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Does Suffering Lack Meaning? A Contemporary Christian Response

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Abstract

Anthropology's approach to answering the question of the role of suffering in our lives is limited to empirical data and at best describes an individual's capability to endure it and make sense of it. Levinas was at odds to find meaning in suffering once it had exceeded certain proportions. Various cultures demonstrate greater and lesser capacities for integrating corporate suffering when it has crossed a significant threshold (e.g. Israeli Holocaust survivors, Canadian-Cambodian Khmer Rouge survivors, and their descendants). What is the role of ritual and productive suffering in revealing meaning in suffering? Some examples are drawn from the experiences of pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago de Compostella. Drawing from Dr. Eleonore Stump's exploration of second-person narratives and relationships, a Christian philosophical-theological response is provided.

Keywords

suffering, theodicy, narrative, second-personal, anthropology, theology, salvifici doloris

Suffering is ubiquitous, affecting all in some part of their lives and affecting some in all parts of their lives. Whether physical ("pain of the body") or moral ("pain of the soul"),[1] the presence of suffering in our lives extends to and through our relationships so that we not only suffer personally but suffer *with* others sympathetically and vicariously. We find ourselves the agents of suffering as well as the patients. We struggle to make sense of that suffering which seems to have no human agency at all yet is continuously present in and brought about through the natural environment: "Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises *the question: Why?*

[1] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1984), n. 5.

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It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and in brief, a question about its meaning."[2] This article puts into dialogue the observations of a number of anthropologists and then proposes to address that dialogue's limitations with theological input.

Making Sense of Suffering

Anthropologists, rather than attempting to step out of their field and make any universal metaphysical or theological claims about the meaning of suffering, have tended to simply record the testimonies and histories of peoples who have suffered significant trauma. Then they identify what these peoples have or have not appropriated (e.g. value systems, religious belief, communal identity) in order to *make sense or give meaning* to the suffering which forms part of their individual or communal history. The observation that suffering "seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*"[3] is a consequence of its ubiquity: "[B]ecause of the universal qualities of trauma, we as observers and witnesses are secure in our abilities to know it when we see it and to feel empathy with those who suffer it in 'a sort of communion in trauma'."[4] Such a communion is possible on the presumption that suffering itself (but not necessarily its meaning) transcends contextual boundaries. Joel Robbins sees "violence and suffering as realities beyond culture, and hence as realities with universal and in some ways obvious import that do not require cultural interpretation to render them sensible."[5]

Don Seeman agrees with Robbins in identifying the transcendent nature of suffering vis-à-vis culture but precisely because of this sees difficulty in making sense of it: "Indeed, it is the way in which suffering *exceeds* culture that makes the anthropology of suffering (in a discipline devoted to cultural interpretation) so problematic. The uselessness (one might also say meaninglessness) of suffering lies precisely in its tendency to exceed culture's grasp."[6] On the one hand, this critique of culture may derive from the failure of religion as a ritualistic culture to "cure" suffering as Clifford Geertz remarks: "The 'problem of suffering from a religious point of view,' asserts Geertz, is not how to *end* suffering but only 'how to suffer,' and ritual

[2] *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 9.

[3] *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 2.

[4] Joel Robbins, 'Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 453.

[5] Robbins, 454.

[6] Don Seeman, 'Otherwise Than Meaning: On the Generosity of Ritual,' *Social Analysis* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 56.

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practice is intrinsic to this dilemma. Religion as a cultural system is inevitably identified with theodicy for Geertz, since it aims to make 'physical pain, personal loss … or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable', and to do so through ritual."[7]

Is Suffering Bearable Only When We Attempt to Remove It?

In the face of the helplessness we experience in the presence of so much suffering, Edward Schillebeeckx expresses a similar sentiment theologically demanding an active response in the face of suffering: "While not restricting salvation to human experiences of healing or wholeness, [Schillebeeckx] holds that God's ultimate salvation needs to resonate in the present through glimpses of salvation occurring for individuals and communities."[8] His concept of the *humanum*, of the 'humane' person, includes the inclination on the part of each human being to respond to the suffering of another human being whose suffering serves as an ethical demand on each of us to respond:[9]

> If the fundamental symbol of God is the living [human] (*imago Dei*), then the place where the human is dishonoured, violated and oppressed… is at the same time the preferred place where *religious experience* becomes possible in a way of life which seeks to... heal it and give it its own liberated existence.[10]

Schillebeeckx is here borrowing on the ethical imperative of Emmanuel Levinas: "The experience of pain as other—irreducible and undeniable—is worth reflection, according to Levinas, because it relates by analogy to the confrontation with human others who are similarly irreducible and undeniable, and whose presence similarly constitutes a demand for response that cannot be interpreted away."[11]

Variable Efficacy of Culture(s) and Ritual

But what of the solution then in providing ritual as a medicine if the suffering itself does not 'go away'? "The question of ritual efficacy has been insufficiently studied in medical anthropology, but it would clearly be reductive to imply that ritual healers and those who visit

[7] Seeman, 56.

[8] Helen Bergin, 'Edward Schillebeeckx and the Suffering Human Being,' *International Journal of Public Theology* 4, no. 4 (2010): 469.

