

# Is God Really Good?

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Perhaps the most difficult and most debated philosophical problem of all time — at least the most passionately debated — is the “problem of pain”: why do bad things happen even to good people? Though none of the many answers which have been proposed are entirely satisfactory to me, the best insights into the problem of pain I have found are contained in a little article by Batsell Barrett Baxter, entitled “Is God Really Good?”, which concludes that evil is the “inevitable result of our greatest blessings.” I will follow Baxter’s outline in presenting my own thoughts on this question, looking at some of the blessings which have, as inevitable consequences, unhappy side effects.

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## 1 The Problem of Pain

In debates over the theory of intelligent design, the “problem of evil” is frequently brought up by opponents of design: if we are the products of intelligent design, why is there so much evil and misery in the world? From a purely logical, or scientific, perspective, this problem is easy to deal with: Nature offers evidence of design — the question of what the designer is like is a separate, more philosophical, issue. But for most of us humans, this is a very unsatisfactory response.

In articles on my web page<sup>1</sup> I have outlined the evidence for the belief that living things are designed, and not entirely the result of unintelligent forces such as natural selection of random mutations. This evidence is so overwhelming that I am convinced that opposition to the theory of intelligent design is not primarily due to any shortage of evidence for design in Nature, but to the fact that it is sometimes so hard to see evidence that our Designer cares about us, and many people prefer not to believe in God at all than to believe in a God who doesn’t care.

Why do bad things happen to good people? This is the question which Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his highly-acclaimed book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), called “the only question which really matters” to his congregation. It is a question which has been asked by philosophers and ordinary human beings throughout the ages; if not the most-asked question, certainly the most passionately-asked. It was certainly the first question that occurred to me in 1987 when I was told that my beloved

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<sup>1</sup> [www.math.utep.edu/Faculty/sewell/articles/mathint.html](http://www.math.utep.edu/Faculty/sewell/articles/mathint.html),  
[www.math.utep.edu/Faculty/sewell/articles/article.html](http://www.math.utep.edu/Faculty/sewell/articles/article.html).

wife, 34 years old and the mother of our two small children, had cancer of the nose and sinuses, and in 1990 when we discovered that the cancer had recurred, and that the surgeries and many months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments she had endured had only prolonged her life a little.

A wonderful little article by Batsell Barrett Baxter, entitled "Is God Really Good?" (1984), contains some insights into the "problem of pain", as C.S. Lewis (1962) calls it, which I have found very useful. I will follow Baxter's outline in presenting my own thoughts on this question, and I would like to begin with his conclusion: "As I have faced the tragedy of evil in our world and have tried to analyze its origin, I have come to the conclusion that it was an inevitable accompaniment of our greatest blessings and benefits." In his outline, Baxter lists some examples of blessings which have, as inevitable consequences, unhappy side effects. None of these points is likely to make suffering in its severest forms any easier to accept, and we may be left wondering whether these blessings are worth the high cost. But I believe they do point us in the right direction, at least.

## 2 The Regularity of Natural Law

The laws of Nature which God has made work together to create a magnificent world, of oceans and forests, mountains and rivers, planets and stars, animals and plants. The basic laws of physics are cleverly designed to create conditions on Earth suitable for human life and human development. Gravity prevents us and our belongings from floating off into space; water makes our crops grow; the fact that certain materials are combustible makes it possible to cook our food and stay warm in winter. Yet gravity, water and fire are responsible for many tragedies, such as airplane crashes, drownings and chemical plant explosions. Tragedies such as floods and automobile accidents are the results of laws of physics which, viewed as a whole, are magnificently designed and normally work for our benefit. Nearly everything in Nature which is harmful to man has also a benevolent side, or is the result of a good thing gone bad. Even pain and fear themselves have useful purposes: pain warns us that something in our body needs attention, and without fear, we would all die young doing foolish and dangerous things.

But why won't God protect us from the bad side effects of Nature? Why doesn't He overrule the laws of Nature when they work against us? Why is He so "silent" during our most difficult and heart-breaking moments? First of all, if we assume He has complete control over Nature, we are assuming much more than we have a right to assume. It does not necessarily follow that, because something is designed, it can never break down. We design computers, and yet they don't always function as designed. When a computer breaks down, we don't conclude that the designer planned for it to break down, nor do we conclude that it had no designer; when the human body breaks down, we should not jump to the conclusion that God planned the illness, but neither should we conclude that the body had no designer.

