FREEWILL, FREE PROCESS, AND LOVE

Nicholas Beale

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde;
Have mercy on my soul, Lord God,
As I would do; were I Lord God;
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde

Of all the philosophical challenges to theism in general and Christianity in particular, the one that Christians take most seriously is the Problem of Evil. It is clearly not logically contradictory to hold that there exists a Loving Ultimate Creator; and nevertheless there is a very substantial amount of evil and suffering in the world. But it is certainly problematic. Deeper scientific understandings of physics and evolution shed some light on this. It is also useful to reflect more deeply on the relationships between love, suffering and creativity.

Martin Elginbrodde believes that he would be merciful if he were God, and thus trusts, or hopes, that God will be merciful to him. Similarly, people may think that they could have done a much better job of creation than God has than: life and love without disease, death and disasters. Surely an omnipotent God could do better than this?

We can take a rough philosophical definition of Christianity as: 'God (the Loving Ultimate Creator) is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth' and we can understand Loving as steadfastly willing the beloved's true wellbeing or ultimate good. It is clear that, if you love someone, you do not knowingly allow them to suffer serious pain or evil without sufficiently good reasons. People do suffer serious pain and evil, and at least some (most Christians would say, all) of them are people whom God loves. The Loving Ultimate Creator is held to be omniscient and omnipotent

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so God (if God exists) is knowingly allowing them to suffer serious pain or evil. It follows that God must have sufficiently good reasons for allowing this to happen. This much is common ground between most Christians and most Atheists.

What, then, are these 'sufficiently good reasons'? Well one of the reasons why Elginbrodde raises a wry smile is that his 'if' is rather preposterous. The contemporary Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga introduces us to noseeums, or sand fleas, which are minute insects that sting campers. If Sam and Jo are camping and Jo says 'I think there is an elephant in our tent' then it's quite reasonable for Sam to reply: 'I can't see an elephant'. But to respond to 'I think there is a noseeum in our tent' with 'I can't see a noseeum' is absurd. Similarly 'I can't see sufficiently good reasons' does not imply that 'God does not have sufficiently good reasons'. This is not a piece of obscurantism. The Theory of Evolution was, rightly, accepted despite the fact that Darwin had no idea of how inheritance worked – indeed such ideas as he had were almost completely wrong and fundamentally incompatible with his theory. Furthermore it has become clear that we still don't really understand how inheritance works: the idea that 'it's all in the genes' turns out to be far too simplistic. Another contemporary example is the problem of Dark Matter: this seems to constitute about 85% of the universe but we don't know what it is made of and it will probably never be directly observed.

Having said all that, we are not in quite the hopeless state of the bitten campers. We can offer a plausible sketch of reasons that might 'hold water'. These may be only first approximations, but at least raise some interesting issues.

All suffering of which we are aware is a result of some combination of freewill choices by persons and the outworking of the laws of physics and biology. Sometimes the evil comes principally from the personal choices – the assassin decides to pull the trigger – and sometimes from the scientific regularities – an earthquake occurs due to

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the laws of physics in general and plate tectonics in particular. In order to prevent these kinds of evil or suffering God would have to modify human freewill or the laws of physics and biology; in order to avert particular instances of evil or suffering God would have to over-ride human freewill or the operation of these scientific laws on particular occasions.

If we regard death as the ultimate evil, for which there can be no countervailing benefit, then of course the ubiquity of death would be a massive refutation of the existence of a Loving Ultimate Creator. Some atheists may claim to take that view, but to argue that, given Atheism (or a particular flavour of Atheism) Christianity is false demonstrates nothing interesting. However, if there is a Loving Ultimate Creator then Love is the most fundamental principle of the universe. This requires, logically, that humans are free to choose to love, and thus free to choose not to love. Indeed a true scientific demonstration that humans did not have freewill would be the closest thing I can imagine to a scientific refutation of Christianity. Especially in a world of finite resources, if it is possible for Andy to choose to do something loving which significantly affects Beth then there is necessarily the possibility of Andy choosing to do something else which will generally be less loving and thus at least to a certain extent cause evil or suffering to Beth. We cannot learn to choose to love unless we have the possibility of choosing not to love. Therefore the possibility of humans inflicting some form of suffering and evil on other humans is inherent in the possibility of love. Of course there is a big difference between not giving someone a birthday present and torturing them, so there remains the issue of the level and extent of suffering, but the principle that suffering necessarily results from the possibility of love is clear.

