

A Theodicy for Carl

by

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God and Evil

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## A THEODICY FOR CARL

Carl Smith, an eighteen year old young man, has watched his father, Wesley, suffer a debilitating muscular disease that has necessitated institutionalization. Understanding the disease to be inherited, Carl has perceived the onset of this malady in his own body; the observation confirmed by his physician. Being a Christian, Carl asks the question, "Why would a good God allow this continuation of evil?"

Steeped inside of Carl's existential query are much broader questions relating to the problem of theodicy. The word "theodicy," is derived from a combination of the Greek words for "God" and "just." In the classical sense, the term has come to mean the defense of God's justice and righteousness in the face of evil; in essence, arguing God is not responsible for evil. Carl's Christian faith affirms for him the principles that God is both all powerful and perfectly good. Being omnipotent and perfectly moral, God must want to prevent human suffering. Yet Carl now knows poignantly and personally that human suffering exists. This dichotomy plunges Carl into the murky philosophical and theological waters of theodicy. Young Carl's angst is well verbalized by eighteenth century skeptic David Hume who asked about God: "Is he willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both willing and able? Whence then is evil?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen T. Davis, "The Problem of Evil in Recent Philosophy," *Review and Expositor* (Fall 1985): 536.

For some, Carl's impasse might initiate questions not only about God's power and goodness but also his very existence. Traditionally, critics of Christianity have pointed to the evidentiary problem of evil to contend that theism is logically inconsistent and improbable. In past centuries skeptics and agnostics quickly posed the question of Christians, "How do you know, after all, that your God does exist?" But in today's pluralistic (dare I say more *tolerant*) culture, each is allowed the existence of their own god. Now critics of Christianity, as well as worried believers, indict God's character and attributes, such as his goodness and power. Michael Calligan notes this phenomenon saying, "the pressure point for Christian apologetics has changed dramatically."<sup>2</sup> Stephen T. Davis concurs, noting that on the heels of nineteenth century optimism, the tragedies of the twentieth century have resulted in the coming of the "Age of Theodicy."<sup>3</sup>

Theodicy is not exclusive to post enlightenment thinking, the questions of evil and suffering to have been omnipresent since the origins of Christian faith. The "Age of Theodicy" however has been hastened by modern technological advances in communication. Calligan laments that the diversity and depth of human suffering and evil are known better to inhabitants of our time than to any previous era because of "the breadth and speed of our information and communications systems."<sup>4</sup> He makes this declaration in his book published in 1976, prior to the evolution of 24 hour news service, and the technologically instant information service of the Internet. Add to these other forms of streaming information (such as cell phones) and the modern individual is

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Galligan, *God and Evil* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, "Evil in Recent Philosophy", 536.

<sup>4</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 6.

bombarded with news, most of it bad, and most of it related to human failure and suffering. In this new social reality, personal experience of evil is intense and magnified. Carl's awareness of evil and suffering, initiated in his own personal experience, will be multiplied by the technologically instant age in which he lives.

Newscasts and web pages are overflowing with stories relating to: social unrest, disappearances, political corruption, sex scandals, corporate and personal thievery, terrorism and war. These woes find their genesis in deviant human behavior and as such they hard to pin on God. Yet the same information services describe the horrible events of pandemic disease, hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes, exacting nearly incalculable tolls on human life. Natural disasters, as well as innocent suffering from the crossfire of human deviance, appear to impeach either God's goodness or power. These examples provided distinction between the two classic types of evil. Those of the first set are termed moral evil, that is, suffering brought on by human agency, in short, sin. Natural evil, the second group, exemplified by disease and natural disasters is regarded as pain which cannot be attributed to human activity. It seems the supply of Carl's difficulty lies in the realm of natural evil.

Now having a somewhat abridged understanding of the problem of evil, its pervasiveness, and distinctions, we turn to the categorization of theodicies available to address the issue. Theologians and philosophers differ in how they structure various theories of theodicy, but common themes are: divine attributes, the nature of evil itself, and human freedom. Galligan uses adherence to the divine attributes of omnipotence and goodness to divide his survey; those that hold fast are the "classical answers of freedom and development," while those that modify the attributes are "new definitions of power

and goodness.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Davis observes that “theodicies available today reveal two main ways of attacking the problem of evil.”<sup>6</sup> Some theodacists essentially deal with the problem by denying or altering one of the two divine attributes that appear to contribute to the problem, omnipotence or perfect goodness. Others work within the orthodox framework of these attributes, trying to solve the problem while retaining them.<sup>7</sup> On a different track, Norman L. Geisler in his work deals with an array of philosophical options, proposing an answer to the apparent contradiction between evil and a good God. Philosophical options concerning nature of evil include illusionism, and dualism; those dealing with God’s character are finitism, sadism, impossiblism, atheism and theism.<sup>8</sup> Geisler espouses theism, which places a high value on human freedom.

