

God and suffering: Approaches and issues

Introduction

In this essay I will be looking at the problem of whether or not God suffers. I will not specifically address human suffering, although I will by necessity make reference to this subject in places. Although I will draw upon the Bible and contemporary Christian theology in my exposition, much of the essay will expound my own thinking on the subject of God suffering. I read widely on the subject but found little writing from other philosophers and theologians that resonates with what I believe to be the truth about God's suffering, which I will present in the latter part of the essay.

In relation to contemporary theological and philosophical thinking, I believe that there are four principal ways in which God can be said to suffer:

- 1) God suffers in response to free human action
- 2) God suffers as Jesus Christ during the crucifixion
- 3) God feels the pain that we feel, and therefore suffers
- 4) Regardless of creation, God has suffering within His divine nature

In the following exposition I will discuss these four approaches to a suffering God. The first approach will draw heavily upon the Bible and theology, as I examine the passible God presented in the Old Testament. The second approach will examine God's involvement in the crucifixion, and will draw upon the theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Edward Schillebeeckx. The third approach is more straightforward and will involve a simple explanation concerning how God might experience our

pain. The fourth approach expounds my own theory of why God suffers and in this section I will draw extensively from an article published on my personal philosophy blog¹ which I believe provides the most adequate solution available to the problems of whether or not God suffers, and why God suffers.

Thomas Weinandy expresses well the concern at the heart of this essay: “The manner in which God both transcends the created order and is present to and immanently acts within the created order will ultimately control whether He is passible or impassible.”²

The above quotation is concerned with the nature of God’s involvement in creation, and highlights the need to discuss the extent to which human beings are free. It cannot be the case both that human beings have free will, and that God is all-powerful (these two statements are logically contradictory). Therefore in what follows it will be essential to establish what is really going on in terms of the divine omnipotence / human free will dichotomy.

I will now examine the four principal arguments concerning how God can be said to suffer.

¹ Philosophy blog at www.perfectchaos.org

² Thomas Weinandy, ‘Does God Suffer’ in *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/does-god-suffer-6> [accessed 18th May 2012]

1) God suffers in response to free human action

The God of the Old Testament is depicted as experiencing feelings in response to human action that is freely undertaken. Christians assume that although God created man, man was given free will; or, put another way, that man acts in a way that is independent of God. This idea allows for there to be a two-way relationship between man and God, where man can act, and God can respond.

Admittedly, the above description makes for a very anthropomorphic kind of God. But as we shall see below, this is precisely the kind of God we find in the Old Testament. God is presented as having very human emotions, and acting and feeling and responding in very human ways.

In Jeremiah, we find an example of God being *moved*: “Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.”³

In the Psalms we read about Israel’s rebellion causing God to *grieve*: “How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! They tested him again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel.”⁴

In the book of Genesis, we read that God experiences *regret* about creating man: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every

³ Jeremiah 31:20

⁴ Psalm 78:40-41

imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”⁵

And in the book of Judges, we see God moved to *pity*: “And he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.”⁶

The above examples from the Old Testament demonstrate a God that suffers through the experience of emotions that are part of our common human experience. God is involved in a relationship with the human beings He has created, who have the freedom to act in ways that seems to move God in an emotional way.

It is worth taking a moment to consider what *kind* of God it might be that would experience emotions in this way. Emotions, as I understand them, are always experienced within a body. They are feelings that relate very much to our human anatomy. Does God have a body? It is difficult to envisage what kind of body this might be, other than if we say the universe as a whole is God’s body. But I can’t imagine that the universe has a nervous system analogous to a human body that would allow God to feel in this very human way. Therefore it is difficult to see how exactly God would experience the human emotions described above.