From a scientific point of view the necessity of suffering and death is even clearer. Death is an indispensible requirement for evolution to be effective, and almost a logical consequence of a finite universe. It is no accident that Darwin was reflecting on Malthus when he developed

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his theories. The biological purpose of pain appears to be to avoid serious danger to the organism. It is better to be hurt by touching a hot fire than to be burned to death. Pain also enables learning, so organisms that can learn to choose to love will inevitably be subject to pain and death. Finally it is an essential requirement for a complex ecosystem that some organisms eat other organisms. People say that evolution is cruel but as far as anyone knows there are only two logically possible ways in which complex organisms capable of love can come into being. One is by an evolutionary process that has suffering, pain, death and predation. The other logical possibility is, of course, Special Creation. There is no doubt that, at some level, God 'could' have created human beings rather in the way that the Biblical Literalists mistakenly suppose. So why didn't God do this? We need to remember those pesky noseeums again. But one obvious problem is that in such a universe humans, once they reached a certain level of intelligence, could be said effectively to have had no choice but to believe in God. To be free to choose, an evolutionary world may be necessary. There is also the point that an evolutionary world allows creatures to be themselves and become themselves in a rather more profound way than they do if each is created directly in their own allotted place in the universe.

A creation in which creatures make themselves can reasonably be seen as a greater good than a ready-made world would have been. But it has a necessary cost. There is an inescapable shadow side to the evolutionary process. It will yield not only great fruitfulness, but there will also necessarily be ragged edges and blind alleys. The engine that has driven the development of life on Earth has been genetic mutation. But if the DNA in germ cells is able to mutate and produce new forms of life, the DNA of somatic cells will also be able to mutate, and when that happens it may produce malignancy. The presence of cancer in the world is undoubtedly an anguishing fact, but it is not simply gratuitous, something that a Creator who was a bit more competent or a bit less callous could easily have eliminated.

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It is the shadow side of a world in which creatures can make themselves. We all tend to think that had we been in charge of creation, frankly we would have done it better. We would have kept all the nice things (flowers and sunsets) and got rid of all the nasty ones (disease and disaster). Science shows us that this is just not possible. The processes of the world are so intricately intertwined that one cannot separate the pleasant from the unpleasant keeping the one and discarding the other. It is a package deal.

Our deeper scientific understanding of the fine-tuning of the universe is of some help here. If the fundamental constants of nature were even very slightly different from their present values then any form of intelligent life in the universe would be impossible. Details of the physical world that are essential to biology, such as the production of reasonable quantities of carbon in stars or the apparently mundane but fundamentally important fact that ice floats, depend on very precise numerical relationships between these fundamental constants whose values could in principle be arbitrary. Therefore, in order to create a universe in which life can evolve at all, it seems you have to have a physical universe whose key features and laws are pretty similar to the ones that we see.

This insight does not remove all our perplexity, but it is of some help. Consider a natural disaster like a tsunami. Earthquakes occur, and if they are under the sea they generate tsunamis, because there are tectonic plates that sometimes slip. Would it not have been better, therefore, for God to arrange for the earth to have a solid crust all over? The answer is, No, it wouldn't. The gaps between the plates enable mineral resources to well up from deeper down and replenish the face of the earth. Without this happening, life would not be able to keep going very long.