[9] Bergin, 468-9.

[10] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 837.

[11] Seeman, 62.

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them seek *only* meaning from this practice and not—as they often and vociferously claim—the alleviation of some real pain or sickness."[12] Where medicine fails, there seems no guaranteed way to rid oneself of pain whether physical or moral in all circumstances and so Geertz' point above about religion's capacity to make suffering bearable implies at least a sort of palliative care. Despite Seeman's concern for a latent impotence within culture to deal with suffering, Carol Kidron's study of Jewish-Israeli Holocaust descendants and Canadian-Cambodian descendants argues strongly for both the ability of culture to provide meaning amidst suffering as well as the cultural dependency of this meaning.

Kidron claims, "As in the case of other idioms of illness, the experience of trauma and the resultant disorder entail culturally constituted meaning systems framing how one interprets and practices the suffering self."[13] In her interviews with descendants of Holocaust genocide survivors, the intergenerational suffering transmitted through 'commemorative' or 'forgetful' ritual is acknowledged as present but remains for the most part nonverbally so.[14] Through these ritual processes Kidron found Jewish-Israeli Holocaust descendants as a cultural group to be more resilient precisely by refolding the functional role of historical suffering:

> [I]f the markers of emotional difference in descendant subjectivity subtly signify the semiotics of a morally valuable Holocaust presence and not merely a personal maladaptive form of suffering, then treatment ('picking at your entrails'), healing (the 'cure' for memory), and closure are not only untenable but undesirable. In contrast to the 'minimal narcissistic' therapeutic self in search of healing and individual meaning, collective meaning-worlds may even be perpetuating individual scars as collective testimonial badges of honor.[15]

Contrasted with Canadian-Cambodian descendants of the Khmer Rouge genocide, Jewish descendants find themselves part of an integrating value set which encourages memory-work rather than silence and non-therapeutic internalization. Buddhist influence on the Cambodian culture on the other hand encourages "memories of past suffering and victimhood [to] be accepted as one's karma, without undue attachment to the past as all material existence is [considered] impermanent."[16] Kidron found among the Cambodian descendants a general and pervasive "disinterest in and in some cases complete

[12] Seeman, 57.

[13] Carol A. Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies,' *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (December 2012): 725.

[14] Kidron, 730.

[15] Kidron, 731.

[16] Kidron, 737.

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rejection of all forms of commemorative practice, be it first- or second-generation commemoration."[17] Such disinterest and rejection finds justification under the auspices of a false sense of "immunity"[18] which does not permit therapeutic verbal or nonverbal retelling. Conversely for the Jewish descendants, structures are in place culturally to refold the functional role of historical suffering into a key element of communal identity:

> Reenactment takes place via ritual and liturgy where perpetual narration of mythic sequences guarantee that they remain culturally embedded as blueprints for interpretation. The imperative of personal remembrance encompasses the commemoration of communal and personal dead. The individual, perceived as the eternal witness embodying memory, and the community of which he/she is a part, loop back to the past in order to make that past present and to create a meaningful 'place' for the events and people on the continuum of history."[19]

When Culture Fails

So it seems that culture has a clear role to play in making sense of suffering and making it bearable. Yet it is also clear that cultures are not static sets of determinative characteristics but rather capable of reshaping and variable appropriation by introspective and reflective individuals. Thus certain cultures are less disposed or even detrimental to the process of integration of suffering. In his book *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent*,[20] James Davies, a psychotherapist, reflects on the transformative role of the suffering which makes up a large part of every human life. Davies' three stage model for moving through suffering is compared to the three stages of the Christian spiritual life: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. "Davies contends that capitalism with its message of spend, spend, spend distracts us from what is important and puts us in a haze," perpetuating a "negative vision of suffering."[21] In his review of the book, J.F. Hoover sketches out the approach:

> Davies constructs what he calls a 'relational perspective of suffering' that includes two dimensions: (1) how we relate to our suffering and

[17] Ibid.

[18] Kidron, 740.

[19] Kidron, 732.

[20] James Davies, *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[21] J.F. Hoover, Review of *The Importance of Suffering: The Value and Meaning of Emotional Discontent*, by James Davies, *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 2 (2013): 698.

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> (2) how we relate to our inner and outer worlds. Both of these dimensions impact our experience of suffering and its ultimate outcome. He identifies the cultural influences of Western society on our disposition towards suffering and demonstrates how they negatively impact our lives. Davies disagrees strongly, eloquently, and compassionately with how Western culture and people view suffering and consequently how it is received, processed, and treated. Davies develops two categories of suffering to make his point: productive suffering and non-productive suffering, which are defined by how the sufferer manages the suffering, not by the event or the emotion itself.[22]

Rejecting a characterization that requires it to be avoided at all costs, "Suffering is, instead, a force that can lead humans to make necessary changes toward self-realization and social transformation."[23] As we have seen with anti-therapeutic Cambodian Buddhist tendencies as well, particular cultural systems can fail to dispose a person to bear or make sense of suffering. On the other hand when "supported correctly, spiritual emergencies allow individuals to make changes to values and existential priorities that lead to an expanded worldview, improved health, greater interest in living and personal satisfaction, and an openness to religious and spiritual experiences."[24]