That we were designed by a fantastically intelligent superintellect is a conclusion

which is easily drawn from the evidence all around us. To jump from this to the conclusion that this creator can control *everything* is quite a leap. And even if we assume He has complete control over Nature it is hard to see how He could satisfy everyone. Your crops are dry so you pray for rain — but I am planning a picnic. It seems more fair to let Nature take its course and hope we learn to adapt.

In any case, what would life be like if the laws of Nature were not reliable? What if God could and did stand by to intervene on our behalf every time we needed Him? We would then be spared all of life's disappointments and failures, and life would certainly be less dangerous, but let us think about what life would be like in a world where nothing could ever go wrong.

I enjoy climbing mountains — small ones. I recently climbed an 8,000 foot peak in the Guadalupe Mountains National Park and was hot and exhausted, but elated when I finished the climb. Later I heard a rumor that the Park Service was considering building a cable car line to the top, and I was horrified. Why was I horrified? — that would make it much easier for me to reach the top. Because, of course, the pleasure I derived from climbing that peak did not come simply from reaching the top — it came from knowing that I had faced a challenge and overcome it. Since riding in a cable car requires no effort, it is impossible to fail to reach the top, and thus taking a cable car to the peak brings no sense of accomplishment. Even if I went up the hard way again, just knowing that I could have ridden the cable car would cheapen my accomplishment.

When we think about it, we see in other situations that achieving a goal brings satisfaction only if effort is required, and only if the danger of failure is real. And if the danger of failure is real, sometimes we will fail.

When we prepare for an athletic contest, we know what the rules are and we plan our strategy accordingly. We work hard, physically and mentally, to get ready for the game. If we win, we are happy knowing that we played fairly, followed the rules, and achieved our goal. Of course we may lose, but what satisfaction would we derive from winning a game whose rules are constantly being modified to make sure we win? It is impossible to experience the thrill of victory without risking the agony of defeat. How many fans would attend a football game whose participants are just actors, acting out a script which calls for the home team to win? We would all rather go to a real game and risk defeat.

Life is a real game, not a rigged one. We know what the rules are, and we plan accordingly. We know that the laws of Nature and of life do not bend at our every wish, and it is precisely this knowledge which makes our achievements meaningful. If the rules of Nature were constantly modified to make sure we achieved our goals — whether they involve proving Fermat's Last Theorem, getting a book published, finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease, earning a college degree, or making a small business work — we would derive no satisfaction from reaching those goals. If the rules were even occasionally bent, we would soon realize that the game was rigged, and just knowing that the rules were flexible would cheapen all our accomplishments. Perhaps I should say,

“if we were aware that the rules were being bent”, because I do believe that God has at times intervened in human and natural history, and perhaps He still does so on occasions, but we are at least left with the strong impression that the rules are inflexible.

If great works of art, music, literature, or science could be realized without great effort, and if success in such endeavors were guaranteed, the works of Michelangelo, Mozart, Shakespeare and Newton would not earn much admiration. If it were possible to realize great engineering projects without careful study, clever planning and hard work, or without running any risk of failure, mankind would feel no satisfaction in having built the Panama Canal or having sent a man to the moon. And if the dangers Columbus faced in sailing into uncharted waters were not real, we would not honor him as a brave explorer. Scientific and technological progress are only made through great effort and careful study, and not every scientist or inventor is fortunate enough to leave his mark, but anyone who thinks God would be doing us a favor by dropping a book from the sky with all the answers in it does not understand human nature very well — that would take all the fun out of discovery. If the laws of Nature were more easily circumvented, life would certainly be less frustrating and less dangerous, but also less challenging and less interesting.

Many of the tragedies, failures and disappointments which afflict mankind are inevitable consequences of laws of Nature and of life which, viewed as a whole, are magnificently designed and normally work for our benefit. And it is because we know these laws are reliable, and do not bend to satisfy our needs, that our greatest achievements have meaning.

### 3 The Freedom of Man's Will

I believe, however, that the unhappiness in this world attributable to “acts of God” (more properly called “acts of Nature”) is small compared to the unhappiness which we inflict on each other. Reform the human spirit and you have solved the problems of drug addiction, drunk driving, war, broken marriages, child abuse, neglect of the elderly, crime, corruption and racial hatred. I suspect that many (not all, of course) of the problems which we generally blame on circumstances beyond our control are really caused by, or aggravated by, man — or at least could be minimized if we spent as much time trying to solve the world's problems as we spend in hedonistic pursuits.

