Theodicy through a Lens of Science

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A theodicy is an attempt to explain the old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" within the assumptions of the existence of God and certain concepts of his nature. There are many explanations: some old, some by current authors. All of them resemble the "saving the appearance" approach of science, and accomplish this aim quite well, but all suffer when presented in situations of pastoral care.

I will argue that evil, from natural disasters to personal tragedies, is not caused voluntarily by God but is a product of the randomness of this world where randomness is our understanding of the unpredictability of a process (epistemic randomness). This is consistent with the classical understandings of God and is better accepted in the pastoral situation.

In less than 24 hours, Floria Tosca's world was turned upside down. Her lover, Mario Cavaradossi, was arrested and tortured into unconsciousness for allegedly hiding an escaped political prisoner. To save Mario from further torture, Tosca confessed the location of the escapee, which confession only brought her wrath from Cavaradossi. His angry denunciations for giving this information were his last words to her as he was being dragged to the gallows. As if this were not enough, Scarpia, the chief of police and a fearsome psychopath, is eagerly preparing to rape her. She cries out to God. (Since this is opera, her lament is set to gorgeous music, but the lyrics must suffice here.)

> I lived for art, I lived for love:
> Never did I harm a living creature!
>
> Whatever misfortunes I encountered
> I sought with secret hand to succour.
>
> Ever in pure faith, my prayers rose in the holy chapels.
>
> Ever in pure faith, I brought flowers to the altars.
>
> In this hour of pain, why, why, O Lord, why dost Thou repay me thus?[1]

Why do such things happen to God's people? Why does God appear to repay good deeds with pain such as hers? Floria was not the first to ask this question, and she will not be the last. I suspect the existence of suffering has produced more atheists than any other issue of God and humans. Trying to answer this question has led to a field of theology known as theodicy.

This article will deal with three ideas. First, it will show that thinking about theology can use the same methods as thinking within science, and when contradictions arise, theology can use similar methods to deal with these. Nowhere is this truer than when the issue is human suffering. Second, it will review some of the common theodicies and their weakness in pastoral situations. Finally, it will suggest an alternative which absolves God from evil and is pastorally sensitive.

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Theodicy

Theodicy is derived from two words, "*Theos*" and "*dike*," literally meaning the trial or judgment of God. In common usage, theodicy is a philosophical and/or theological exercise involving a justification of the righteousness of God.[2] Somewhat more colloquially, it is a defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil. Theodicy is a way to rationalize the presumed actions of God which are harmful to his people. Theodicy is an attempt to answer the old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

All theists hold notions of God and God's characteristics that would in science be called assumptions. The first assumption is that a powerful being, worthy of worship, given the name God, actually exists.[3] Having made this assumption, we can move on to our assumptions about God's character. Implicit in the assumption that God is worthy of our worship is that this is a good God. We will focus on two parts to this assumption: God never does what is morally wrong, and God is a loving God. Initially we base this assumption on accounts of God's actions for his people as described in the Old Testament. We then move through scripture to the many statements of Jesus concerning the character of his Father, to 1 John which insists not that God loves, or is loving, but that God *is* love.

Much of the evangelical world places much more emphasis on the assumption that "will" is a most essential aspect of God. God is free to will whatever God chooses, and humans must not question the actions that result from the expressions of his will. The expansion of this term expresses that whatever happens in the universe is planned, ordained, and governed—without exception—by God. Even if God works through secondary causes, he is still in total control.

Advocates of this position go to great lengths to show that there can be no exceptions to this control. As R. C. Sproul explains,

> The mere existence of chance is enough to rip God from his cosmic throne. Chance does not need to rule; it does not need to be sovereign. If it exists as a mere, impotent humble servant, it leaves God not only out of date but out of a job. If chance exists in its frailest possible form, God is finished.[4]

If a single molecule is out of its intended position, this would show that God is not in control; but we need not worry, all molecules and other small particles are exactly where God intended. Obviously, this is not a position held by quantum physicists!

