

**WHO IS THE GOD AT THE HEART OF SUFFERING?  
AN EXPLORATION OF SUFFERING AS CAUSED BY NATURAL  
& MORAL EVIL**

**Dr. Scott Ventureyra**

**Abstract:** This paper will examine the problem of suffering as it arises from both moral and natural evil through a Christian philosophical and theological perspective. Suffering throughout our planet is pervasive. We all experience it in one form or another. In western culture, we are bombarded, through the media with the terrible tragedies that occur in our home country and abroad. Inevitably we ask ourselves, the following question, as Professor Ramon Martinez, probes into his book, *Sin and Evil*, “Why does God permit suffering?” In order to address the question of suffering and its relation to the God of Christianity, we must understand what suffering is and how it affects humanity.

**Keywords:** Christianity; evil; God; moral evil; Michael Ruse; natural evil; pain; philosophy of religion; problem of evil; Richard Dawkins; suffering; theodicy

This paper will examine the problem of suffering as it arises from both moral and natural evil through a Christian philosophical and theological perspective. Suffering throughout our planet is pervasive. We all experience it in one form or another. In western culture, we are bombarded, through the media with the terrible tragedies that occur in our home country and abroad. Inevitably we ask ourselves, the following question, as Professor Ramon Martinez, probes into his book, *Sin and Evil*, “Why does God permit suffering?”<sup>1</sup>

In order to address the question of suffering and its relation to the God of Christianity, we must understand what suffering is and how it affects humanity. It is important to note, as theologian Ted Peters

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<sup>1</sup> Ramon Martinez de Pison Liebanas, *Sin and Evil* (Sherbrooke: Mediaspaul, 2002), 136.

observes, that there are two kinds of suffering, “some due to natural evil and some to moral evil. Natural evil and moral evil over-lap, but they are distinguishable.”<sup>2</sup> Suffering can be precipitated by natural evil, namely, natural phenomena such as cancer, asteroid collisions, earthquakes and tsunamis. Suffering due to moral evil is the product of human freedom.

Suffering can be both emotional and physical. The dilemma of suffering in the world is one which holds great significance within the history of the Christian tradition. Inescapably, upon pondering the problem of suffering, one attempts to associate suffering with a particular view or notion of God. The problem of evil is one that has unceasingly troubled the minds of philosophers and theologians. The problem is illustrated clearly by John Polkinghorne, when he states: “how can a world of cancer and concentration camps be the creation of a God at once all-powerful and all-good?”<sup>3</sup> Reconciling the reality of suffering in the world, with the existence of a personal and loving God, has undoubtedly been one of the greatest challenges to Christianity. Throughout this paper several different responses to the problem of evil will be considered which seeks to reconcile the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient God with the existence of evil and suffering in the world.

Suffering as caused by “natural evil” is seen throughout the history of life on Earth. Pain is rampant throughout the animal kingdom. Pain is seen as more of a physical manifestation through a discomfoting sensation, whereas suffering occurs upon a reflection of the physical pain or even emotional pain. The distinction is not so clear throughout the theological and philosophical literature. Martinez indicates the issue is best sorted through psychology<sup>4</sup> in order to provide a distinction between the two, as psychologist Robert Augustus Masters, helps illuminate the distinction:

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Peters, *Playing God?* 60-61.

<sup>4</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 138.

Though pain and suffering are often thought of as being much the same, they differ greatly from each other. Pain is fundamentally just unpleasant sensation. Suffering, on the other hand, is something we are doing with our pain. Pain comes, often inescapably so, with life. It often also is, especially in its awakening or alerting capacity, necessary. Suffering, however, is far less necessary than we might think. When we cannot sufficiently distract or distance ourselves from our pain, we generally turn it into suffering.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to realize that suffering and pain occur in different degrees among both human and animals. That begs the question then, do animals suffer? Are they able to reflect somehow in their own pain? Mammals aside from humans do seem to mourn the loss of loved ones. Perhaps it is a degree of intensity in which the suffering is felt that varies. For example, the philosopher that is plagued with attempting to understand the meaning of his existence seems to suffer more existentially, than the individual who lives life without deep introspection.