When Ritual Fails

Before examining some testimony which shows how people can not only bear suffering through positive support of a particular cultural worldview and appropriation of ritual, we need to point out that not just any ritual will suffice. Kalonymos Shapira was a Hasidic Jew who lost his family during the German invasion of Warsaw in World War II. He was subsequently deported to the Trawniki concentration camp near Lublin and was executed at gunpoint. The death of his mother during the invasion apparently from "a broken heart"[25] caused him to reflect on excessive suffering in a commentary on Abraham's binding of Isaac with respect to the matriarch Sarah:

> [That is why] Moses, our faithful shepherd, juxtaposed Sarah's death in the Torah [Genesis 23] with the binding of Isaac [her son, in Genesis 22]. It was in order to exonerate us; to show [to God!] what can happen, God forbid, when a person is made to suffer beyond measure. It was through excessive suffering that Sarah's soul expired. And if

[22] Hoover, 697.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Peter Bray, 'Bereavement and Transformation: A Psycho-spiritual and Post-traumatic Growth Perspective,' *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 3 (September 2013): 894-5.
[25] Seeman, 64.

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> this was true for Sarah, that great saint, who for all that was unable to withstand her harsh affliction, how much more will it be true for us![26]

Contrasting the rational and nomistic worldview of Levinas to the mystical worldview of Shapira, Don Seeman concludes that Shapira had exhausted the cultural and ritual-based meaning mechanisms available to him: "[T]he writing and teaching of this sermon was itself a highly ritualized act that carried deep cosmological significance for Rabbi Shapira... Yet the *content* of his teaching constitutes a denial that the insufferable can be made sufferable, and seeks to rescue agency precisely in meaning's ruin."[27] Seeman posits that Rabbi Shapira's continued participation in Jewish ritual after the loss of his mother, despite the indication in his writings of a 'collapse of meaning' in the world around him, highlights "an indigenous understanding of ritual practice in which the regime of meaning is explicitly called into question by the extremity of suffering, and which reflects more or less self-consciously on the possibility of a different approach, which is ritualized yet otherwise than meaning."[28] Seeman interprets Shapira's "Ghetto sermons [to] urge ritual fidelity *in spite of* meaninglessness, and not always as its antidote."[29] If ritual ultimately empties out into meaningless and impotence, how do we account for its pervasiveness in all its religious forms across the globe?

At the fulcrum, upon which balances the entire discussion of ritual efficacy, is also the boundary between anthropology and theology. Emmanuel Levinas rejects any attribution of efficacy to ritual beyond an articulation of meaning: "At no moment does the law acquire the value of a sacrament ... No intrinsic power is accorded to the ritual gesture."[30] Seeing no other outcome than Levinas' view, Seeman finds the sole tangible good in ritual to be

> the intersubjective dimension that rises to the fore when pain is rendered useless. This is [Seeman's] understanding of the 'medical gesture' to which Levinas points: It is the original opening toward what is helpful, where the primordial, irreducible, and ethical, anthropological category of the medical comes to impose itself—across the demand for analgesia, more pressing, more urgent in the groan than a demand for consolation or a postponement of death. For pure suffering, which is intrinsically meaningless [*sic*] and condemned to itself without exit, a beyond takes shape in the inter-human.[31]

[26] Seeman, 65-66.
[27] Seeman, 66.
[28] Seeman, 67.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Seeman, 68.
[31] Seeman, 70.

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John Paul II considers this intersubjectivity to be "one of the key-points of all Christian anthropology. Man cannot 'fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself' .... [S]uffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's 'I' on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer."[32] Nonetheless, there are two questions of which both Levinas and Seeman fail to take account.

First, if we assume that Levinas is restricting his comment about 'intrinsic power' to the Jewish Law and its ritual precepts, are there any rituals in other cultural or religious contexts which do have intrinsic power or sacramental power?[33] Second, what consolation or support is made present to the individual who suffers alone and therefore is beyond reach of the "inter-human"? Ritual certainly need not involve other human beings at one's side (e.g. lighting a votive candle). Although solitary prayer is interpersonal inasmuch as the person praying interacts with God, I assume that such a scenario is beyond the scope of Seeman's claim since God *per se* isn't human.[34] It seems to me that a presumption inherent in anthropology's rhetoric of *meaning-making* is that the question of agency in bringing about positive change is isolated exclusively to the sufferer's willing it or believing it and no potential power is assumed to be part and parcel of ritual even when the faith of the sufferer is prescribed as a necessary but insufficient element. Moreover, from what authority does a person *make meaning*? Is it not required that someone rather recognize and appropriate *from someone or somewhere else* the interpretative matrix since reality is not constituted by our mere declaration or desire that it be thus and such? "Suffering provokes an investigation of how the world must look in order to be meaningful and a quest for the specific type of ritual virtuosity that can confirm the meaning that is inevitably discovered."[35] Let us consider the evidence then from a context in which sufferers accounted their suffering as not only bearable but necessary for a flourishing experience. After this we

[32] *Salvifici Doloris*, nn. 28-29.

