

Evil and God: Has Process Made Good Its Promise?

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A related idea held that *evil is necessary, or contributory, to the good*. Were it not for the cross, we could not experience the joy of the crown. "O *felix culpa!*" went the Roman prayer—O blessed fault (Adam's sin), without which we would never have known God's grace. And Leibniz constructed a mathematician's theorem to describe God standing at creation and gazing knowingly down the stream of history before selecting the best of all possible worlds. Evil for him (as for Whitehead) was a condition without which there could be no world at all.

But for all their ingenious logic, theologians had never been able to show a reasonable relation between our sins and our agonies, or between the way the world must work and the way we suffer. The God of Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin and Leibniz, was omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; immutable, impassible, and alone having necessary being. What, then, can it mean to say that in the world of a God like this evil is also "necessary"? Is God, after all, limited by his creation? If *this much* evil—the slow death by starvation of innocent children in drought-stricken India, for example—is necessary, then why create a world at all?

And although Adam and Eve succumbed to the serpent, and I, too, succumb, could not an omnipotent God dam the flood of subsequent evils just this side, say, of the more hideous forms of cancer? Or if God's sense of justice requires a life here and there, can he not be satisfied with the life of some incorrigible criminal and spare my six-year-old friend who is dying a lingering death from a disease that was built into his genes? Suppose we all miss a base now and then; is that reason enough to expel us from the game?

Such questions against the classical arguments seemed to be gaining more credibility than the arguments themselves. They contributed to the

comparative silence of neoreformation theology on the problem of evil. Even Luther had held that evil is an irrational, "alien work" of the hidden nature of God. Similarly, for Karl Barth, evil cannot be rationalized because it is related to *das Nichtige*, the unspeakable break in the relationship between Creator and creature.

With theodicy ridden to exhaustion, how could Whitehead and his followers dare to take it up again? They did it seizing the dilemma by its two horns, God and the world, and redefining both. First we must rid theology of the static concept of a God to whom we pay, in Whitehead's phrase, "excessive metaphysical compliments"—attributing to him omnipotence, perfection, and all the rest. Neither can the world be considered simply an object over against God, a lifeless creation separate from a distant Giver of life. Rather, we are to think in terms of a God-world *organism*, an ensouled universe, a stream of vitality and creativity, a becoming of events.

Very well. What's a problem like evil doing in a world like that?

Creativity and Conflict

The one overriding fact of life, process holds, is that it is teeming with creativity, "the category of the ultimate." Everything that exists has the capacity to react to its environment and to act, in turn, on other realities (Whitehead called them "actual entities"). Since God himself exists, he not only partakes of this creativity but also is acted upon. Instead of seeing God as the awesome but distant Creator pictured by classical theism, Whitehead viewed him as "the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands." In this, his "consequent nature," God can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities because he is very much a part of the infirm world.

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Another look at
Whitehead.

But why is the world infirm? Simply because in a world where all actual entities or events are endowed with creativity, they must also be presumed to have some sense of choice. That is the essence of creativity. But in a world of space and time, those choices often conflict. It is in one sense an evil that I cannot at once be here with my family and there with my ailing mother. But it is not an ultimate evil; it is simply an inevitable part of living in a real world.

Obviously we have heard this line before, in terms of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds. But process believes that its dynamic view of matter contributes an element of freedom not previously entertained. Absolute evil is denied because every particle of reality retains the "indeterminacy" of the proton and electron, whirling about their nucleus. And why do some molecules form themselves into copper, rather than flesh; some into matter, rather than mind? And what force within the brain cell enables a material body to be influenced by an immaterial thought? Only a kind of low-grade, or at least metaphorical, "consciousness."

Of course this picture of a virile, creative universe is interrupted when the present passes into

the past. Minds and bodies and matter all "die." But we quote the world, for a second glance reveals the old life taken up into the new. The young sapling has within its cells the nourishment of the leaves decaying at its roots; the dying father's seed lives in his heir; the stone thrown into the pool sends ripples to the farthest edge before it sinks to the bottom. Hence the "perpetual perishing" of the world is not tragic. All passes into "objective immortality." Because God is also an actual entity, he is so present to this process that he can ensure that nothing of value will ever be lost.

Still, process must admit that no actual event is *absolutely* free. The molecule of copper inherited a past. Its potential was not unlimited; it was suited for becoming metal and not flesh. Some *principle* of limitation seems to be at work, outlining and limiting the options from which units of reality "choose." But who sets these options? "God," process an-

swers—this time, God in his "primordial" aspect.

For a process theodicy, this means that God has not abandoned the world to chaos. While his creation enjoys freedom, it is a freedom within certain boundaries. God longs for creation to follow his "subjective aim" for it, but it sometimes rebels, in its freedom, and evil results. Hence his power of limitation is only a gentle nudge, a persuasive but never a tyrannical or omnipotent force. God is "the Eros of the universe," not its Absolute Ruler. For Whitehead, notions of God's omnipotence were a distortion modeled after the medieval king: "When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered, and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers" (*Process and Reality*). God is only "the poet of the world," asserted Whitehead, "with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."

What Has Process Wrought?