Suffering, pain and death have occurred extensively throughout the history of life on this planet, as George Johnson and Peter Raven observe: “One of the most prominent features of the history of life on earth has been the periodic occurrence of major episodes of extinction.”<sup>6</sup> Paleontologists have estimated that ninety-nine percent of all the species that have inhabited the earth have gone extinct. Robert John Russell elucidates this by stating that: “Life feeds on life: without death, the ecosystems of our world would not be possible, and without extinction, the evolution of complex life would have not occurred.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, humans and modern organisms are here in part because of all the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Augustus Masters, “Suffering and Pain,” accessed April 6, 2015, [http://www.robertmasters.com/ESSAY-pages/Suffering\\_Pain.htm](http://www.robertmasters.com/ESSAY-pages/Suffering_Pain.htm)

<sup>6</sup> George B. Johnson and Peter H. Raven, *Biology* (St. Louis: Mosby College Publishing, 1989), 428.

<sup>7</sup> Robert John Russell, “Natural Sciences” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 336.

suffering that occurred prior to the advent of their being. Christians typically see humanity's appearance on earth as the culmination of God's creation, Genesis 1:27, states that "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Reconciling biblical truths about our creation and our evolutionary history, it seems as though, our planet was gradually groaning its way to reach its pinnacle. One may suppose there is no entirely intellectually compelling answer for all the suffering that has occurred through the combination of law and chance, prior to humanity. Nonetheless, this does not mean there are no rational responses to the question of evil and suffering.

Cornelius Hunter, in his book, *Darwin's God*, shrewdly observes that evolution, prior to Darwin and forward, growing with sophistication and explanatory power, had been utilized as an attempted mean to explain away the problem of evil.

Hunter states that:

One strategy was to try to show that God was somehow disconnected from creation. Natural evil arose not from God's direction but from an imperfect linkage between Creator and creation... The carnage in nature had always been obvious but the scientific revolution was revealing it in detail... naturalists were finding the created order to be full of apparent inefficiencies and anomalies. From parasites to extinctions, nature seemed to be less than ideal.<sup>8</sup>

So, it seemed that evolution, particularly with Darwin's theory, provided a solution to the long standing problem of natural evil. Yet, some believed that this "distanced God from creation to the point that God was unnecessary."<sup>9</sup> Darwin in a letter to Asa Gray states: "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Hunter, *Darwin's God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Brazo, 2001), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, *Darwin's God*, 16.

with living bodies of Caterpillars.”<sup>10</sup> Much of Darwin’s work and that of subsequent evolutionists is filled with similar arguments that are parasitic off of the theological, that is to say, they borrow something from theology, in order to give evolution a greater explanatory power over rival doctrines such as special creation.<sup>11</sup> Richard Dawkins, for instance, in *River Out of Eden*, Dawkins states that:

Cheetahs give every indication of being superbly designed for something, and it should be easy enough to reverse-engineer them and work out their utility function. They appear to be well designed to kill antelopes. The teeth, claws, eyes, nose, leg muscles, backbone and brain of a cheetah are all precisely what we should expect if God’s purpose in designing cheetahs was to maximize deaths among antelopes.<sup>12</sup>

Michael Ruse a well-known philosopher of biology suggests that antelopes are also effective in getting away from cheetahs since “they are fast, agile, watchful and so forth.”<sup>13</sup> Inevitably it leads one to ask the question about God: “What is He playing at? Is he a sadist who enjoys spectator blood sports?”<sup>14</sup> It is obvious that for the non-believer such a question does not pose a problem since there is no God or One that takes little, if any, interest in the affairs of humans or other living creatures.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Dawkins, *A River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 95. This is taken from a letter by Darwin to the Botanist, Asa Gray, May 22, 1860.