The ‘embodied feelings’ problem aside, my main concern with the idea that God suffers in response to free human action is that it implies human action is free from the will of God, which is a belief that is highly problematic. I don’t understand how a

⁵ Genesis 6:5-6

⁶ Judges 2:18

heart can beat, or a mind think, or a hair grow, or a leg move, unless God is actively making these things happen in human beings. Has man ever known how to beat his own heart? Of course not, because he isn't doing it – God is doing it. It is the same with all action. I think that it is absurd to think that anything can happen outside of the will of God, so for there to be a two-way relationship between man and God, where God is affected by things that are *outside of His control*, is non-sensical. I will elaborate further on this crucial point in Part 4 of this essay.

2) God suffers as Jesus Christ during the crucifixion

This section assumes that God's suffering is limited to the suffering experienced when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. Here we focus on the major event of Christ's suffering recalled in the Bible, the crucifixion.

Jürgen Moltmann is an influential German reformed theologian who has written extensively on the subject of God suffering. But Moltmann's theology is notoriously difficult to understand, as Lucien Richard explains: "...Moltmann's theology of the cross and therefore of suffering cannot fully escape the accusation of being at times somewhat mystifying and open to misunderstanding."⁷

Moltmann's theology focuses very much on the crucifixion of Christ as the central event within Christianity and indeed history, and this is where the theologian looks as he attempts to understand God's suffering. Moltmann talks extensively about what he calls 'forsakenness'. It is a tricky concept to grasp, but it is at the heart of the way he

⁷ Lucien Richard, *What are they saying about the theology of suffering?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p 55

understands the crucifixion event: “In the forsakenness of the Son the Father also forsakes himself. In the surrender of the Son the Father also surrenders himself, though not in the same way.”⁸

This is deeply mysterious writing, but the following quotation provides a little more clarity concerning Moltmann’s perspective: “The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son.”⁹

Rather like the Old Testament God presented in Part 1 of this essay, here Moltmann is describing a God that suffers grief – in this case, grief over the death of His dearly beloved Son. It is not clear whether God experiences the agony of the cross in any direct sense¹⁰; rather grief is a reactive emotion and implies a degree of separation between God and Jesus. It seems that in Moltmann’s view we are almost dealing with two Gods (Jesus and God) that experience different things.

Incidentally, the ontological difference between the persons of the trinity is highly problematic for Christian theology. Christians generally maintain that Christ was fully God and fully man, but how can it ever be that God as Jesus could be in relationship with a transcendent God, without there being two Gods? This is not a problem that Moltmann solves.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (SCM, 1974), p 243

⁹ Moltmann, p 243

¹⁰ By ‘direct’ I mean that God actually feels Christ’s pain in some sense (see part 3 of this essay)

It is interesting to contrast Moltmann's view of the crucifixion with the perspective of the Belgian Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx. For Moltmann, the crucifixion reflects an occurrence between Jesus and God, whereas for Schillebeeckx, Jesus' death reflects his relationship with the community and thereby to God. As Helen Bergin explains: "For Schillebeeckx, Jesus' death is an event between God and humanity not between God and God."¹¹

For Schillebeeckx, God is more 'transcendent' and unaffected by Jesus' death, which is attributed more to sinful humanity than God's abandoning action. While Moltmann's theology explains that God 'gives up' the Son and is directly involved in the horror of Jesus' death, for Schillebeeckx, God is silent and therefore not actively rejecting Jesus who is really being given up by humanity rather than God. It is difficult to imagine what Schillebeeckx believes this silent God *is* doing exactly (in terms of His involvement of creation), but the theologian manages to distance God from the suffering Christ in a way that avoids the 'two Gods' problem of Moltmann's theology described above.

Moltmann and Schillebeeckx are similar in that they focus their theology on the event of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the main way in which we are to understand the nature of God. Where they differ is in their understanding of the extent to which a suffering Jesus implies a suffering God.

¹¹ Helen Bergin, 'The Death of Jesus and its Impact on God – Jurgen Moltmann and Edward Schillebeeckx', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986), pp 193-211, p 208

Aside from the significant problem that Moltmann seems to describe two Gods interacting with each other, the major problem I have with Moltmann's focus on God suffering in the person of Jesus Christ is that a radical distinction is drawn between Jesus and other human beings. I find it hard to imagine that God could suffer as Jesus Christ, but not suffer as Saint Paul, or as you or I, or as any other human being that has ever lived. Christians often talk about Jesus' relationship with God as being unique, but I can't help but question what exactly it is that made Jesus, who walked, talked, prayed, suffered, ate, and lived like rest of us, different to other human beings. What made the ontological connection between Jesus and God different to the ontological connection between God and other human beings? Does God not make my heart beat as He made Jesus' heart beat? This is a very important problem that is often ignored by theologians.