Even believers who do not go to these lengths still speak and sing of God's power and his sovereignty over all creation, that is, his ability to express and fulfill his will. Does this language of power and sovereignty make God responsible for disease and death? Many Christians would answer this question with a resounding "yes," but despite this, they also accept love as a characteristic of God. This conclusion becomes their cornerstone in dealing with the tragedies of daily living. Alasdair MacIntyre describes this belief complex as pre-modern, but it is a common assumption of many people in my world of ministry.[5]

These assumptions come together to establish a paradigm which specifies the existence of God and describes certain characteristics of God. A paradigm is a collection of observations, hypotheses, and assumptions that provide the context for describing and explaining further observations and ideas.[6] We have developed a simplified, two-factor paradigm for thinking about God's character: God is loving, and God is sovereign over all events and occurrences. This is certainly not a complete description of God;[7] it does not include omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and other aspects, but it will allow us to focus on God's role in human suffering.

Because there are events and observations that do not match this paradigm, theologians go to great lengths to reconcile these whenever they think or talk about God. For example, we assume that God is love. The correctness of this assumption is challenged every day. Good people are subject to natural evils such as hurricanes, tornados, floods, and droughts. They are betrayed, mugged, stabbed, and shot by other humans. They are in accidents. They suffer diseases such as heart disease, strokes, and cancer. They are abandoned by those they love, and finally they die. How could a loving God allow such to befall any human created in his image?

Instead of focusing on love, we may assume the importance of God's will and that God has the power to impose this will on humans. If God has this

power, we wonder why he does not use it for good instead of appearing to be arbitrary and sometimes even appearing to be a tyrant.

Explaining these apparent inconsistencies is the work of theologians and is called "theodicy." In medieval natural philosophy and early science, a similar process was called "preserving the phenomena." The term asserts that a scientific theory is worth holding if it (1) accounts for or predicts new data and (2) is simple.[8]

Not all use the term "preserving the phenomena" in exactly the same way.[9] Here it will refer to "phenomena" as a common understanding, a hypothesis, a scientific law, or a well-held belief usually based on some data. This larger understanding is then threatened by other, new data, usually observational. To a scientist, data is true, unchangeable, nonnegotiable, not to be "fiddled with." It is the explanations placed on data that are changeable, questionable, and sometimes false.[10] In "preserving the appearance," the data that conflict with the phenomena are interpreted, augmented, expanded, or explained in such a way that the phenomena remain essentially intact.

One of the ancient examples of this was Aristotle's model of the universe, which was the early normative paradigm. It described the universe as a sphere with the sun, moon, each planet, and the fixed stars on perfect spheres which rotated around the earth. There was no empty space, and the further regions were more perfect than the regions below the moon.

There were observations made by the early Babylonians and subsequent astronomers which showed that the movements in the heavens did not match the model. Most obvious was the path of the planets which appeared to be moving counterclockwise with the fixed stars, then suddenly reversing direction, only to make another turn to the original course. Soon this strange motion would be repeated as the planet made its circular trip across the sky.

Many people tried to find a way to explain these observations, most successfully Ptolemy, a first-century astronomer. He devised a system of epicycles to explain the wandering nature of the planets. In this description, each planet made a second counterclockwise circle upon the main path around the earth. In half of this second rotation, the planet would be moving in the same direction as the main rotation and would appear to be headed "correctly." In the other half, it would be moving counter to the main motion and would appear to be moving in a retrograde manner. This series of small circles on the larger motion accurately described the observed motion and was later termed "preserving the phenomena"; that is, it preserved the Aristotelian model despite the data.

Aristotle's authority was maintained by Ptolemy's modification, so it was accepted everywhere, even by the church, which claimed to read the Bible literally on this point. (The biblical model was vastly different, but was subsumed by Aristotle's.)