<sup>11</sup> This point is made by proponents of Intelligent Design as a criticism against evolutionary thought. ID exponents state that evolutionists rely more on theological arguments than evidence based arguments by stating what God would or would not do from their vantage point. This is the central theme found in Cornelius Hunter’s book, *Darwin’s God*.

<sup>12</sup> Dawkins, *A River Out of Eden*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 130.

<sup>14</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* 130.

Dawkins suggests that ultimately, in reality, there is nothing but blind indifference:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people [and/or other organisms] are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.<sup>15</sup>

One would have to concede that Dawkins is absolutely right, if in fact, there is no God, especially not a personal one, as believed by Christianity. However, Dawkins has not provided any convincing evidence that this is the case. Evolution by natural selection does not necessarily preclude the existence of God or the absence of purpose in nature. It is a rather haste conclusion since there still remain many important questions to be answered regarding the nature of reality, such as: Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the best explanation of the finitude of the past? What is the best explanation for the finely tuned laws and initial conditions of physics and chemistry that permit life? What is the correlation between existence and scientific observability? What is the best explanation for the specified information necessary for the origin of a self-replicating system? What explains the high level of consciousness that humans possess? How can we account for the correspondence of our minds with reality which allows the use of logic and language? What is the source of objective morality? What accounts for the historical evidence in favour of the resurrection of Jesus? These are questions that reasonably transcend the purview of Darwinian biology. Nevertheless, ultimately, it is worth pointing out that, it makes no difference if interventionist creation is true or creation through mechanistic processes that occur over billions of years; the problem of natural evil remains for the Christian regardless of how creatures were brought into existence.

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<sup>15</sup> Dawkins, *A River Out of Eden*, 133.

The second type of suffering is due to moral evil – in other words, sin.<sup>16</sup> The evil that causes this type of suffering is one “which is bound up in one way or another with the finitude and freedom whereby we have chosen to act against our ultimate good.”<sup>17</sup> Ted Peters maintains that:

Concentration camps produced suffering as the deliberate product of human hands. Child abuse, rape, street crime, organized crime, terrorism, torture, political totalitarianism, civil war, international war, and genocide are some of the way that the human race has devised for drawing innocent people into a state of victimage. Suffering here is the product of human creativity.<sup>18</sup>

This type of action can be labelled as the “sin of the world,” an expression borrowed from the Gospel of John. This “sin of the world” is, as Martinez states, “a sin that arises from the wicked behaviour of human beings.”<sup>19</sup> This kind of suffering is a direct result of human free will. This evil is one which can be lessened or increased by humanity since it can be harnessed individually and by consequence perhaps one day, collectively, if everyone takes responsibility for their actions. This will ultimately only be possible, as Martinez makes clear, with the aid of Christ’s “creative and liberating love” which is “not conditioned by sin.”<sup>20</sup>

The responses formulated to why suffering exists in the world in relation to God’s nature undoubtedly say something to and about God. So what does this say about the creator who brought all living things into being? What kind of God are we dealing with here? Martinez vividly illustrates the kind of God, the Judeo-Christian one is for us today:

[T]he image of God has evolved. The idea of the deity inherited in large part from the Middle Ages and from Descartes belongs

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<sup>16</sup> Peters, *Playing God?* 61.

<sup>17</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 197.

<sup>18</sup> Peters, *Playing God?* 61.

<sup>19</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 106.

more to the Greek deities than to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is far from our human experience, which is always moving forward. But the God of Jesus Christ is not immutable, impassible, and omnipotent, because he is affected by the evolution of his creation.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Ruse, similarly, agrees with Martinez's view of God, namely a God who suffers with His creation. Echoing Martinez, Ruse states that:

Right at its centre there is a suffering god, Jesus on the Cross. This is not some contingent part of the faith, but the very core of everything. God is not some impersonal Unmoved mover, who has little concern with the creation and who feels none of the joys and travails of the earthly creatures... God [suffers physically and psychologically], pushed to the limit that any of us can feel. There is the agony of the crucifixion and the despair of rejection: 'My God, my God, why has though forsaken me?'<sup>22</sup>