It is evident in these categorizations that a primary watershed of theodicy is the modification or denial of the traditional divine attributes of perfect goodness and omnipotence. John Roth’s “Theodicy of Protest” demonstrates a theodicy in which the divine attribute of goodness is impugned. Roth is convinced of God’s sovereignty and omnipotence, however deeply troubled by the holocaust, he contends God’s nature has an evil or dark side; God is not perfectly moral.<sup>9</sup> David Griffin, a process theologian,

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<sup>5</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, "Evil in Recent Philosophy", 537.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *The Roots of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978; repr., Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 12 (page references are to the reprint edition).

<sup>9</sup> His position summarized from John K. Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy, A New Edition*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1-20.

acknowledges God's goodness, but rejects his omnipotence. Discounting creation *ex nihilo*,<sup>10</sup> Davis asserts God's creative activity involved the ordering of chaotic pre-existent material. God's power then is already limited by the finite nature of uncreative material he had to work with. In addition, God is not "all powerful" because he is bound by certain metaphysical principles inherent in the creator-creature relationship; creatures physically independent of the creator, share power with the creator. What power God retains over creation is persuasive rather than coercive, attempting to lure his creation in the direction of good.<sup>11</sup> Theodicies that attack the problem of evil by altering divine attributes are insightful and of interest to theologians and philosophers alike. It is doubtful however that Carl would find solace in them, or wish to surrender the orthodox views of omnipotence and perfect goodness.<sup>12</sup>

Following the assumption that Carl would find the capitulation or modification of the divine attributes unpalatable, we now consult theodicies that retain divine omnipotence and perfect goodness. Both Davis and Galligan delineate two classic approaches to theodicy, each preserving the divine elements of power and goodness; a theodicy of freedom and a theodicy of development. These theodicies trace their origin to the earliest thinkers of the church. The theodicy of Freewill was inaugurated by Augustine; development can be traced to Irenaeus. Since their inception, these theories

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of creation "out of nothing."

<sup>11</sup> His position summarized from David Ray Griffin, "Creation out of Nothing, Creation out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy, A New Edition*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 108-125. See also Davis, "Evil in Recent Philosophy", 537.

<sup>12</sup> As is evident in his question which affirms the posture of a "good" of God.

have retained a prominent place in the thought of the church, being championed, assimilated, and adapted by many. Given their traditional position, these classic theodices appear best suited to respond Carl's question. The remainder of this study will focus on the theodicies of development and freedom, beginning first with freedom.

The free will theodicy, as initially developed by Augustine, logically depends on at least three controlling ideas or presuppositions: freedom of the will, evil as the privation of good and created goodness as a balanced hierarchical organization.<sup>13</sup> Of these suppositions, the divine intention of free will is foundational and quintessential. Being made in God's image, Augustine understood humanity's freedom as a reflection of God's freedom; humanity's will is no more coerced than God's. Of all the aspects that comprise the nature of humanity, Augustine contends the will of the soul is superior; it makes humans what they are.<sup>14</sup> This prototypical element is essential to a world in which humans are created with the ability to freely love and obey God. God's desire was to create the best possible universe he could, containing rational agents with true libertarian freedom.<sup>15</sup> Inherent in this gift of free will, is an element of risk. God, in making humans free, hazards the prospect things will go wrong; "the possibility of freely doing evil is the inevitable companion of the possibility of freely doing good."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Stephen T. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy, A New Edition*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

The second controlling assumption of Augustine relates to the definition of evil as the privation of good. By privation, Augustine indicates “a lack of something or absence of something that should be there.”<sup>17</sup> Augustine advances this concept based on the understanding of God being good and subsequently the author of all good; hence all that God has created is good. Creation is solely the product of the divine will, not formed out of pre-existent material or the substance of God, but from nothing.<sup>18</sup> Being the Creator of everything and wholly good, God could not have created evil *things*. Evil then is not a substance that exists in and of itself, but rather a corruption or privation of good things made by God.<sup>19</sup> Absent of being a “thing,” evil is nonetheless real. Sickness is an *actual* physical lack of (or corruption of) good health; “a real lack or corruption that leaves what remains in a state of incapacitation.”<sup>20</sup>