3) God feels the pain that we feel, and therefore suffers

Another way in which God might experience pain is through an intimate involvement with the lives of His creatures. The idea, which is sometimes found in panentheistic thinking¹², is that God's being permeates the universe and all of His creatures, including human beings, so closely that when we experience a feeling of pain or a negative emotion, God Himself experiences that pain or emotion. Every time a sensation is experienced within the consciousness of a creature, God also experiences that sensation.

¹² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panentheism> for a definition of panentheism

In relation to this idea we must consider whether God causes as well as experiences our emotions. From my own perspective, all things happen due to the will of God, therefore it logically follows that God is both causing and experiencing our suffering.

If God is creating the pain that we feel, and feels that pain with us, then there is an obvious question regarding *why* God chooses for His created beings to experience pain. I believe that in order to answer this question, we need to pay deep attention to the question of God's ultimate nature¹³. If we do so, we may then be able to come up with some reasons why God may choose pain and suffering for His creation and Himself, when, as an all-powerful being, He could just as easily create nothing but bliss for all of us.

4) Regardless of creation, God has suffering within His divine nature¹⁴

I am a panentheist and I believe that God is everywhere, and in everything. God's being permeates the entire cosmos, and even more than that, God is the active agent in all of existence – God is “doing” everything. There is not a single atom in the entire universe that is separate from God.

How I know this to be true it is difficult to say, but God has given me certain insights that give me great confidence in this worldview. I am certain that God exists because God has frequently spoken to me in the past. I am certain that God is everywhere because I see no boundaries in the universe. Unbelievers will always ask for more

¹³ See Part 4 of this essay

¹⁴ This section contains passages taken from Steven Colborne, 'The Reason Why We Suffer' in *Perfect Chaos*, <http://perfectchaos.org/2012/03/04/the-reason-why-we-suffer/> [accessed 21st May 2012]

evidence that God exists, but evidence is subjective and is very much dependent on what God chooses to reveal to the mind of an individual at any particular time.

If the panentheistic vision of the world that I espouse is true, it means that God must be responsible for all human action. After all, God is “doing” human action as well as everything else. This means that God is in control of our emotions and actions. We experience life through choices God makes for us to experience things in a certain way.

Admittedly, I am describing God as the cosmic ‘puppeteer’. This is an unpopular idea amongst those who believe in free will, but nevertheless, I believe it is the way things really are. There is so much evidence that we are not in control of ourselves. I can raise my arm or nod my head; I can grow my nails or my hair; I can beat my heart and flow my blood – yet I have no idea how I do any of these things. The reason I have no idea is because God is doing them.

How does all this relate to suffering? On the whole, human beings seem to experience both the yin and yang of existence; the ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and miseries. Why is this? Why do we not live lives of pure happiness? Why must we suffer?

I believe the answer to this problem lies in God’s own nature. If the panentheistic view of the world that I believe in is correct, then really there is only one being in the universe, which is God. God is eternally alone. What must that be like?

I can imagine that there are two poles to God’s experience of being completely alone. There is the bliss of having infinite power and infinite awareness, but there is

also the misery and suffering of being always alone; of never having another being with whom to interact.

Perhaps the reason that God makes creatures is because there is such joy in interaction. Making creatures that interact is as close as God Himself can get to interacting with other beings. And perhaps the reason why God gives us negative emotions as well as positive emotions, and bad times as well as good times, is because this is an honest reflection of God's own predicament. God's creatures each get a taste of the real thing; of what ultimate reality is like for God.