So it seems that a world with love and freedom will necessarily have suffering, death and disease. But why so much? Couldn't an omnipotent God have created a world with a bit less 'bad' and a bit more 'good'?

Again the noseeums come buzzing around. If the physicists are right, then there is much less logical freedom of

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action than we may think: a world with these kinds of physical laws and these constants will have certain properties. It is just as contradictory to speak of a world with these physical laws and conditions but not their consequences as it is to speak of a world in which $2 + 2 = 5$. Let us take the level of pain in the world. Biological systems adapt to the conditions in which they find themselves. Our perception of pain in general adjusts to the conditions we face, so that conditions of pain or suffering which are unbearable to a comfortable city-dweller may be routine to a trained soldier in a war zone. In the medium term, whatever conditions evolved intelligent beings find themselves in will provide experiences that range between agony and ecstasy. It is therefore plausible that any conditions under which intelligent life can evolve will have a similar range of perceived extremes of pain and suffering. We also need to remember what we are asserting when we speak of God as Creator. Terry Eagleton puts it beautifully in his *Reason, Faith and Revolution*: God the Creator is not a celestial engineer at work on a superbly rational design that will impress his research grant body no end, but an artist. The nearest thing we have to a Creator in our own experience is a great novelist or playwright. Consider a great play like *Much Ado About Nothing*. Shakespeare, in a certain sense, loves his characters – none is a mere cipher put in to Represent a Point of View. Yet the greatness of the play comes to a large extent from the suffering and grief. Leonato's appalling rejection of his daughter, and the point at which Beatrice tells Benedict 'Kill Claudio' are spine-tingling moments in a great performance. It would be idiotic to demand that the suffering be cut to make a better play, rather on the level of Sam Goldwyn demanding that no music for an MGM film should have a minor chord. A coach for Olympic athletes who does not make them suffer is not doing the job properly, nor would the athletes thank him or her for it. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare kills off Cordiela, contrary to his source, not because he hates her but because it gives a truer insight into the deep realities

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that he is exploring. Of course there are big differences between a play and the whole physical world. Cordelia dies but the actress playing her lives – though it would be facile in the extreme to say that, if she is playing the role really well, she does not suffer. Christians hold that physical death and suffering are not the last word either: they are certainly important but 'not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed.' But the point I want to make here is that a creation with less suffering is not necessarily a better creation, and there is no reason why what we know to be true in our own experiences of creation should not be the case in the ultimate Creation under discussion.

If this can be taken as a fairly standard modern presentation of a Christian response to the problem of evil, what can we say to some of the standard objections?

Some people object that this shows that Christians don't take suffering seriously. This seems an odd accusation for a religion whose central symbol is an instrument of the agonising suffering and death suffered by its founder, and which has devoted so much to education, hospitals, development and the relief of poverty and suffering. But the fundamental problem is that Christians and Atheists do not see suffering and death in the same way. Most atheists see earthly suffering and death as the greatest possible evils, indeed perhaps the only evils – though of course there will be many nuances and qualifications. But Christians do not accept that this is the whole story. Thus, given Atheism, it may be reasonable to say that Christians don't take human suffering as seriously as atheists do. But, as we have noted before, 'given Atheism, Christianity is false' tells us nothing new, philosophically.

Another objection is that there is so *much* evil in the world. Why were six million Jews murdered by the Nazis – couldn't it have just been, say, sixty thousand? Well each murder was a tragedy that is not diminished by the others. The scale of evil that can be wrought by humans is truly shocking, and in situations like this it is hard to deny that some transpersonal forces may be at work. In any complex

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interacting system there will be modes of system behaviour in which many of the components interact to produce an effect that would not be observed in isolated individuals. Scientists use terms like strange attractors and emergent properties, depth psychology talks about the collective unconscious, and biblical writers talked about Thrones and Dominions which were evil spiritual influences. Nevertheless, from a purely philosophical point of view, the sheer quantity of death and suffering is not really relevant. A world in which people can die is a world in which millions can die. There is no convincing miserific calculus that could quantify all the misery in the world – let alone a possibility of humans evaluating the good and evil in the world down to a single net figure in some cosmic balance sheet.