In general, we try to "preserve the phenomena" when we form hypotheses and/or give explanations which seem to explain what is otherwise a contradiction between our closely held beliefs and our observations. This process works well until too many inconsistencies surface and, to use the language of Kuhn, a crisis develops and the old paradigm is replaced by a new one.[11]

Theodicy is the example we wish to explore; it is the process of developing the explanations offered for the observation that bad things frequently happen to good people. In doing this, we are determined to "preserve the phenomena" we ascribe to God, his character and his nature. In doing this, we are acting the way that natural philosophers and scientists have always behaved.

We must do this cautiously. Karl Barth, perhaps the preeminent theologian of the twentieth century, was very concerned about human confidence in speaking about God and the message of God for us. When we speak, we may do so with "words of our own coining or scripture quotations," but we must not "confuse our words with the fullness of the Word of God."[12] We should do our best to understand God, but we should always be humble about our efforts and conclusions.

Barfield uses the term "idols of the study" for hypotheses and "factitious extrapolations" that are considered to be ultimate instead of recognizing them as human constructions.[13] These idols are formed by people who do not take Barth's cautions seriously. Although Barfield is harsh, he is no

more so than Jesus "teaching human precepts as doctrines" (Mark 7:7).[14] I believe all of these to be particularly appropriate for hypotheses about God.

Theodicy is a division of theology: *theos* and *logos*, words about God. The words of any theodicy are words about the relation of God and human suffering. These are human words, as precise and accurate as the best thinkers of the ages have been able to devise. But they are human words, attempting to preserve the phenomena. We must never confuse ourselves into believing that the conclusions we reach about God and human suffering are absolutely congruent with reality.

This view can be compared with "critical realism" as described by John Polkinghorne.[15] There is a reality, and this may be exactly the way things appear. However, there are a number of obstacles. Therefore we may not see clearly or understand correctly. As a result, we need to apply our ideas of reality cautiously and gently.

Theodicies deal with apparent contradictions concerning God and the world. Many philosophers have presented ways to think about it, but a very common approach is to think about this as an incomplete triangle. You cannot have a triangle with one point asserting that God is all powerful, a second point claiming that God is good and loving, and the third point asserting that evil exists. Any connection of two points is possible, but not all three. Consider these possibilities: (1) God can be all-powerful and evil can exist, but then it is hard to say that God is loving. If God were loving, he could destroy the evil and there would be no problem of suffering of his followers; (2) God can be loving and evil exists, but then God seems to lack power to do anything about evil; (3) God can be both powerful and loving, but this requires denial of the existence of evil. This conception provides us with ways to begin a theodicy.

Evil Does Not Exist

The last of these possibilities seems to be the most popular: God is powerful and loving and, implicitly, the existence of evil is denied. A proof text for this might be, "All things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). This verse is frequently taken to mean that what we see and discern to be evil really is good; we just do not understand, but the events are working toward a plan. What we need is faith and confidence, together with the patience, for it all to unfold.

However, plainly speaking, this approach is simply a denial of evil. God is in control, whatever is happening is God's will, and therefore it cannot be truly evil. Our duty is to accept what comes to us cheerfully. Many Christians hold this view and find that it gives them great comfort. There are at least two ways this denial of evil is expressed: (1) what appears to be evil is really punishment; and (2) evil produces character.

1. What Appears to Be Evil Is Really Punishment

A precise way to deny the existence of evil is to say that what we perceive as evil is punishment designed to correct our deviant behavior. This explanation has biblical roots; the prophets of ancient Israel used this language frequently. Nathan told David that his son would be king, but that if he committed iniquity, he would be disciplined by God, using men to administer the pain (2 Samuel 7:14). Jeremiah (chapters 1–25) frequently used the concept of discipline to express what God would do to Judah for their widespread sinfulness. The idea of these passages is that pain and suffering can show us that our lives are not what they should be and awaken us from our worldly happiness.

The 1892 *Book of Common Prayer*, in its service for the sick, says, "Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness be, know you certainly that it is God's visitation," and that "we should patiently and with thanksgiving, bear our heavenly Father's correction."[16] This theology of 120 years ago is not dead; it is alive and well within and without the walls of churches today. The word "father" links this apparent evil to the punishment of an earthly parent that is designed to get the misbehaving child back on the right track. But if we make this connection, and indulge in anthropomorphism, we must also remember the idea of proportionality. Good parents discipline, but they do not abuse; good parents are not tyrants.