So we suffer because God suffers. But I believe that God is ultimately merciful, and doesn't want us to suffer too much. God is deeply aware of how painful suffering is, and so He gives us enough suffering for us to taste what it is like, without ever letting it become unbearable for extended periods of time. God could, if He so wished, inflict infinite enduring suffering upon each of us, but He chooses not to do so because He is loving and merciful.

When we suffer, God is not punishing us for right and wrong action. That is illogical because God is in control of all action. But God does want a varied and interesting universe in which His divine nature is expressed in all its complexity. That is why He has made creatures, and that is why He chooses for us to suffer.

Conclusion

In this essay I have examined four ways in which God can be said to suffer, and I have discussed the merits and problems of each perspective. I am now in a position to conclude by answering the two questions posed in the introduction to this essay; does God suffer, and if so, why?

My panentheistic vision of a God who is everywhere and in everything makes the kind of God described in arguments 1 and 2 seem unrealistic. God cannot suffer in response to free human action as described in argument 1 because human beings are not free. God cannot suffer solely in the person of Jesus Christ, as described in argument 2, because there is no good reason to believe Jesus was ontologically different from other human beings, who also suffer as Jesus did during the crucifixion, and are just as much part of God's nature as Jesus was.

I believe arguments 3 and 4 hold a lot more weight, and are worth taking seriously as we consider the nature of God's suffering. If God is intimately involved in all of creation, then we can rightly assume that on some level, God feels what we feel. Therefore I would argue that God does indeed feel our pain when we experience it, although at the same time He holds a universal perspective in contrast with our creaturely windows of experience.¹⁵

As I argue in part 4, God is in control of everything that happens. Therefore God must be the cause of the pain that we and He feels. God is the present moment creator of all reality, and is therefore creating our suffering as we (and He) experience it.

I have argued that the reason God causes suffering is because suffering is itself a part of His divine nature. I have argued that God is both infinitely powerful, and infinitely alone, and that God creates this vast and complex world in order to feel less alone. In this vision, the multiplicity of created beings pleases God, because through them it appears as though such wonders as loving relationship and friendship can really

¹⁵ For a more in depth discussion of the distinction between God's perspective and the human perspective, see Steven Colborne, 'Layers of Reality' in *Perfect Chaos*, <http://perfectchaos.org/2012/05/19/layers-of-reality/> [accessed 23rd May 2012]

exist. Of course, all the while God is aware that such relationship is in reality impossible, as all beings are expressions of the One - the eternal substance that is God – eternally alone and all that is.

Problems and Objections

It seems to me that there is only one serious argument that can be made against the worldview that I have offered above, which sees God as causing suffering because God Himself suffers. The argument is that the *degree* of suffering present on earth indicates that God would have to be unreasonably cruel in order to create such a world.

There are countless examples of extreme suffering that one could name, but an obvious example is the horrific suffering endured by the Jews during the holocaust in World War 2.

Lucien Richard points out the problem by quoting Dorothy Soelle:

Dorothy Soelle cannot understand that after the reality of the holocaust, one can still talk about an almighty God. 'It simply went beyond my powers to conceive of a powerful God who could look at Auschwitz, tolerate it, participate in it, observe it, or whatever. If he is all-powerful, then he is devoid of love. Such was my conclusion.'¹⁶

When I personally contemplate the horror of the holocaust it certainly raises a question about why God would choose to unravel His universe in this particular way. Couldn't God choose to be more kind and more merciful?

¹⁶ Richard, p 75

My response to this problem is that we do not know how much God Himself suffers. Being eternally alone may be an agony of its own kind, and as I described in Part 4 God presents us with trials that can be very severe in order to give us a taste of the suffering that God Himself experiences.

In spite of the reality of suffering, my worldview remains one of hope. Even those who suffered the horrors of the holocaust could have had a much worse time. An infinitely powerful God could, if He so wished, inflict infinite enduring suffering on His creatures. But the reality is that God chooses to be merciful. It may well be that those who suffer in this life experience an incredible liberation in the next life, and I have a hope that God will always choose to return us to a place of peace and mercy in the end.

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