Theologians, in general, have considered several possibilities for an explanation to the existence of physical pain and suffering and emotional suffering.<sup>23</sup> The first argument appeals to the possibility that suffering is illusory. It takes the stance that perhaps natural evil does not exist and all that exists is natural good and in some contexts the absence of it. Yet, such an approach seems rather unsatisfying since physical pain and suffering are very real and highly unpleasant for humans and other organisms. Ruse explains this point further: "Illusion or not, physical pain is very unpleasant for humans... The fact that some things are psychosomatic – and most things are not – does not make the suffering any less intense... you may be able to think yourself out of pain, but often you cannot, and even when you can it does not mean that the ill goes away."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 135.

<sup>23</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 132-34.

<sup>24</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 132.

Another argument is that suffering itself functions as a route to faith. In other words, if there were no suffering, then in a sense, there would be less of a propensity to become closer to God. The author of Job was quite sensitive to this, as Ruse indicates: “if there were no [suffering] then faith would lose its meaning.”<sup>25</sup> The theologian, John Haught, has stated that:

The Bible ... proclaims the paradoxical possibility of faith and hope in God in spite of all evil and suffering. Some of us would even argue that faith has no intensity or depth unless it is a leap into the unknown in the face of such absurdity. Faith is always faith ‘in spite of’ all the difficulties that defy reason and science.<sup>26</sup>

So this moves us away from an intellectual proposition to an emotional one. Where the God of the Bible, is shown to be a redemptive God, one we come to understand more fully and justly as we progress and evolve over time. God is revealed more fully to humanity as our understanding increases because of our experience of suffering. Pain and suffering are seen as a means to cull out the goodness in humanity. Yet, as Martinez illustrates, God does not necessarily act as an explanation to suffering but God is “its first victim. He is God who is in Jesus Christ [who] reveals to us the only valid attitude to human suffering – compassion.”<sup>27</sup> Robert Russell holds to a similar position on suffering which advocates for a wide encompassing view of Christ’s compassion, to all living things. Russell proposes an interesting outlook in addressing the question of life’s suffering in redemptive terms: “this expands the scope of Christ’s compassion then our experience of the presence of God in and with the suffering of the poor and oppressed should now include all living creatures... Can we then understand the hope offered by Christ’s resurrection to include all living creatures?”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Russell is on the

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<sup>25</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 133.

<sup>26</sup> John Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>27</sup> Martinez, *Sin and Evil*, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, “Natural Sciences,” 337.

right track. Did all the suffering, death and extinction of all the organisms that occurred alongside and prior to humanity happen without legitimate reason? One of the major tenants of Christianity is free will. God gave creation autonomy and freedom to evolve. However, with autonomy and freedom comes much suffering as well. God chose such a method in order to bring his creation into existence. He is omnipotent but he cannot make the impossible happen like a logical contradiction. Ruse states that God “is all powerful and all-loving, He will create the best that He can. But this does not mean that God can do the impossible. God cannot make two plus two equal five.”<sup>29</sup> This is especially true in the case of the God of Jesus Christ, Ruse empathetically drives this point:

the Incarnation shows that what can be done is not defined simply by the laws of mathematics and logic. God wanted to save humankind from its sinful nature, but that did not mean that God could do it in any way He chose. He had to sacrifice himself on the cross. Likewise, God having decided to create, did then create – perhaps His choice, perhaps not – in an evolutionary fashion. And this being so, He was not locked into a path which would necessarily lead to [pain and suffering]. It comes with the method employed.<sup>30</sup>

The point being made by Ruse demonstrates that natural evil is not an argument against an all-loving and all-powerful God and that it seems to be a necessary mean to bring creation into existence the way it is today, otherwise it would resemble something different to what it is. Moreover, God’s creative capacity in which he allows the world to be able to act independently according to random events and natural law can bring about suffering “on the part of any creature, human or animal” – so for our self-sufficiency and freedom we inevitably pay the price of pain and suffering.<sup>31</sup> Polkinghorne amplifies this point: “a world [of] freely choosing beings is better than a world of perfectly programmed

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<sup>29</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 134.