Some atheists are fond of bringing in Ivan from *The Brothers Karamazov* at this point, with his poignant descriptions of the sufferings of children and his declaration that he would respectfully return his ticket to a cosmic harmony if the price were such suffering. Dostoyevsky is one of the most profound Christian writers of the 19th Century, and one cannot boil down the amazing polyphony of the great dialogue between his characters to a few sentences. But one of the major themes of this novel is that love and forgiveness can indeed overcome evil, whereas turning away from this path, either by setting up a temporal authority that deprives people of their freedom (like Ivan's imagined Grand Inquisitor) or by Ivan's nihilistic attitude that 'everything is permitted', leads to disaster. Plainly, in philosophical reality, 'returning the ticket' is not an option. We do have to choose what we believe and how we live – as the Grand Inquisitor says, God wants 'free love and not the base raptures of a slave before the might that has overawed him forever'. This freedom necessarily implies that adults can inflict suffering on children. It could be argued that God has a moral duty to take this suffering, however necessary it may be, on Himself. Christians hold that He did exactly that on the cross, but more generally, if God is indeed loving and compassionate, then He is far from

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indifferent to the sufferings of those He loves. Talk of God as a designer, although popular in some circles, seriously misses the point.

This is also the difficulty with attempts to draw a distinction between 'absorbed evils' which 'are necessary in order to bring about some greater good' and 'unabsorbed evils'. We cannot think coherently about the world as a set of unconnected events, in which you could chop out a few and leave the rest unchanged – as though they were words in an essay or lines in a computer program. Physicists have long known this, and biologists are increasingly aware that no level of biology can really be considered in isolation – indeed the most profound biological thinkers such as Denis Noble are recognising that there is no fundamental level in biology.

What then of the objection that human freewill is an illusion? Certainly we are understanding more and more about the workings of the brain and the mind, although no scientist worth his or her salt pretends that this is anywhere near completion. But one thing that is completely clear is that the brain is not a fully deterministic system. This is true both at the experimental level and at the level where physics, chemistry and neuron behaviour interact. To give just one example, the exact timing of the firing of a neuron depends on, amongst other things, the exact time at which a single Calcium ion docks with a receptor on a synaptotagamin molecule to cause the release of a neurotransmitter. Quantum physics leads us to understand that it is impossible, in principle, to predict exactly when this will happen. But the exact timing of the firing of one neuron can make the difference of whether another neuron will fire or not, and in a brain with 100 billion massively interconnected neurons such effects will occur often. Therefore even in the imagined future when the processes of the brain are 'fully understood', science can never truthfully depict us as the robots of materialist imagination. Of course the limitations of our bodies limit our freewill – even if we are healthy, we cannot fly unaided; if we are paralysed we cannot walk and

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certain disorders of the brain may severely limit our freewill – but this is no argument against freewill's existence.

We have a choice. No-one can be forced, intellectually, either to belief or disbelief in a Loving Ultimate Creator. Certainly the problem of evil perplexes Christians, not so much at a purely philosophical level but as compassionate human beings. But the idea that it is, philosophically, a defeater for religious belief is mistaken. As the wisest philosophers have known since Socrates, the path to deeper understanding is dialogue that will inform choices. Because choose we must. Philosophy can perhaps clear the ground and make the nature of the choices clearer. But even the decision not to decide, for now, is a decision.[1]

Nicholas Beale is a social philosopher, Director of Sciteb and an Associate of the Faraday Institute. His most recent book, co-authored with John Polkinghorne, is Questions of Truth.

Note

[1] Much of this paper is based on *Questions of Truth* and I am very grateful to my co-author John Polkinghorne FRS for our discussions and for permission to use our joint material. www.questionoftruth.org

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