The third idea central to Augustine’s understanding of the evil is his contention that God organized creation in different levels according to a definite “chain” or “hierarchy of being.”<sup>21</sup> Created things are characterized by limit, form, and order. The goodness of creation is exemplified by harmony and balance; beings exhibit goodness when they adhere to their allotted place in creation. If a given being yearns for a structure higher than its appropriate level, or debases itself to a lower level, it denies the value of its own proper goodness and deviates from that particular value, disfiguring the

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<sup>17</sup> Geisler, *The Roots of Evil*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Geisler, *The Roots of Evil*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 21.

beauty of of the whole creation. Goodness is diminished within the created order and the cosmos deprived of its intended harmony; evil is introduced into creation.<sup>22</sup>

From the interaction of these three suppositions we gain Augustine's explanation for evil. Evil originates from the departure of angels from God's plan. Augustine however does not trace the deviation of humankind from their appropriate good to the influence of the fallen angels; humankind's fall is solely attributed to Adam's free will, and his choice to depart from God's good purposes.<sup>23</sup> Geisler says it succinctly, "Evil then is the corruption that arises when a good but potentially corruptible creature turns away from the infinite good of the Creator to the lesser good of the creatures."<sup>24</sup> Both moral and natural evil can be traced to the primordial fall of humanity. Freedom, provided to us that we might truly love and obey God, is misused for our own purposes. This abuse of our freedom, a corruption and privation of its natural purpose, is costly; it disrupts our relationship with God and introduces disharmony and imbalance into his good creation. Moral evil is the result of our own damaged relationship, natural evil mysteriously stems from the disharmony and imbalance imposed on God's initially perfect creation.

The theodicy of freedom addresses Carl's question in the context of freedom and responsibility. Ultimately, the responsibility for both moral and natural evil rests with human beings, of which Carl is an associate. God deliberately created an environment in which Carl and his fellow humans could freely choose to love and obey him. In

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Geisler, *The Roots of Evil*, 49.

fashioning creatures with the freedom to say yes or no to him, God unavoidably ran the risk that some would say no to him. Evil is a result of this free rejection of God. To say that God permits certain evils to continue is not to say that he promotes them. In the interests of freedom and responsibility some evils must be permitted to continue.

Through the miraculous removal of evil, were God to routinely intervene in the physical, mental, and spiritual affairs of humanity, his highest creation, he would reduce them to something less than they were originally created to be, free and responsible moral agents. Carl is physically ill, but he retains the archetypal element of his humanity; freedom.

The second of the classic theodicies which retain the divine attributes of omnipotence and perfect goodness is the theodicy of development. The origins of this thought lay with Irenaeus, a early Hellenistic church Father. Although not developed as a theodicy per say, the thought of Irenaeus (and Clement of Alexandria) provide foundational motifs for the development of a theodicy not dependent upon the idea of the fall.<sup>25</sup> The foremost proponent of a theodicy based on Irenaean thought is the contemporary philosopher of religion John Hick. The “central theme” of this type of theodicy is the notion of a two-stage conception of the creation of humankind; first creation in the “image” and then in the “likeness” of God. Hick reflects, “Existence ‘in the image of God’ was thus a *potentiality* for knowledge of and relationship with one’s Maker, rather than such knowledge and relationship as a fully realized state.”<sup>26</sup> People

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<sup>25</sup> John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy, A New Edition*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

created as spiritually and morally immature creatures undergo a long process of further growth and development, most particularly in the second stage. Perfect creation has not gone tragically wrong, but is a continually creative process, whose completion will reside in the eschaton.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to the Augustinian model, Hick believes God wants humans to be free to love and obey him. God's purpose in creation is the growth of all human creatures "away from self-centeredness and toward God consciousness."<sup>28</sup> True freedom to choose God cannot occur in his very presence. A finite creature cannot exercise free choice within an immediate consciousness of the presence of the infinite Creator. In order for some measure of genuine freedom, the creature must be brought into existence, not in immediate divine presence, but at a "distance" from God. In the case of humans, their existence must take place in a world that is an autonomous system, separate from God's overwhelming evidence. Thus our world is "religiously ambiguous," affording us the opportunity to disbelieve in God and organize our lives around his perceived absence.<sup>29</sup> Freedom to love and obey God depends upon this epistemic distance; it must be an act of faith.

Hick's Irenaean theodicy finds the origins of moral evil in humanity's basic self-regarding animality, in the sins of individual selfishness as well as the more massive sins

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>28</sup> Davis, "Evil in Recent Philosophy", 541.