This theology can be seen regularly in literature. In *The Plague* by Albert Camus, Fr. Paneloux, the Jesuit pastor, preached the message of God's punishment, saying that the plague and the resultant huge numbers of deaths were God's chastisement for the

population's sins.[17] (After Fr. Panaloux watched a small boy die, he became much less certain of this explanation.)

Although this response denies the existence of evil, it does acknowledge that the event is the result of a deliberate decision and action by God. There is no question of the role of God, but it leaves the question of love unanswered.

2. Evil Produces Character

Somewhat similar is the idea that what we perceive as evil is actually material for building character. This hypothesis assumes that God is the actor, and therefore the action is not evil. It includes God's love, in that the intended result is a better human being.

C.S. Lewis explained that God's love for people is of the type that is committed to making them into the best people they can be. Frequently, this is painful.[18] Because good eventually comes of it, God is justified in allowing or ordaining this type of suffering so that people will grow and mature. God is acting out of love, and the apparent evil is only that—apparent, not real.

This explanation has been developed in great detail by John Hick who puts present suffering into the larger context of our eventual eternal bliss. "Humankind is brought into being … as a spiritually and morally immature creature, and then growing and developing though the exercise of freedom."[19] The virtues we develop as the result of suffering are of great value in building our character.

This leads to invoking God indirectly in a number of statements made to people with disabilities. These statements imply not only a doctrine of what it means to be disabled, but also the idea that evil assists a person in developing character.

"You are special in God's eyes."
(If this is "special," what does God do to those he hates?)

"God gave you this to develop your character."
(I've developed enough character to last a lifetime, maybe it's your turn.)

"You are such an inspiration to us in the way you overcome your difficulties."
(I'm just glad that you don't complain the way you know I would.)[20]

One way or the other, suffering is considered to be good for us. However, the idea that God is deliberately causing suffering for one reason or another is counterintuitive to the practice of medicine, nursing, and the allied medical specialties. The goal of medicine is always to relieve suffering even when it cannot cure; does this mean that medicine is sometimes working against God's will? How can a doctor know when to intervene and when to stay away? Have the practitioners of modern medicine become God's antagonists? I think not!

There is only one theory of a place where suffering is redemptive: Purgatory. All stays in Purgatory are temporary; the souls placed there will eventually attain Paradise. The doctrine of purgatory developed as theologians considered that sinners who repented prior to death did not deserve the immediate transformation to Paradise with saints and martyrs, but were still somehow within God's grace. Thus, a doctrine of a time of purification and eventual elevation seemed reasonable. One author calculated the years in Purgatory to be twenty-five years for each venial sin and fifty for each mortal sin. The reprobate who repented late in life would not have a rapid trip to glory, but will make it in the end.[24] This doctrine answers the objections that incommensurate degrees of suffering are experienced by different victims.

People who support this doctrine must hold a robust version of free will. For Purgatory to be effective, humans must have the freedom to imagine themselves as better and to remake their lives. Those consigned to Purgatory have the power and the will to change their lives into one characterized by purity. This doctrine is not widely held by Christians outside segments of the Roman Catholic Church. For those who do not believe in Purgatory, this example merely illustrates the inadequacy of the "character building" defense.

I believe that the idea that God actually intends for people to undergo extreme physical or mental anguish is cruel and incompatible with the scriptural account of a God who loves his creatures. It is inconsistent with Jesus as the revelation of God. It is inconsistent with 1 John that declares, not that God loves, but that God *is* love. Directly linking divine actions and human suffering is too high a price to pay to preserve the phenomena, and it seems to create

more inconsistencies, rather than resolve them. This means that we must look for another explanation, another way to preserve our paradigm that includes God's power and love.

"Evil" Is Not Caused by a Loving God; It Is The Result of Human Errors and Sins.

