

The Theodicy of Suffering

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Introduction

The concept “theodicy”, a Greek word which means “justice”, “was coined in the year 1710 by a German philosopher called Gottfried Leibniz¹. In his work titled “Theodicy Essays on the Goodness of God: the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil”, Gottfried argued that “the evil in the world does not conflict with the goodness of God” (Harper, 1, *Theodicy of suffering*). The writing of Gottfried was a challenge to the work of Pierre Bayle who in another literature posited that with the many sufferings in the world, God could not be labeled as good and omnipotent in any way. Merriam Webster defines theodicy to be “the defense of God’s goodness and the omnipotence in the view of the existence of evil”. Apparently, this definition is also not in support of the stand that was taken by Pierre Bayle (Harper, 1, *Theodicy of suffering*).

In trying to address the questions surrounding the theodicy of suffering, Harper notes it is important to first point out that suffering is generally associated with evil, and goodness or moral is associated with God. ²Moreover, he explains that “moral evil is the unrighteousness that occurs first in the hearts of free moral agents and then manifests itself in those deeds regarded as sinful” (Harper, 1, *Theodicy of suffering*). Among such things qualified as evil are “hatred Greed, selfishness, deceit, theft, lust, and envy just to mention a few.

Notably, there are also those things labeled as natural evils, and so, moral and natural evils are just but different categories of evil deeds. Examples of natural evils would encompass earthquakes, floods, hurricane, lightning and any of the commonly known natural disasters. Whether moral or natural, all the evil results into sufferings

¹ Harper, 1, *Theodicy of suffering*: “the evil in the world does not conflict with the goodness of God”.

² Harper, 1, “moral evil is the unrighteousness that occurs first in the hearts of free moral agents and then manifests itself in those deeds regarded as sinful”.

and deaths. It is for this reason that at times, the natural and the moral evils are combined to be perceived as one.

Concluding on his introduction chapter, Harper as remarked, "we ought to look upon nature`s evil as if they were the responsibility of humankind and we should also accept the sufferings of mankind as if they were part of nature`s casual laws" (Harper, 1, *Theodicy of suffering*).

The Thesis Statement

Because there are too much evil deeds in the world, there seems to be so many problems as well. But the argument is, if God is associated with all that is good and not evil as Harper posits, how then could it be possible that there are already too much problems caused by evils, when in the actual sense, Harper believes the world is "under the control of an all-good and all-powerful God"? This also brings us into the question as to what extent is³ "our belief in the Biblical scriptures and consequently in God justified in the presence of the many sufferings"? This is what many philosophers have termed as "the problem of theodicy". The very concept "theodicy" literally implies, "justification of the power of God".

Harper believes ⁴"evil are all those which cause intentional harms or deliberate destruction which violates the moral codes". He views evil to be the exact opposite of good. His assumptions go well with many of those held by religious leaders who mostly associate evil "with an active force often personified as an entity termed as Satan" (Harper, 1-2, *Theodicy of suffering*).

³ Harper, 1-2, *Theodicy of suffering*: "evil are all those which cause intentional harms or deliberate destruction which violates the moral codes"

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In chapter three and four of his book, Harper Douglas talks about “the Nature of Suffering” and all that is pertained to it. In chapter II, he argues⁵ “as long as there is conscious life and continuing belief therein, then there must also be the phenomenon of experienced hurt in some measure”(Harper, 16).He contends God should not be held responsible for the evils in the world, “He does not have, did not have or will not have choice in the creation of either the supernatural or natural world” (Harper,16), natural or manmade evils.

This chapter further informs us that God Himself does not have such powers as to satisfy every aspect of our lives, solve our problems of which we intentionally perpetrate, prevent our sufferings which are the consequences of our own problems and then, blaming the good-God in the circumstances of our own failures.

Chapter IV discusses about “Suffering and Evil”. Harps explain there is no any difficulty in recognizing those deeds which have been or can be isolated as evil. He talks of two categories of evils ⁶“those evils brought about through the natural forces and those which are caused by human beings” (Harper, 22).