[33] From a Catholic standpoint, the sacraments do not have intrinsic power as though one could cast a spell (i.e. the power is in the ritual itself). Rather, God works through (as God has promised to) the sacramental ritual powerfully according to his design. By design, I intend to include the dispositions of the instrumental actor and the patient-recipient. So for example, a penitent who confesses with true contrition to a priest is forgiven her sins. If the penitent is in no way contrite then she is not in fact absolved even though God's power of forgiveness is nonetheless present in the sacrament.

[34] I also set aside the question of intercessory prayer by the saints who are human inasmuch as it is not within the scope of anthropology to prove that the communion of saints consist of real humans who are empirically available for 'inter-human' interaction.

[35] Seeman, 60.

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will provide a sketch of a proposed worldview which fits with the suffering world in order for it to be meaningful.

The Camino

Elo Luik studied groups of pilgrims who set out to walk the Camino de Santiago de Compostella, a pilgrimage trek which ends at the Cathedral of St. James in Compostella, Spain, and which people of all manner of age, gender, religious background, and nationality have undertaken for innumerably unique personal reasons. The Camino itself is no easy task and its demands often result in varying degrees of pain and injury for the pilgrims. The physical pain of the Camino awakens in the pilgrims an awareness of the "potential and limitations of physical human existence"—an awareness which is otherwise dulled by our over-technologized world.[36] Having become attuned to the embodied experience of life which the Camino sets in relief, one pilgrim remarked, "Getting tired and hurting gets you a better feeling for yourself, a feeling that you've got a body and you need to be aware of it always and look after yourself."[37] This somatic awakening is a catalyst for and object of a dialectical interpretation:

> In an analysis of how sacred journeys are shaped, perception, experience and the body cannot be separated. In turn, experiences of suffering need to be seen as affected and manipulated through systems of social and cultural meaning.... A pilgrim can be affected by blisters in a completely different way than an athlete or a student would be, for example. Just as aspects of the person can play a part in the interpretation of the embodied experience, so can an embodied experience have an effect on the constitution and transformation of the self.[38]

This same dialectic has been identified in bereavement studies: "Given that stressful life events provide significant opportunities to transition between 'what is and was and what could be', bereavement can alter an individual's relationship with their religion and spirituality and in turn shape their experience of that bereavement."[39] Pre-existing narratives serve as placeholders within which the suffering is first given meaning. At the same time "narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience. Narratives therefore provide a framework for turning a formless succession of events in history

[36] Elo Luik, 'Meaningful Pain: Suffering and the Narrative Construction of Pilgrimage Experience on the Camino de Santiago,' *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 37 (Summer 2010): 32.

[37] Luik, 32.

[38] Luik, 31.

[39] Bray, 891.

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into a meaningful life, where events can be experienced and interpreted in a particular light. The present is made meaningful with an interpretation of the past and a desired future in mind."[40] Elo Luik's argument that "emotions, beliefs, states of mind and even morals are intertwined with physical aspects of suffering"[41] reinforces the connection between psycho-spiritual narrative and physical experience. "[S]uffering, more than anything else, places individuals in a kind of liminal place that necessitates sense-making. Narrative offers a way out for the individual who is faced with aspects of life that are difficult to comprehend or come to terms with."[42]

Generally healthy people become accustomed to an established way of embodied interaction with the world. "This can change dramatically through pain and suffering, leading to a gradual re-attunement of embodied attention."[43] Conversely, chronic sufferers benefit in a way from a quasi-inoculating somatic history:

> In most cases, the determining factor in dealing with pain did indeed appear to be prior experience of it. Those who have been through chronic illness or had simply suffered great pain before seemed to manage better on the pilgrimage. An 'old pain' has been accepted by the individual as a part of their objectified self. It is safe and sensible rather than scary and unknown.[44]

Faced with the "deconstruction of the lifeworld" they had known, pilgrims seek to "reconstitute" by connecting the suffering to meaning through narrative, yet Luik asks "What narratives make the suffering of pilgrimage seem sensible and bearable?"[45] The narratives which pilgrims bring as part of their worldview or the narratives they adopt along the way determine the significance of the experience from their perspective. Rather than ancillary to the Camino journey, the pain and blisters along the Way are central to it—"What emerges then is an idea of sacrifice as necessary for deserving the physical arrival in Santiago and transformation into the ideal that the pilgrim is so desperately after."[46] One pilgrim's testimony served as an exemplar for willingly accepted suffering for the sake of post-traumatic growth:

> If pain is incorporated into personal narratives of sacrifice and transformation it can almost become a positive and necessary part of the experience of a sacred journey. This could be the reason Juan did not mind the pain of his blisters . . . . The blisters for Juan were the price

[40] Luik, 34.
[41] Luik, 31.
[42] Luik, 34.
[43] Luik, 35.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Luik, 37.
[46] Luik, 37.

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> to be paid for freedom, self fulfilment, confidence and reflection. As long as the price was fair, he was happy.[47]

Moreover, Luik's research recognized the significance of appropriation of second or third party narratives for experiential interpretation. The narrative lens which interprets and shapes the experience can blend the input from others also, borrowing from these sources well after the physical experience is complete to bring an interpretation to a more developed stage.[48]

Which Culture? Which Ritual?