There is truth to the explanation that some evil comes from human causes. Some suffering we bring upon ourselves; we get what we deserve. As we sow, so shall we also reap (Galatians 6:7). Imagine a three-pack-a-day smoker who after twenty years develops lung cancer. Physicians will treat that person with respect and the best medical care, but the question of causation is clear. God did not cause that suffering.

Aquinas expressed this very clearly by saying that all human tragedy is the result of human flaws. The entire world, including humans, was created good; suffering entered by the exercise of the human will. Except for the interventions of God's love, this theodicy completely eliminated God from the world of human pain. The world is full of darkness, wickedness, unbelief, and selfishness. It is these forces, not God, that are responsible for human pain.

This is also an answer to the gross atrocities of humanity that result in the death and suffering for millions of God's believers. The overwhelming capacity for evil possessed by some persons and regimes produces plagues as horrible as any bacteria.

This answer of human etiology may work well for lung cancer or mass murderers, but what about the sweet, lovely young girl whose life is terminated by a careless driver? If God can foresee this tragedy, why did he allow it to happen?

To return to the concept of a triangle, this answer asserts that God loves and that evil exists, but leaves us with the conclusion that God cannot be all-powerful. If God were powerful, God would use this power to prevent evil rather than allowing it to occur. So we attempt to preserve the phenomenon of a loving God, but at the expense of a weak and even impotent one. Is such a god worthy of worship? I think not.

Some try to restore strength and power to such a god by assuming the power of knowledge of the future. Thus we have a god who is not responsible for the presence of evil, and cannot seem to do anything about it, but can accurately foresee it.

This was the explanation of the actions of Oedipus in Sophocles's play of the same name.[22] The gods foretold that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother; this came to be, but these events were the results of his free actions. His suffering was due to his own free will. This explanation has not lost its popularity in 2,500 years, but I do not find it helpful.

A personal note of cynicism: These attempts to "save the phenomena" may work in theory, but I have observed that those who most loudly proclaim God's personal involvement in pain and suffering tend to be young and personally free from tragedy. They should listen to those who have suffered, and they should read Dante more carefully.

> You will come to learn how bitter as salt and stone
> is the bread of others,
> how hard the way that goes up and down stairs
> that are never your own.[23]

Many young pastors today lack the experience to comment appropriately on human suffering. They are like Fr. Paneloux, who was separated from human anguish by his vestments and had not experienced suffering first hand. Dr. Rieux described him thus:

> Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth—with a capital T. But … any country priest would try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence.[24]

Pastors like Paneloux are good at creating explanations while at their desks, but incapable of ministering to those in pain.

Other Theodicies

The theodicies that are developed from thinking about an incomplete triangle account for most of the explanations of Christians in the pews. Theologians have developed other, more sophisticated explanations such as the human story, which is part of the universe and is unfinished and therefore unpredictable.[25] Others suggest that human freedom depends on freedom for nature. Our world is good, but it is

not perfect. It is not by the direct action of God that humans suffer, but suffering is intrinsic to the structure of our world.

John Polkinghorne, a physicist who became an Anglican priest, generalizes this idea by suggesting that we must "acknowledge that by bringing the world into existence God has self-limited divine power by allowing the other truly to be itself."[26] After listing a number of natural disasters over which God had no control, he goes on to say, "That these things are so is not gratuitous or due to divine oversight or indifference. They are the necessary cost of a creation given by its Creator the freedom to be itself."[27]

Without the freedom demonstrated by creation, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a universe in which we were free to love or reject God. If our love is truly our own, it must be self-initiated, and we must be free either to do acts of love or to do unloving acts which may cause great harm. To say that a creature is free must mean that the creature has the freedom to choose.[28] If God wants to create loving beings, God must create free beings.[29]

Some will read these ideas to mean that since God designed the universe he must somehow be responsible. John Silber has made a distinction between status and voluntary responsibility,[30] and Ronald Hall has suggested that this is of assistance in thinking about God.[31] To hold a person responsible in the "status" understanding is to hold him responsible for his essence, his being, who he is. In contrast, to hold a person responsible in the "voluntary" sense is to hold her responsible for specific, intended, voluntary acts that she has performed. This is a distinction between who one is and what one does.