According to this chapter, “evils of our own making will be held to be evils of our own choosing”. The term “evil” should not be confused with “suffering”, even though what is perceived to be evil is generally associated with suffering. He cautions “whoever performs evil knowing that it is evil is more seriously condemned than those who do the same out of their moral consciousness (Harper, 23-29)

⁵ (Harper, 16, *Theodicy of suffering*): “As long as there is conscious life and continuing belief therein, then there must also be the phenomenon of experienced hurt in some measure”.

⁶ “Those evils brought about through the natural forces and those which are caused by human beings” (Harper, 22).

Harper concludes by saying⁷ “our own self-worth and self assurance is enhanced by the very fact that there may be definite risks of loss” which of course can be minimized by our understandings and capabilities to detach from what are evil oriented (Harper, 23-29).

Chapter V looks into “the Psychology of Suffering”, where Harper states “suffering as we experience it is a private but distorted affair raised into the actuality of existence” (Harper, 39). To avoid psychological sufferings, he us “to learn to position ourselves into the large measures in control of a natural force meekly allowing ourselves to become its hapless victims” (Harper, 41). Harpers argue that what many scholars have termed as mental suffering “is scarcely not a condition of the mind alone but also a distress of an emotional nature” (Harper, 42).

The following chapter titled “the Universe and Particular” is about general nature of the concept “suffering”, which all human kinds are exposed to. As Harper highlights in this chapter “...reason has given individuals a belief in the comforting influence of the present universe concept of suffering”. In conclusion, this chapter addresses the ability of every individual to cope with challenges of life which should generally be deemed as normal and part and parcel of life.

Proceeding is chapter VII, discussing about “the Value in suffering”. Suffering as described in this chapter is the evil emanating from natural forces, which in turn enable us accept realities of nature, redefine ourselves, become more wise and self conscious (Harper, 55). Harper elaborates “we have God himself as the suffering servant”, and so, our sufferings may not really be of much value in the impossible contrast with God`s.

⁷ (Harper, 23-29, Theodicy of suffering): “our own self-worth and self assurance is enhanced by the very fact that there may be definite risks of loss”.

“God and suffering” subsequently forms a theme of discussion in chapter VIII. Here, we are called upon to say ⁸“God’s suffering for our sake is all merciful”, meaning, “our mercy to ourselves is in some way limited and subjected in many respect to the sacrifices on our own behalf...” (Harper, 65).

Harper Douglas narrows it down by tackling on two major themes in the last chapters of his book, that is ,”The Holocaust” discussed in chapter XI and “Christianity” addressed in the very final episode of this book.

Referring to the “Holocaust” of World War II as one of the bloodiest of the human sufferings, Harper digs deep into the feasible therapeutic mechanisms which can be utilized in managing the many human sufferings. He notes that God must not be mistaken for any of such noxious human sufferings, or the “inhuman torment” as he precisely refers to them. To him, “God as God taken in the Godhead does not intervene in man’s despicable behaviors...” (Harper, 76).

The question of “the goodness” of God failing to prevail in times of extreme sufferings, the likes of the Holocaust of World War II, generally remains a question of debate. As Harper asserts “the problem bequeathed to present day Judaism through the horrors of the Holocaust” (Harper, 76-77).

In his final episode, Harper has reflected on the essay by Kenneth Surin, in which case, Surin addresses the aspect of true Christianity and its response to “the problem of evil”(Harper, 82).In this last chapter, the role of the Christian faith and belief has been reflected upon. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is acknowledged as the true son of

⁸ (Harper, 65,Theodicy of suffering): “God’s suffering for our sake is all merciful”, meaning, “our mercy to ourselves is in some way limited and subjected in many respect to the sacrifices on our own behalf...” .

God who dies to carry the heavy burden of the human sufferings. Here, what is good and that which is evil; have also been defined based on the Christian belief.

Works Cited

Harper, J. Douglas. *Theodicy and Suffering: the nature of suffering*. London. University of St Andrews: Levenson. 2001.1-92