a son or daughter). This is the relationship that needs to be cultivated, so that when the bad times come, one already has faith that God knows best.

For many, however, the bad times are all too present, and the trust may not be there. This is why using epistemology is always a bad option for consoling them (even if they ask for such information). Without a relationship with God, knowing "why" pain exists is meaningless. For a skeptic in pain, one needs to get him to trust in God. But before one can do that, one has to get the skeptic's trust. If one can get the trust of the skeptic, then the skeptic will listen. If the skeptic is listening, then he can learn of God. If he learns of God, then he may grow to trust God. Once he truly trusts in God, the question of why He allows pain goes away, and it is replaced with hope of what the pain will bring (Earthly or Heavenly). True faith in God's promises makes all Earthly suffering inconsequential.

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