We can illustrate this by thinking about the usual academic hierarchy. When I was a medical school dean, I was held responsible by the president, by the board of regents, and, most importantly, by the press for the education of the students and residents, the research and publications of the faculty, and the welfare of the animals in the laboratories. This was status responsibility. I certainly was not a direct actor in any of these, or in the myriad of other activities that take place in a medical complex; I had status responsibility.

In contrast, the faculty members, who had direct contact with students, residents, and patients, had voluntary responsibility since their conduct was consciously and deliberately chosen, and they acted freely. Similarly, the faculty, doing research deliberately and freely, designed their experiments and reported their results with voluntary responsibility. The same could be said for every other person in the medical complex.

This was sharply illustrated one Sunday when an orthopaedist on the faculty refused to treat a 19-year-old woman with a fractured femur because she was indigent, ordering her to be sent to the county hospital. By 10 am the next day, we had calls from both Medicaid and Medicare officials saying that if the story as told by her mother was correct, we would be shut off from all federal reimbursements. By 11 am, an investigative reporter announced that he would be there at 1 pm for an interview. Suddenly, the Medical Center vice-president was "traveling"; the hospital president was "unavailable." By virtue of who I was, this was my problem. That was status responsibility.

The troublesome orthopaedist had voluntary responsibility for this fiasco. He had intentionally and deliberately acted to send this woman away. He could have chosen to ask someone else to care for her; he could have called me—I would rather have fixed her femur than try to fix the fallout. But, he thought, intended, and acted, and therefore had voluntary responsibility. I had only status responsibility.

By virtue of being the creator, God has status responsibility for the evil that occurs in the world. However, this does not mean that God is directly and actively involved in decisions to allow evil to occur. We do not experience a recapitulation of the Job story.

Of all the ways of thinking of God and human suffering, the explanations involving freedom of creation and humans are the best my head can accept, but my heart is unsatisfied because I have experienced great evils. Within a short period of time, my younger brother died of a brain tumor, our two-month-old son was killed in a car accident, and my wife became psychotic. Later my sister was killed in a car accident, my career in medicine was terminated over a situation in which I had neither responsibility nor authority, and our daughter was murdered. I understand Floria Tosca's cry, "Why, why, O Lord."

These events are evil by any definition. To be human is to experience pain. Is there not an explanation to help me, one that I could give to someone else who is suffering from crime, oppression, or disease?

Perhaps I wish for too much. Both Alvin Plantinga and John Hick are explicit in that they do not expect a theodicy to help sufferers find peace or practical help.[32] Freud made the same observation from a different perspective.

> No matter how much we may shrink with horror from certain situations—of a galley-slave in antiquity, of a peasant during the Thirty Years' War, of a victim of the Holy Inquisition, of a Jew awaiting a pogrom—it is nevertheless impossible for us to feel our way into such people; to gauge their pain.[33]

It may be that only those who are suffering understand the power of evil, but this conclusion puts an insurmountable burden on caregivers.

Randomness as the Explanation of Many Evils

Another way to think about the problem of God and human suffering is to inquire if accidents ever occur. An answer of many Christians is "no," what we perceive as an accident is really an intended action of God. They often claim that God is either punishing us or building our character. An existentialist would answer "yes," the world is a chaotic place; there are accidents. Many unexpected things happen; they are random events—unintended, unexpected, and named "accidents." When these accidents produce suffering, they are hard to bear—exactly because they appear so random.

The word "random" is used in many different contexts and with different meanings. Most generally, random events refer to events that proceed, are made, or occur without some definite aim, reason, or pattern. James Bradley has listed nine examples of events to which the word random is attached.[34] However, there are so many variations in the use of the word that some have despaired of a unique, organizing idea of its meanings.[35] In this article, randomness refers to our understanding of the unpredictability of a process or an outcome.[36]

There are at least two concepts of randomness that concern us: epistemic and ontological randomness. The first is concerned with the appearance of randomness: what we know or believe we know. The second is the absolute truth about randomness and the natural world. This article takes the position that, for the purpose of thinking about theodicy, we do not need to delineate which is occurring.