Since the *meaning* provided to suffering is itself meaningless except *that it be true*, the intimate connection between our desire for truth and our desire to make sense of our suffering reveals the inherent spiritual component of our nature which longs for the transcendent. "[I]n the words of Saint Augustine: 'You made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'. In this creative restlessness beats and pulsates what is most deeply human—the search for truth, the insatiable need for the good, hunger for freedom, nostalgia for the beautiful, and the voice of conscience."[49] If the choice of culture and ritual are crucial to one's success in making meaning out of suffering and making suffering more bearable, then access to cultural or religious worldviews and rituals which successfully respond to suffering must be made available and a person must have the freedom to dialogue with and express herself by them:

> Certainly the curtailment of the religious freedom of individuals and communities is not only a painful experience but it is above all an attack on man's very dignity, independently of the religion professed or of the concept of the world which these individuals and communities have. The curtailment and violation of religious freedom are in contrast with man's dignity and his objective rights.... In this case we are undoubtedly confronted with a radical injustice with regard to what is particularly deep within man, what is authentically human. Indeed, even the phenomenon of unbelief, a-religiousness and atheism, as a human phenomenon, is understood only in relation to the phenomenon of religion and faith.[50]

[47] Luik, 38.

[48] Luik, 40.

[49] John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html (accessed October 13, 2014), n. 18.

[50] *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 17.

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In light of this, I would like to sketch out what a successful worldview will look like that both involves ritual and seats it within a culture which has proven itself in responding to the question of suffering, viz. Christianity (and particularly Catholicism with its sacramental ritual life).[51] In this worldview, God exists, is personal and capable of a close interpersonal relationship with each and every human being. God is also absolute, ultimate, perfect Good(ness) in which everything else, inasmuch as it is good, participates. The basic framework I borrow from Eleonore Stump in her work on theodicy, *Wandering in Darkness*,[52] in which she describes another world (which the reader may accept or not to be the same as this one) in which a consistent worldview exists which includes a perfectly good God (as just described) and human suffering.

Theodicy

"In essence, on Aquinas' theodicy, God is justified in allowing human beings to endure suffering . . . because, through their suffering and only by its means, God gives to each . . . something that these sufferers are willing to trade their suffering to receive, once they understand the nature of what they are being given."[53] The limits imposed by freedom however demand that it necessarily is not the case that knowledge of the benefits of suffering nor certain circumstances external to the sufferer's volition (which include that knowledge) would suffice to convince or 'force' the sufferer to choose to accept that suffering for the sake of the benefits.[54] The willingness of the sufferer then holds a key position in the consistency of the defense. "There are those who are in every way unwilling to suffer—those unwilling *simpliciter*—and those who are unwilling only in a certain respect—those unwilling *secundum quid*."[55] Unwillingness *simpliciter* avers from suffering under any possible set of circumstances whatsoever. An unwillingness to suffer *secundum quid* acquiesces to the suffering for the sake of a higher priority value at play in one's life. The difference between the two involves a general assent to the endurance of suffering that accords with higher-order volition in a

[51] The possibility for a theology of redemptive suffering exists beyond the Catholic Church (e.g. among the Orthodox) so although another form of Christianity might hold to the framework I'm going to describe, it might not apply especially if it's strongly Calvinistic or if it lacks a robust sacramental life to provide ritual content.

[52] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010).

[53] *Wandering in Darkness*, 375.

[54] *Wandering in Darkness,* 606-7, note 3.

[55] *Wandering in Darkness*, 381.

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person even if the particular suffering endured is involuntarily in the lower-order will.[56] So for example, a professional athlete presumably willingly suffers the particular hardships of physical exercise *secundum quid* because her desire to best her competitors is of a higher order than her lower-order desire to generally avoid suffering. As a qualifying point, suffering which can only be avoided by ceasing to care about something falls into the category of involuntary suffering *simpliciter*.[57] Shame for example is more like this latter category for "even if there is an element of will in the acceptance of the standard by which the shamed person is shamed, there is no similar acceptance of the suffering itself."[58]

With respect to a person's desires of love for herself, a sense of shame (which need not imply actual guilt or actual shame) can give her "the opposite of a desire" for herself; she can find herself "ugly and repulsive."[59] The natural connection "between shame and moral wrongdoing helps explain why so many people are inclined to believe that shame is nothing more than an auxiliary to guilt and that it should melt away with the forgiveness or absolution of guilt. Such people miss the fact that shame and self-loathing can be stimulated by many things other than care about one's own moral wrongdoing."[60]

A sense of shame often causes a willed loneliness which derives from a sense of deficiency relative to a community's set of objective standards for attractiveness, "but [the shamed person] also needs to accept those standards as ultimate for him, as somehow binding on him and not overridden by other standards.... Insofar as the standards by which a person is shamed are not the ultimate standards of human loveliness, it is open to a shamed person to refuse those standards and to align himself with a deeper measure of beauty by which he himself is lovely and worthy of honor."[61]

For Christians, God provides this standard, and the Christian's commitment to Christianity serves as the higher-order general assent to the endurance of suffering as part of the processes of justification and sanctification through which the Christian recognizes her own (and others') loveliness and worthiness of honor and receives inner healing and greater closeness with other persons and God. "[T]he natural remedy for shame is honor" because in celebrating the life of the shamed person, those who celebrate show the shamed person that

[56] *Wandering in Darkness*, 382.
[57] *Wandering in Darkness*, 383.
[58] Ibid.
[59] *Wandering in Darkness,* 146.
[60] Ibid.
[61] *Wandering in Darkness,* 148-9.

