

A Response to Granville Sewell, “Is God Really Good?”

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Professor Sewell grapples admirably with a question that surely has vexed every thoughtful theist. His answers, however, are not completely satisfactory inasmuch as they suggest that God should not be held fully responsible, and that much of the world’s suffering is caused by human beings rather than by God. More satisfactory answers become possible if the question is considered in a different context. The theological problem of pain assumes the existence of an extra-cosmic God. If, instead, God is immanent, the question is no longer how God came to admit within His creation a suffering and an evil to which He Himself is immune, but how He came to admit these things within Himself. Cruelty to others is one thing; self-infliction of suffering, I being the sole Existence, is quite another.

Professor Sewell grapples admirably with a question that surely has vexed every thoughtful theist: “Is God really good?” How can an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God permit a world of unfathomable pain? To this question, he offers several responses, each of which is satisfying to varying degrees and the sum of which provide some sense of clarity and vision. For each angle on the problem, the author steps back and provides us with a larger view, a method I will attempt to apply in my own limited response.

For me at least, Professor Sewell’s responses, though palliative, are not deeply satisfying. At the risk of oversimplifying, I place his responses into three general categories. First, God may not be fully in control and therefore should not be held fully responsible. Second, the good outweighs the bad. Third, much (if not most) of the world’s suffering is caused by human beings and not by God. The first category denies God’s omnipotence, which for many is unacceptable. The second offers some consolation, yet begs the question of why the seemingly bad is necessary. The third category, which raises the complex matter of free will, is most persuasive. Yet it is also conspicuously silent on two matters: why God would create a creature capable of such evil and all the suffering for which humans are not responsible.

The question itself and therefore all the standard responses, however admirably they are formulated, is grounded in a fundamental assumption that, once revealed, changes the entire field of discussion. Indeed, this revelation even has the capacity to challenge the self-perceptions and the ontological bearings of the discussants themselves. The theological problem of pain assumes the existence of an extra-cosmic moral God. But if

God is immanent within the creation, rather than standing outside as a personal creator, then the implications are at once mind-boggling and humbling. As Sri Aurobindo articulates, “the question is no longer how came God to create for His creatures a suffering and evil of which He is Himself incapable and therefore immune, but how came the sole and infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss¹ to admit into itself that which. . . seems to be its positive negation. . . Cruelty to others is one thing; self-infliction of suffering, I being the sole existence, is quite another.”²

If God is everywhere and in all things, as many religions and virtually all mystics tell us is the case, then this perspective seems unavoidable. When my mind opens to the vastness of this perspective, I experience a moment of vertigo. To fully acknowledge the depth of my own suffering can feel overwhelming at times; to admit the possibility of God simultaneously experiencing the full range of joy and pain of every sentient being at each moment throughout time and space defies imagination. Yet this is precisely what is entailed if we accept the nondualistic premise of God’s immanence.

In order for it not to lapse into conceptual abstraction, the immensity of this perspective cries out for a counterbalance: some way of bridging our ordinary sense that we are separate from God with our intuition of God’s immanence. While faith can serve as a powerful bridge, there are also many practices available help us bridge that gap. Odd as it may sound, we may speak of an art of suffering. In her essay, “How to Suffer,” Helen Luke recalls that the root of the word is the Latin *ferre* which means, “to bear”.³ To suffer with nobility, she suggests, we have not only to bear the weight that threatens to pull us down, but also to do so while recognizing our suffering as one small piece of a larger human struggle. For Christians, the image of “bearing one’s cross” might provide this larger context for one’s seemingly personal suffering. Sidestepping the question of God, Buddhists also understand suffering as the entry point into spiritual practice. The middle way of mindfulness, neither indulging nor avoiding suffering, offers another path of liberation. Indeed, this path requires taking responsibility for one’s own suffering, which is perhaps easier when there is no God to blame.

Professor Sewell also makes the important observation that the pain that comes from “acts of God” is small compared to the pain we inflict on one other. The interdependence of human life, he notes, is a cause of much unhappiness. I would like to place these observations in a context beyond our immediate personal relations. One implication of the increasingly global impact of human interdependence is that we must consider how our everyday actions are the unintended source of suffering for others. Driving an SUV in America, for instance, can contribute to rising sea levels in

1 The Vedantic *sat+chit+ānanda* = *sachchidānanda*. In this conception God relates to the world as the substance that constitutes it, as the consciousness that contains it, and as an infinite Quality/Delight that expresses and experiences itself in it.

2 Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (seventh edition), p. 102. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2006.

3 Helen Luke, *Old Age: Journey into Simplicity. Parabola*, 1987.

Bangladesh. The fact that we are one species sharing one planet can no longer be ignored. If taken seriously, this fact has profound implications for ethics as well as for the evolution of human consciousness.

Finally, to return to the matter of God's immanence, even if it is God who secretly bears all the world's pain, we nonetheless ordinarily operate under the illusion that it is we who bear it. What sort of bridge might we find between these two perspectives? Ultimately, the question is how to find the God within. This is a highly personal question, even if innumerable answers are supplied by the world's religious and spiritual traditions. One element of such a bridge, however, is available to each of us in everyday life. When we experience empathy in the face of another's pain, we are in a sense reweaving the pieces into a whole. This is why the Dalai Lama calls empathy "the master emotion," for it carries the potential of opening into a wide and universal compassion that can transform human relationships at every level. Most of us have experienced on a personal level the healing potential of empathy. Despite my training as an international relations scholar, I also believe that empathy and compassion (more so than treaties and institutions) are the primary seeds of global peace and justice. As the New Testament declares, "All creation groans awaiting the awakening of the sons of God".⁴ Perhaps when our consciousness is sufficiently universalized, we might live in that secret oneness and say, as Ramana Maharshi said while dying of cancer, "Pain there is, suffering there is not."

4 "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. . . For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now." (Romans 8:19-22, New King James Version)