From the human viewpoint, unpredictability is inherent in the nature of our world.[37] This is true at all levels, from quantum physics to a macro process such as the weather. In some, the process is partially understood by scientists; in others, it is not. The process of plate pressures and shifts that produce the earthquakes that plague the west coast of North America are understood, but the next slippage cannot be predicted. There is a confluence of deterministic causal streams that lead to an unpredictable outcome. From the viewpoint of the observer, their occurrence is random.

The volcanos in the same region are not as well understood, but they are not the mystery to scientists that they are to the person in the street. However, even with all the measuring devices available, some scientists monitoring Mount St. Helens were surprised and killed by the 1980 eruption. This too is a deterministic process with an unpredictable outcome. Not only is the eruption unpredictable in the short term, the next mountain to erupt is unknown. The periodicity also demonstrates epistemological randomness. There were 65 years between the eruptions of Mount Lassen and Mount St. Helens, but many more years since the previous eruption of Mount Lassen.

To speak of God and randomness in the same sentence produces a spectrum of responses. Christians who hold to some type of divine determinism, such as R.C. Sproul, quoted above, find this idea completely unacceptable. In contrast, David Bartholomew explains that chance is within the providence of God and that chance and randomness are used to accomplish his purposes. Chance provides a space for God to operate without disturbing the general lawfulness of the world.[38] Bradley takes an intermediate position: it is not inconsistent with historical Christianity to adopt the instrumentalist interpretation,[39] which is another term for "saving

the phenomena."[40] I believe that just as there is a spectrum of responses to the idea of God and randomness, there is also a plethora of possibilities for God to use or to ignore randomness.

If randomness is part of many of the terrible things that happen to good people, we may wonder why God found it necessary to create randomness. We must understand how we are using the word here. Stephen Barr says,

> When people speak of randomness, whether in science, in other professions, or in everyday life, they are not speaking of how things in this world relate to God, but how they are related to each other.[41]

For those for whom the subtleties of theological reasoning are not enough (see Barth's concerns of speaking about God, above), Alexander Pope reminds us that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."[42] We will attempt not to rush in, but we will briefly consider a few possible answers to our question of why randomness exists.

Thinking from science, randomness does not seem to be an afterthought of the Creator, but part of the divine design; creation, as we understand it, would be impossible without randomness.[43] It is the random genetic mutations and combinations that provide the variety of organisms which will become subject to natural selection, eventually producing the creatures we know.[44] On a macro level, the extinctions, such as the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs and allowed the growth and spread of mammals, were random events, but they were crucial for the progress of evolution. These are examples of how we might imagine that God uses randomness to accomplish his purposes.

Thinking from theology, humans are intrinsically random by virtue of their membership in nature. Furthermore, they have free will, which is analogous to the freedom of creation and is considered to be a good by philosophers and common people alike. Generally speaking, an action is free in the sense that it cannot be caused by anything outside of the agent. To push this point, it is claimed that not even God can cause a person to freely do what is wrong.[45]

Every human being has the opportunity (choice) to make a difference in something or someone, but not all choose to do so. One has only to look at a college faculty to see those who devote themselves to assisting students to mature and grow and those who only appear on campus for their lectures. But, for each, the choice is theirs.

Another Suggestion

Thus far, we have used pure thinking to attempt to resolve the problem that human suffering causes for our concepts of God. We have behaved like Plato in the *Timaeus* who thought about the world and said, "Let me tell you a most likely story to explain what we see and experience."[46] We have tried to think like Einstein who had no experimental data for his theories of motion and gravitation, but made a similar claim; this is the way the world must be. We should have no reason to feel inadequate for having used our minds in this problem; this is an aspect of science, but it is not the only approach to truth. There are other roads to truth, and one of the most powerful of these is experimentation. Despite Einstein's confidence in his thought experiments, he was pleased by the empirical verification of the observed bending of starlight.