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they have "a desire for *him*."[62] The means by which the Christian attains this honor ultimately is sanctification and justification.

Sanctification

Stump identifies the cooperation between God and the higher-order desires of the will to be sanctification. "On Aquinas's view, one kind of grace that God bestows on a human will is the grace God gives to strengthen a human person's will for added power to will some particular good in response to that person's higher order desires that God do so."[63] If a person's will "commands itself to will some good to which she is committed", but nonetheless does not will the good thing itself, God will respond to the person's prayers by strengthening her will to choose the good "she herself wants to will."[64] To harmonize with the Thomistic account of causality and safeguard the freedom of the person, Stump rejects God's intervention in first-order volition.[65] Moreover, "God cannot make [a person's will] stronger in its willing of the good than that person wants it to be."[66]

Justification

Within Stump's volitional schema, justification is the spiritual regeneration of a person by which all higher-order desires for particular goods are subsumed under and presupposed by a "higher-order desire for a will that wills to will the good," and faith is its necessary and sufficient condition.[67] Since the good itself is convertible with God, justification provides the "desire for the good God desires to have" and this serves as the first of a person's 'desires of love' *for* God. "[O]n Aquinas's views a person who longs for God's goodness is a person who longs for God."[68]

The connection between the longing for God's goodness and the longing for God is the basis for allowing a distinction between explicit and implicit faith, the latter being open to the former. Again, faith is the necessary and sufficient condition for these two processes whose purpose is "the establishment and deepening of a

[62] *Wandering in Darkness,* 147. Cf. Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 67.
[63] *Wandering in Darkness*, 159-60.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] *Wandering in Darkness*, 161.
[67] *Wandering in Darkness*, 163.
[68] *Wandering in Darkness*, 164.

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relationship of love between [a person] and God that is undermined by the absence of psychic integration . . . and the ultimate end of these processes is a union between [that person] and God."[69] They also serve as an antidote to shame for two reasons. First, because "no matter what the standard is with respect to which a person is shamed," surrender to God in these processes involves accepting the love, and therefore the desire, of "the most powerful and most good being possible" from whom comes "the ultimate of all standards."[70] Second, insofar as "God can receive a human person's willingness to be in a loving relation with God, . . . to be someone who is able to give to God is to be ultimately honorable."[71]

In this 'ultimate of all standards' and important to the consistency of the defense is the extrinsic lower bound to the scale of human flourishing which for Aquinas is hell.[72] This is an everlasting state in which a person is "permanently psychically fragmented, permanently alienated from oneself, permanently separated from others, including God. Because a human will is free in a libertarian[73] sense, it is possible for a human being never to achieve or even to want real closeness or love with God or with any human persons either . . . . To be in this condition is to be everlastingly at a distance from oneself, from all other persons, and from God."[74] Hell then "is unendingly lonely."[75]

Relationships form the qualitatively superior good for human beings, and union of love with God is the greatest of these relationships and therefore the greatest of all goods for human beings.[76] Inasmuch as union describes a condition of a human being, and shareability is a "hallmark of a great good,"[77] union with God in heaven which is potentially shareable with all of humanity and all of the angels constitutes "an intrinsic upper limit on human flourishing."[78]

In light of these two extremes in human flourishing, union with God as the best of all goods to be gained and hell (as permanent

[69] *Wandering in Darkness*, 171.
[70] Ibid.
[71] *Wandering in Darkness*, 172.
[72] *Wandering in Darkness*, 377.
[73] That is to say, there are always at least two possible choices in a decision neither of which compel us by force to choose one against the other in any sort of deterministic fashion. These two possible choices may simply be for or against a course of action—for example, to drink a glass of water or to *not* drink a glass of water. The point of identifying that a choice for God is free in a libertarian sense, is to say that though God is goodness itself, such goodness does not *force* us to choose God.
[74] *Wandering in Darkness*, 387.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

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alienation from God and self) as the worst of all evils to be avoided, God's allowance of suffering in this life (which is finitely limited by the finitude of this life) can be defended if it serves to avoid a greater evil (in fact the greatest evil, hell) and the best means to potentially attain to the greatest good (heaven) for the sufferer. That the benefit accrues to the sufferer herself regardless of the goods that God might also bring about for others is an indispensable part of the argument. Aquinas establishes this qualification in his commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