The process approach has a certain beauty, and it seems to offer all the right pieces to the puzzle of evil. Its God is more akin to the biblical God than the distant, Unmoved Mover of Hellenistic theology. But despite these positive aspects, we must ask what it has done to go beyond the inadequacies and inconsistencies of older theodicies.

First, it is fair to ask whether process is consistent with its own stated limitations and goals. Does it abide by its own rules?

One of Whitehead's rules was that God must be the exemplification of, not the exception to, the way the world works. We must not have one category for bodies and another for minds, one metaphysic for creation and another for God. This has proved an attractive rule for philosophers interested in developing natural theology. But a difficulty appears when we ask this sort of God about the problem of evil. Our most profound reflections on suffering and evil usually end in a cry, and appeal to One far greater than the structures of our evil world. Unexceptional beings suffer and die, without the capacity to redeem such a loss of values. All actual entities perish. In the process system, even God is an actual entity, an unexceptional being. What hope can agonizing humanity gain from a God-in-process if that process leads toward even the death of God?

Whitehead suddenly shifts ground at this point. There is, after all, one exception to the rule about an unexceptional God. Unlike all other actual entities, God does not participate in the perpetual perishing of the world. As it turns out, therefore, even process appeals to a category that is a glaring exception to its own metaphysical game plan. A



nonperishing God is needed by theodicy; but it is not a God yielded by Whitehead's own method.

A similar inconsistency lies in the process concept of the mental quality of matter, although we cannot pursue it here. We can only note that attributing "choice" to the material world requires a language game other than pure metaphysics. Whitehead does not show how he overcomes Kant's "limits" against moving from the phenomenal to the noumenal. Biblical theology may do something like what process wants to do when it speaks of a "fallen" world, or of a creation that "groans," or of tombs that burst open; but that is the language of revelation. A consistent process approach rules out that move, seeking salvation by metaphysics alone.

Whatever Happened to God?

The process theologian John Cobb was concerned about Whitehead's inconsistent shift to an exceptional God, or to a God in his primordial nature, when the going gets tough in the empirical world. Cobb insists rather that we search for a deity fully explicable "in terms of the principles operative elsewhere in the system" (*A Christian Natural Theology*). What sort of God would this yield for theodicy, even if it could be done consistently?

It must be admitted that God as "actual entity," alongside the rest of us, is companionable. He is even heroic, stalwartly enjoining us to submit bravely to the world process even though, to the empirical eye, it ends irrevocably in death. Further, there is a certain attraction these days to any scheme that can debunk scholastic ideas of immutability, omnipotence, and the rest of the attributes of God that have survived the razors of generations of Occams. We no longer delight in paying metaphysical compliments.

Yet when we have enjoyed the companionable, heroic, pared-down God, whom do we *worship*? And to whom do we attach our hopes that *prima facie* irredeemable evil will one day meet its Redeemer? In his consequent nature God is incapable of functioning as Redeemer. In his primordial aspect he is too gentle to overpower even actual entities, not to speak of any Cosmic Adversary. In short, Stephen Ely's perceptive title of nearly thirty-five years ago is still relevant; we must question *The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God*.

Paradoxically, even the classical God was more "available." To use such ideas as immutability, impossibility, and aseity to suggest that the orthodox God is brittle, distant, and insensitive is to construct a straw God in whom few have ever

believed. These ideas were developed by the early church fathers under the pressure of paganism and polytheism. They were designed not to show how God was removed from history or the world process but to show that he was One God; that he was not ruled by the passions that embroiled pagan deities in debauchery; and that the world depended on him for its being, not he upon the world (Cf. G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*).

This is no brief for clinging to the patristic language of God. A part of the task of theology is to develop more adequate terminology. The point is that process has often substituted its own terms with no advantage for theodicy and with considerable loss in religious availability. For transcendence, process substitutes a primordial God, but one who lacks any real divine power. For immanence, process prefers a consequent God, but one who does not outlive his perishing companions. We may be excused for being reluctant to make this swap, which neither solves the problem of evil nor leaves intact a God who can promise one day to do so.

The Gospel in Process

A consistent process view of reality has little place for the one event Christians consider to be centrally important to the problem of evil: the incarnation-resurrection, the Good News that God was in Christ reconciling this process to himself. The claim of the New Testament documents is that if we ever hope to see the point (*telos*) of currently baffling evil, we must view reality from the standpoint of that supreme evil, the cross. And we are offered the resurrection faith as the proleptic triumph over the power of darkness. Far from being an example of the way the world usually works, this event was an intrusion, an enfleshed Message from another realm who was then transformed in order to "return." Christ appears in the mode of the prophet, one with a message he claims to have received from outside the world process, which otherwise seems doomed. What happens to this claim in process theology?

Whitehead's answer is that prophets, or those who believe themselves to be revealing a message from another realm, are mostly mad, ignorant, or deceived. The odds are so heavy against their authenticity that "apart from some method of testing perhaps it is safer to stone them, in some merciful way" (*The Function of Reason*).

The process theologian Norman Pittenger cannot accept without reservation the claim that Christ's nature was qualitatively different from that of the common run of men (see his books *The*

Process theology holds that the one overriding fact of life is that it is teeming with creativity.

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