<sup>29</sup> Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy", 42.

of corporate selfishness. God is “gradually creating children out of human animals.”<sup>30</sup> Hick acknowledges natural evil exists as well, referring to it as “nonmoral” evil. Natural evil results from the autonomous system of “distance” that we live in. This “objective world” with its laws, broken at the penalty of pain or death, is basic to the development of our moral nature.<sup>31</sup> Both moral and natural evil is to be accepted as necessary for God’s purposes; for our moral and spiritual development. Both moral and natural evil is to be regarded essentially as good, a product of God’s love.<sup>32</sup> Hick imagines a world without pain and suffering would be one without moral choices, and hence no possibility for growth and development. He summarizes, “We can see that the pain-free paradise would not constitute a person-making environment.”<sup>33</sup>

The theodicy of development reminds Carl that there is a purpose to his suffering. Although it may not be evident to him, his disease will result in his refinement both spiritually and morally. In some regards his affliction “closes the distance” between himself and God. God is responsible for permitting the continuation of evil in Carl’s life for his own good. Carl, can rest assured that in spite of his pain, a loving God is moving him toward an ideal end-state where he will be pain free and perfected. This end-state will not greet Carl in this physical life, but is promised to him in the next.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, "Evil in Recent Philosophy", 542.

<sup>33</sup> In recent work, Hick has replaced his well known term “soul-making” with “person-making.” As used in Ibid., 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 51.

The theodices of freedom and development preserve the divine attributes of omnipotence and perfect goodness which are assumed crucial to Carl's Christian belief system. These theories might satisfy Carl on an intellectual or rational level; and are most appropriately brought to his attention when he has some "breathing space" and there is no immediate crisis to bear.<sup>35</sup> Yet there are other aspects of his Christian faith Carl can rely on during the most existential moments of his present suffering. Carl's Christian faith affirms for him that he is not suffering alone, God is suffering with him; in addition, Carl is promised that suffering, an important part of the Christian experience, will come to an end, it will not last forever.

William Ernest Hocking defines the essence of God's goodness as "the ability to co-suffer and co-experience the evils men endure."<sup>36</sup> Pain is much more easily tolerated when undergone in communion with others, isolation magnifies suffering. Hence we are in need of an "infallible associate" who is always present during our suffering.<sup>37</sup> Jesus Christ is this infallible associate. The Scriptures tell us, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb 4:15), but one who is

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel J. Simundson discusses two levels on which people deal with suffering, one intellectual, and the other survival. He cautions Christians not to provide "pat" answers on either level. See Daniel J. Simundson, *Faith Under Fire: How the Bible Speaks to Us in Times of Suffering* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2001), 121-130. In concert with Simundson, Gilbert W. Stafford introduces a similar notion with his explanation of two kinds of "why" questions. The first "why" is the cry of emotional anguish; the second "why" being intellectual and reflective, asked at an emotional distance from suffering. See Gilbert W. Stafford, *Theology for Disciples: Systematic Considerations about the Life of Christian Faith* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 1996), 266.

<sup>36</sup> Galligan, *God and Evil*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

“acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). Biblically speaking, “the ultimate apologetic for the problem of evil is the action of God in becoming the victim of maximum evil.”<sup>38</sup> Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, suffered the entirety of human misery and evil. In addition to all of our sins, He bore our griefs and sorrows (Isa 53:4). Where is God while Carl suffers? God is at the side of Carl, as co-sufferer, his “infallible associate.”

Suffering is also an important part of the Christian experience. Redemption is proclaimed through the suffering of Jesus Christ, yet there is a certain redemptive element of our own suffering. Paul, requesting removal of his own personal malady, quoted the Lord’s response as, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Suffering is a reality and a “call” of the Christian life; yet we are assured that suffering will not last forever. The Christian faith has a hope in the future, eschatologically Carl can be comforted “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). Carl in the presence of his current suffering can realize that he is not alone, that his experience is genuinely Christian, and that it has an end.

Ultimately the answer to Carl’s question, although intellectually addressed, rests in the arena of faith. The issues raised and attended to in this piece have dealt essentially with faith as belief (*fides quae*), that is, the intellectual acceptance of certain statements about God. Carl’s real answer involves faith as trust (*fides qua*), an internal self-revelation of God. Carl may very well believe and accept arguments set forth by

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<sup>38</sup> W. Gary Phillips, "The Problem of Evil: A Pastoral Approach, Part Two: The Good News," *Michigan Theological Journal* (Fall 1991): 111.

Christian scholars on his behalf, but his true solace, his answer, will come in *trusting* his Savior. Trusting that God did not create this evil, but allows it to continue on behalf of human freedom. Trusting that he is not alone in his suffering, God is co-sufferer with him and his suffering will have redemptive purpose. Trusting that through Christ, all suffering and death has ultimately been vanquished; Carl's own experience of suffering is only temporary. The response to Carl's inquiry finally is found in faith as trust in an all loving and all powerful God.

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