God has given us, on this earth, the tools and resources necessary to construct, not a paradise, but something not too far from it. I am convinced that the majority of the things which make us most unhappy are the direct or indirect result of the evil deeds and errors of people. Often, unfortunately, it is not the guilty person who suffers.

But our evil actions are also the inevitable result of one of our highest blessings — our free will. C.S.Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* (1943), says, “Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. . . Someone once asked me, ‘Why did God make a creature of such rotten stuff that it went wrong?’ The better stuff a creature is made of — the cleverer and stronger and

freer it is — then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong.”

According to the Biblical creation allegory, our troubles began when Adam (“the man” in the original Hebrew) ate of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” As long as “the man” was like the other animals, he did not know sorrow or heartbreak, anger or hatred. He experienced none of the sorrows resulting from evil, but he also was just another animal. When he ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he became, as the serpent predicted, “like God, knowing good and evil”. His actions were no longer entirely controlled by God or Nature; he was now a creature with his own free will. This is when he had to leave “paradise” — this is when evil originated. Once we could see the difference between good and evil and were free to choose, we became capable of the most horrible deeds, and mankind has suffered terribly ever since. At the same time, however, we became capable of the most wonderful actions and emotions — of love, of sharing and of courage in the face of evil and pain.

Why do a husband and wife decide to have a child? A toy doll requires much less work, and does not throw a temper tantrum every time you make him take a bath or go to bed. A stuffed animal would be much less likely to mark on the walls with a crayon, or gripe about a meal which took hours to prepare. But most parents feel that the bad experiences in raising a real child are a price worth paying for the rewards — the handmade valentine he brings home from school, and the “I love you” she whispers as she gives her mother and daddy a good night kiss. They recognize that the same free will which makes a child more difficult to take care of than a stuffed animal also makes him more interesting. This must be the way our Creator feels about us. The freedom which God has given to us results, as an inevitable consequence, in many headaches for Him and for ourselves, but it is precisely this freedom which makes us more interesting than the other animals. God must feel that the headaches are a price worth paying: He has not taken back our free will, despite all the evil we have done. Why are there concentration camps in the world that God created? How could the Christian church sponsor the Crusades and the Inquisition? These terribly hard questions have a simple answer: because God gave us all a free will.

There is a Biblical parable about “wheat and tares”, which seems to teach that the weeds of sin and sorrow cannot be eliminated from the earth without destroying the soil of human freedom from which the wheat of joy and goodness also springs. It is impossible to rid the world of the sorrow caused by pride, selfishness and hatred without eliminating the free will which is also the source of all the unselfishness and love that there is in the world. Thought itself is an expression of our free will, and to say that God ought to prevent us from doing evil is to request that our ability to think be withdrawn. If we ask God to take back the free will which forced us out of paradise, we might as well ask Him to turn us into rocks.

If we base our view of mankind on what we see on the television news, we may feel that good and evil are greatly out of balance today; that there is much more pain than joy in the world, and much more evil than goodness. It is true that the amount of pain

which exists in our world is overwhelming, but so is the amount of happiness. And if we look more closely at the lives of those around us, we will see that the soil of human freedom still produces wheat as well as weeds. The dark night of Nazi Germany gave birth to the heroism of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie ten Boom and many others. The well-known play “The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds” is about two sisters raised by a bitter mother who suffocates ambition and discourages education. One sister ends up following the path to destruction taken by her mother; the other refuses to be trapped by her environment, and rises above it. It may seem at times that our world is choking on the weeds of pain and evil, but if we look closely we will see that wheat is still growing here.

Again we conclude that evil and unhappiness are the inevitable by-products of one of our most priceless blessings — our human free will.

#### 4 The Interdependence of Human Lives

While the theme of this section is closely related to the previous point, Baxter considers it to be so important as to merit separate consideration.

Much of an individual’s suffering is the direct or indirect result of the actions or misfortunes of others. Much of our deepest pain is the result of loneliness caused by the loss of the love or the life of a loved one, or of the strain of a bad relationship. How much suffering could be avoided if only we were “islands, apart to ourselves.” Then at least we would suffer only for our own actions, and feel only our own misfortunes. The interdependence of human life is certainly the cause of much unhappiness.