> Whatever happens on earth, even if it is evil, turns out for the good of the whole world. Because as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, God is so good that he would never permit any evil if he were not also so powerful that from any evil he could draw out a good. But the evil does not always turn out for the good of the thing in connection with which the evil occurs, because although the corruption of one animal turns out for the good of the whole world—insofar as the good of one animal is generated from the corruption of another—nonetheless it does not turn out for the good of the animal which is corrupted. The reason for this is that the good of the whole world is willed by God for its own sake, and all the parts of the world are ordered to this [end]. The same reasoning appears to apply with regard to the order of the noblest parts [of the world] with respect to the other parts, because the evil of the other parts is ordered to the good of the noblest parts. But whatever happens with regard to the noblest parts is ordered only to the good of those parts themselves, because care is taken of them for their own sake, and for their sake care is taken of other things . . . But among the best of all the parts of the world are God's saints . . . He takes care of them in such a way that he doesn't allow any evil for them which he doesn't turn into their good.[79]

A side objection to God's justified use of suffering comes by way of questioning God's omnipotence: could not God have simply made a world which didn't need suffering to bring about good for the sufferer or avoid greater evils for the sufferer? Aquinas will respond that suffering in the world is not part of God's antecedent will but only part of his consequent will.[80] This is not a character flaw for God since "God is able to make a world with suffering in it even more beautiful than the world would have been had there been neither moral evil nor suffering."[81]

Having warded off this objection, "God is justified in allowing the suffering of such a person by one or the other or both of two possible benefits, where Aquinas's scale of value is the measure of the benefits . . . . For a person who does not have even implicit

[79] Thomas Aquinas, *In Romans*, 8.6, quoted in *Wandering in Darkness*, 385.
[80] Cf. ST Ia Q.19.
[81] *Wandering in Darkness*, 386.

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faith, whose suffering is involuntary *simpliciter*, suffering is defeated in virtue of its contributing to warding off a greater harm for her. On the other hand, for a person who is committed to a life of faith, whose suffering is involuntary only *secundum quid*, suffering is defeated in virtue of its contributing to providing a greater good for her."[82] Human beings however, have a more limited justification in allowing the suffering of another, for example when such suffering is implemented for the sake of warding off a greater harm—life saving surgery is a natural example. With respect to human agents allowing suffering for the provision of a greater good, however, our lack of insight into the hearts of others presents an opaque veil which obscures for us the desires of their hearts and therefore obscures the presence of their consent.[83] The point is that, although history has so often shown (particularly evidenced in the saints) that suffering can transform a person and develop within her a spiritual greatness, this evidence does not justify *our* causing suffering in all circumstances since as we shall see, the mere fact of suffering is insufficient for this growth—a kind of consent is required which is not always available to our scrutiny. Hitler is not to be praised for wreaking havoc across Europe simply because a heightened global introspection, a martial ethic (e.g. Geneva Conventions), and outpouring of new charitable effort (e.g. Catholic Relief Services and the work of Fr. Dominique Pire) resulted.

God's omniscience on the other hand allows God unobscured insight into a person's intellect and will. "[A]lthough God is in an epistemic position to be justified if he allows suffering he could prevent, a human person very generally is not. From the fact that there is a morally sufficient reason for God to allow suffering, it does not follow that this reason also gives a human person moral license to allow suffering."[84] Therefore for God to permit selected suffering which is involuntary only *secundum quid* and which provides a greater good for the sufferer "is (*ceteris paribus*) a morally acceptable reason for allowing suffering if the suffering is the best or only means available in the circumstances for that end."[85]

The instrumental purpose of the suffering is to internally integrate the sufferer around the highest moral good (union with God) since

[82] *Wandering in Darkness*, 392.

[83] In fact Stump argues, "[I]t is not the case that one has a benefit that defeats suffering if and only if one knows that one has it. *A fortiori*, others may also fail to see it.... We *are* in a position to know what God's reasons are for allowing suffering—but only in general, in theory. For any *particular* case of suffering, because of the opacity of suffering and the opacity of the benefits defeating suffering, by means of unaided human reason a human person will typically not be in a position to know what justifies God in permitting *that* suffering." *Wandering in Darkness*, 408.

[84] *Wandering in Darkness*, 414.

[85] *Wandering in Darkness*, 393.

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a lack of integration "undermines and obviates closeness between persons"[86] including a human person and God. Internal division in the will as a source of sin and obstacle to perfect relationship with God holds a rather ancient pedigree in the Church. St. Augustine in his Confessions laments to God the lack of unity which characterized his adolescent years: "You gathered me together from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided. I turned from unity in you to be lost in multiplicity."[87] Recalling the libertarian free will with which God has created each of us, "even God cannot be present to a person with significant personal presence unless that person is willing to be close to God, with all that closeness entails."[88]

As we have already seen, sanctification and justification is this re-ordering and integration of the will towards perfect conformity with the divine will. "Sanctification presupposes justification, and justification includes a surrender to God in love."[89] While justification is entirely passive on the part of the human person and therefore involuntary, sanctification entails cooperation with God's grace. "Insofar as suffering is a means to justification, therefore, the suffering involved is involuntary *simpliciter*; but the suffering resulting in sanctification is by contrast involuntary only *secundum quid*."[90] The resulting closeness to God that occurs through this internal integration of the will around the good further redounds to the honor which heals the sufferer's shame and alienation from herself. "To be loved by God is to be desired by God, and so to be desirable by the greatest standard of all. To be in a relationship of mutual love with God is also to be able to give to God, as well as to receive from God; and there is ultimate honor in giving to the Deity."[91]

If we accept the argument thus far, we are bound to ask why, with all the suffering that is so obviously present in the world, people aren't in fact better than they are. Underscoring again the consent that is required both for the moral rectitude in the defense as well as the cooperation with grace, first-order volition remains autonomous from direct intervention by God and higher-order volition is only aided and not over-determined by the divine will. The 'vulnerability' which God wills in allowing humans "to be able to give to God" invites an important contingency. Before a person asks forgiveness of God, it is not in God's power to be reconciled with that person—it takes two to tango as they say.[92] Yet, "there is something worthwhile

[86] *Wandering in Darkness*, 395.