Computer simulation has been used to understand a wide variety of natural conditions such as cancer, to make meteorological predictions, to test the molecular modeling of new drugs, to design traffic flows, and to build models of human cognition. Computer simulation is not the same as observing an event in nature or manipulating nature in an experiment, but it can be very helpful in understanding concepts and possibilities. The Center for Science and Religion at Samford University is engaged in a project of computer simulation named "Randomness and Divine Providence" that is studying the effect of random stimuli on a model of neural circuits required for locomotion. Preliminary results indicate that the number of generations required to reach a target of fitness follows a log-normal distribution, as do many biological processes. When duplication of primitive components is allowed, the speed of evolution of multiple appendage entities is increased and subpopulations developed, which result also parallels biological observations.

To date, none of this relates directly to theodicy, but it does demonstrate that, in appropriate models, randomness can have pronounced effects

in developing reproducible outcomes. To the extent that these results can be generalized to real life, randomness is not just noise, an irritant, or a distraction, but events that are random can produce change. The results of these stimulations do not prove, but rather are consistent with, the idea that random events can change our lives and our world.

Returning to the role of theodicy, I agree with Bradley, that introducing the concepts of randomness is very helpful in "preserving the appearance" of historical theology, including doctrines of good and yet affirming the presence of evil.[47] Further, thinking of randomness in the occurrence of evil and suffering has the advantage of explaining many, if not all, situations of human suffering. It has the pastoral advantage of "explaining" a wide variety of specific evils ranging from the death of a child to natural disasters, to evil actions of persons that are not explained by the theodicies of punishment or personal improvement, with or without claims that God is loving.

God's Direct Actions in Human Suffering

Does the hypothesis that evil results from random events mean that God is totally separate, distant, and disinterested in our grief and sorrows? Is this a theodicy only because it totally protects God from any responsibility? Not at all. The suffering Christ, who took on our humanity, is ever present and near, ready to provide comfort to suffering humans.

Barbara Brown Taylor described the care she received after a concussion and the people who took care of her. She believed that she experienced God's direct intervention in two ways. God was near and caring for her through humans who did not know her, but who were concerned about her every need. She considered this care to be so extraordinary that it deserved the term "miracle." A second miracle she experienced was how safe she felt despite her head injury. This safety, she recognized, came from far beyond her pain; a safety net she knew would catch her no matter how far she fell. "Although my injuries were human, my safety felt divine."[48]

I have experienced such a safety net. I once had an operation that was technically perfect, but I received an infected injection in the recovery room and developed a condition with a sixty-percent mortality rate. I knew of the high likelihood of death, but remained calm while in the intensive care unit despite having tubes placed in every natural orifice and in some created for the occasion. This tranquility was the result of the conviction that "whether I live or whether I die, I am in the hand of God." The thought was constant, repetitive, blocked out most fears and, I am willing to believe, was a gift of the presence of God. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20) applies to more than missionary activities.

These two examples illustrate that God's grace is frequently best recognized when a person is totally out of control and unable to predict what will happen next. Since Christian belief begins with the reception of grace, our attempts at elimination of uncertainty may make it harder to receive and experience grace. Thus, there may be one desirable side effect of pain and suffering, despite my denials above.

It is this confidence of grace—although not proven or even fully explained, but attested to by many—that God is not responsible for our suffering but is with us in our suffering, that allows us to worship God despite our sorrows. We can become like Bruce in *Bang the Drum Slowly* who is dying of a cancer for which there was no treatment, and yet claimed, "I am doomed, but the world is all rosy—it never looked better. The bad things never looked so little, and the good never looked so big."[49] For theists, this is not simple denial, but confidence in God.

Summary

The popular theodicies do not serve their function of preserving the paradigm of a loving and powerful God. Following the path of these common theodicies is not pastorally sensitive and only leads to contradictions. Thinking about random events as the cause of evil and suffering performs this function better, and is pastorally sensitive.

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Notes

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