Yet here again, this sorrow is the inevitable result of one of our greatest blessings. The pain which comes from separation is in proportion to the joy which the relationship provided. Friction between neighbors is a source of grief, but friendship is the source of much joy. Bad marriages and strained parent-child relationships are responsible for much of the unhappiness in the modern world, but none of the other joys of life compare to those which can be experienced in a happy home. Although real love is terribly hard to find, anyone who has experienced it — as I did for a few short years — will agree that the male-female relationship is truly a masterpiece of design, when it works as it was intended to work.

As Baxter writes, “I am convinced that our greatest blessings come from the love which we give to others and the love which we receive from others. Without this interconnectedness, life would be barren and largely meaningless. The avoidance of all contact with other human beings might save us some suffering, but it would cost us the greatest joys and pleasures of life.”

#### 5 The Value of Imperfect Conditions

We have thus far looked at suffering as a by-product of our blessings and not a blessing in itself. And certainly it is difficult to see anything good in suffering in its severest

forms.

Nevertheless, we cannot help but notice that some suffering is necessary to enable us to experience life in its fullest, and to bring us to a closer relationship with God. Often it is through suffering that we experience the love of God, and discover the love of family and friends, in deepest measure. The man who has never experienced any setbacks or disappointments invariably is a shallow person, while one who has suffered is usually better able to empathize with others. Some of the closest and most beautiful relationships occur between people who have suffered similar sorrows.

It has been argued that most of the great works of literature, art and music were the products of suffering. One whose life has led him to expect continued comfort and ease is not likely to make the sacrifices necessary to produce anything of great and lasting value.

Of course, beyond a certain point pain and suffering lose their positive value. Even so, the human spirit is amazing for its resilience, and many people have found cause to thank God even in seemingly unbearable situations. While serving time in a Nazi concentration camp for giving sanctuary to Jews, Betsie ten Boom (1971) told her sister, "We must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here." C.S. Lewis concludes his essay on *The Problem of Pain* (1962) by saying "Pain provides an opportunity for heroism; the opportunity is seized with surprising frequency." We might add that not only the person who suffers, but also those who minister to his needs, are provided with opportunities for growth and development.

As Baxter put it: "The problems, imperfections and challenges which our world contains give us opportunities for growth and development which would otherwise be impossible."

## 6 Conclusions

In *Brave New World* (1932), Aldous Huxley paints a picture of a futuristic Utopian society which has succeeded, through totalitarian controls on human behavior and drugs designed to stimulate pleasant emotions and to repress undesirable ones, in banishing all traces of pain and unpleasantness. There remains one "savage" who has not adapted to the new civilization, however, and his refusal to take his pills results in the following interchange between "Savage" and his "civilized" interrogators:

"We prefer to do things comfortably," said the Controller.

"But I don't want comfort, I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin."

"In fact," said Mustophe Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."

"All right then," said the Savage defiantly, "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."

If God designed this world as a tourist resort where man could rest in comfort and

ease, it is certainly a dismal failure. But I believe, with Savage, that man was created for greater things. That is why, I believe, this world presents us with such an inexhaustible array of puzzles in mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology and philosophy to challenge and entertain us, and provides us with so many opportunities for creativity and achievement in music, literature, art, athletics, business, technology and other pursuits; and why there are always new worlds to discover, from the mountains and jungles of South America and the flora and fauna of Africa, to the era of dinosaurs and the surface of Mars.

Why does God remain backstage, hidden from view, working behind the scenes while we act out our parts in the human drama? In all our debates about intelligent design, this question is always lurking just below the surface. If God is there, why doesn't He simply walk out onto the stage, and take on a more direct and visible role, clean up our act, and rid the world of pain and evil — and doubt. But our human drama would be turned into a divine puppet show, and it would cost us some of our greatest blessings: the regularity of natural law which makes our achievements meaningful; the free will which makes us more interesting than robots; the love which we can receive from and give to others; and even the opportunity to grow and develop through suffering. I must confess that I often wonder if the blessings are worth the terrible price, but God has chosen to create a world where both good and evil can flourish, rather than one where neither can exist. He has chosen to create a world of greatness and infamy, of love and hatred, and of joy and pain, rather than one of mindless robots or unfeeling puppets.

Batsell Barrett Baxter, who was dying of cancer as he wrote these words, concludes: "When one sees all of life and understands the reasons behind life's suffering, I believe he will agree with the judgment which God Himself declared in the Genesis story of creation: 'And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.'"

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