[87] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 396.

[90] *Wandering in Darkness,* 396.

[91] *Wandering in Darkness,* 397.

[92] Cf. *Wandering in Darkness*, 404.

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about giving a person an opportunity for a good thing even if one were in a position to know [the person] will not take that opportunity."[93] The opportunity present for justification and sanctification by the suffering which God allows does not necessitate a sufferer's taking advantage of the opportunity. Nonetheless, that the person was afforded the opportunity is still reconciled as a good and "there is God's love for the sufferer in offering it."[94] This holds true even if the explanation for the suffering is absent the sufferer when such explanation would abrogate both the justification and the benefit to the sufferer in drawing her closer to God.[95]

Sufferer's Cooperation

The conditional volition of the sufferer in accepting the suffering on these grounds which involves accepting the worldview as described is itself part of the matrix which both makes meaning available to the sufferer as well as accounts for the non-universal cultural context which Kidron argued for above. Peter Bray's exploration of bereavement may be extrapolated to suffering more broadly: "[T]he choiceless experience of grief provides opportunities to make unique connections or continuing bonds within a transpersonal realm that recognizes both religious and spiritual experiences."[96] The 'choicelessness' of the experience does not proscribe potential self-actualization,[97] nor does the suffering need to be minimal (*contra* Levinas *et* Seeman) in order to fall within a meaning-filled matrix, but on the contrary:

> Tedeschi et al. suggest that there is a minimum threshold to be crossed before the experience of trauma gathers enough power to produce post-traumatic growth. However, Grof maintains that a crucial predictor of growth is not necessarily the event but a person's 'readiness' at an unconscious level to make developmental adjustments prior to the event. The individual's psychological predisposition towards inner transformation could therefore be more influential than the external stimuli itself . . . [in leading to an experience of] both death and then as rebirth of the self—the 'total destruction of the ego' followed by a 'broader more encompassing sense of self'.[98]

All the more important therefore is the recognition of the Paschal mystery and our capacity to partake of it.[99] Appropriation of the

[93] *Wandering in Darkness,* 403.
[94] *Wandering in Darkness*, 404.
[95] Cf. *Wandering in Darkness*, 410.
[96] Bray, 892.
[97] Cf. Bray, 895.
[98] Bray, 897.
[99] Cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 23.

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Gospel message can lead therefore to openness to transformation and transcendence without which "surrender to the process of post-traumatic growth and transformation, a satisfactory or enhanced outcome might be difficult to achieve."[100]

The Theological Threshold

To know that there is in fact a God who fits this bill and that the *meaning* received through this worldview's interpretive lens is true requires the revelation of faith which only comes through Christ. "Christ gives the answer to the question about suffering and the meaning of suffering not only by His teaching, . . . but most of all by His own suffering."[101] John Paul II seemed to have been keenly aware of Levinas' articulated difficulty about making sense of suffering: "A source of joy is found in the *overcoming of the sense of the uselessness of suffering* . . . . The discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ *transforms* this depressing *feeling*."[102] Such a transformation is possible through allowing our sufferings to become a share in those of Christ which extends the meaning of our suffering outward beyond us to others in a co-redemptive act.[103] The simple act of "offering up" the trials that come whether they be small or heroic are a participation available to all the baptized in the royal priesthood of Christ: "[B]y basing ourselves on Christ's example and collaborating with the grace that he has gained for us, . . . we are able to produce a mature humanity in each one of us. Mature humanity means full use of the gift of freedom received from the Creator when he called to existence the man made 'in his image, after his likeness'. This gift finds its full realization in the unreserved giving of the whole of one's human person."[104] To get a sense of those who fully imitated this spiritual maturity,[105] we have only to look at the lives of the Christian saints whose earthly pilgrimage was often marked by suffering at the hands of those who shared their same religion. Quoting John Henry Newman, Nancy Benvenga introduces us to a soul whose life integrated a great deal of psychological suffering at the hands of his coreligionists:

> God . . . has created me to do Him some definite service. . . . If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. . . . He does nothing in vain. He knows what he

[100] Bray, 900.
[101] *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 18.
[102] *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 27.
[103] Cf. *Salvifici Doloris,* n. 19.
[104] *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 21.
[105] Cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 22.

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is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me—still He knows what He is about.[106]

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[106] Nancy Benvenga, 'Frankl, Newman, and the Meaning of Suffering,' *Journal of Religion and Health* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 64.

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