<sup>30</sup> Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* 135.

<sup>31</sup> Peters, *Playing God?* 62.

automata... In relation to physical evil (disease and disaster) there is parallel “free process defense”: that in his great act of creation, God allows the whole universe to be itself.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, of course the problem of evil cannot be solved by declaration and is without a purely intellectual solution. What one as a Christian believer must keep in mind, as mentioned earlier, is that of Christ’s compassion. Since, God clearly identifies with those who suffer. This is evident throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry. Peters delineates the Christian God’s reaction to suffering due to both moral and natural evil:

As Jesus spent much time in unison with victims of social stigma – due to leprosy, being born blind or other diseases – we believe that God incarnate has entered the realm of flesh and thereby experiences what we experience as soil, as natural evil. As Jesus spent time in solidarity with tax collectors, traitors, and prostitutes – sinners who were stigmatized by the righteous citizens – we believe that God incarnate has entered the realm of sin, and thereby God experiences what we experience as moral evil... the cross reveals to us that God incarnate has become the victim of suffering rather than its permitter or perpetrator.<sup>33</sup>

A final response to the problem of evil is one provided by William Dembski, a mathematician and philosopher who compares the God of Aristotle with the God in Christ. He denotes that Aristotle saw friendship as a possibility only between equals and that it is impossible for a friendship between God and persons since God would be degrading himself to think of anything lower than Himself. Yet, this is exactly what we have in Christianity. Dembski drives this point home when he states:

Among the vast catalogue of virtues that adorn Aristotle’s ethics, humility is nowhere to be found. Yet, humility is the only virtue that captures the love of God for humanity, a love fully expressed

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<sup>32</sup> As found in Peters, *Playing God?* 62.

<sup>33</sup> Peters, *Playing God?* 63.

in the Cross. Only by humility does Christ – and those who share his life – defeat the sin of pride that led to the Fall. Without humility, as Martin Luther noted, all other virtues become merely occasions for pride.<sup>34</sup>

Dembski also beautifully illustrates this correlation with the concepts of infinity in mathematics. On the one hand, you can go to a large value without measure and on the other hand can, “form a fraction in which the denominator goes to zero.”<sup>35</sup> Dembski further indicates that “[t]he cross is a path of humility in which the infinite God becomes finite and then contracts to zero, only to resurrect and thereby unite a finite humanity within a newfound infinity.”<sup>36</sup> This is an illuminating and provocative illustration where we can attempt to visualize the suffering endured by Christ. By doing so, Christ identifies with and redeems His Creation.

As we have seen, moral and natural evil have been the cause of tremendous amounts of pain including both physical and emotional suffering that has occurred throughout the evolutionary history of life on earth. Several responses offered by different scholars were explored. Despite the great thought involved with many of these responses, the problem of evil is far from being solved, at least not fully from either an intellectual or emotional standpoint. However, upon closer examination, the God of Jesus Christ is revealed through His ultimate compassion for all of creation. The God of redemption gives the answers to our hearts and speaks to our faith. Despite that in isolation the problem of evil deeply affects the emotional aspect of our being; it should not necessarily threaten one’s belief in the Christian God since there are plenty of arguments in favour of such a God that cannot be fully explored here.

God by giving freedom to His creation permits his creatures to experience suffering and evil but these do not have the final word. God stands before and after both suffering and evil. Jesus Christ’s compassion is the first and last word – one that gave creation its freedom

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<sup>34</sup> William A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 22.

<sup>35</sup> Dembski, *The End of Christianity*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Dembski, *The End of Christianity*, 22.

and autonomy, then by redeeming it through the cross, ultimately proclaiming victory through his resurrection with humanity, over both suffering and evil.

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