

## ***What We Care About***

### ***I. The Problem of Evil***

- (1) there is suffering in the world
- (2) there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God
- (3) There is no morally sufficient reason for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God to allow suffering in the world.

(S) what is bad about the things a human being suffers is that they keep her from being what she ought to be, or keep her from having the desires of her heart, or both.

### ***II. The central question: preliminary formulation***

A. The first pair:

(C a1) does God's allowing a person's suffering contribute to her being able to be what she ought to be?

(C a2) is a person's suffering the best available means, in the circumstances, for the sufferer to be able to be what she ought to be?

B. The second pair:

(C b1) does God's allowing a person's suffering contribute to her being able to have the desires of her heart?

(C b2) is a person's suffering the best available means, in the circumstances, for the sufferer to be able to have the desires of her heart?

### ***III. The scale of value***

On Aquinas's worldview, the scale of values for human beings has shared union with God as the best thing and the permanent absence of that union as the worst thing. On this scale of value, a person's flourishing is a matter of her increasing closeness to God.

### ***IV. The central question reformulated***

(C A1) does God's allowing a person's suffering contribute to her willingness to let God be close to her?

(C A2) is a person's suffering the best available means, in the circumstances, to help bring about her willingness to let God be close to her?

### ***V. Aquinas on suffering and God's presence:***

"People need to be supported in the evils that happen to them. And this is what consolation is, strictly speaking. Because if a person didn't have something in which his heart could rest when he is overcome with evils, he couldn't bear up [under them]. And so one person consoles another when he offers him some relief, in which he can rest in the midst of evils. And although in some evils one human being can take consolation and rest and support in another, nonetheless it is only God who consoles us in all [our] evils."

### ***VI. The first subsidiary pair of questions***

A. Quantum change: transformative experiences associated with trauma.

(i) "One way of explaining quantum change experiences is that they represent ... a turning point in the life journey where major change simply must occur because the person is unable or unwilling to continue in his or her present course. It is a point of desperation, a breaking point where "something has to give" --- and it does. The result is a new, dramatically reorganized identity. ... Strained and separate aspects of identity are reordered...."

B. Adversarial growth in recent psychological studies:

“Positive changes following adversity have long been recognized in philosophy, literature, and religion.... They have been reported empirically [by psychologists and other researchers] following chronic illness, heart attacks, breast cancer, bone marrow transplants, HIV and AIDS, rape and sexual assault, military combat, maritime disasters, plane crashes, tornadoes, shootings, bereavement, injury, recovery from substance addiction, and in the parents of children with disabilities....Studies of adversarial growth are an important area of research... [And from] an applied perspective, clinicians should be aware of the potential for positive change in their clients following trauma and adversity.... [T]he facilitation of adversarial growth may be considered a legitimate therapeutic aim.”

VII. *John Hull and Clara Claiborne Park:*

A. John Hull:

(i) “the thought keeps coming back to me.... Could there be a strange way in which blindness is a dark, paradoxical gift? Does it offer a way of life, a purification, an economy? Is it really like a kind of painful purging through a death? .... If blindness is a gift, it is not one that I would wish on anybody....[But in the midst of music in church] as the whole place and my mind were filled with that wonderful music, I found myself saying, ‘I accept the gift. I accept the gift.’ I was filled with a profound sense of worship. I felt that I was in the very presence of God, that the giver of the gift had drawn near to me to inspect his handiwork.... If I hardly dared approach him, he hardly dared approach me... He had, as it were, thrown his cloak of darkness around me from a distance, but had now drawn near to seek a kind of reassurance from me that everything was all right, that he had not misjudged the situation, that he did not have to stay. ‘It’s all right,’ I was saying to him, ‘There’s no need to wait. Go on, you can go now; everything’s fine.’”

B. Clara Claiborne Park:

(i) “I, who tell this story, was when ...[Jessy, the fourth child] was born a typical college-bred housewife.... I was like my friends in putting my full resources of intelligence and intuition into the task of bringing up my children. ... I had used to exhaustion the full abilities of a grown-up woman in overseeing the first years of these small humans, and I was terribly proud of what I had done. Anyone would have said -- many people did say -- that I had three lovely children.... I was terribly proud to have produced three such lovely children. ... So much of pride had I invested in my bright and beautiful children and my great good luck.”

(ii) “our lives change and change us beyond anticipation. I do not forget the pain -- it aches in a particular way when I look at Jessy’s friends, some of them just her age, and allow myself for a moment to think of all she cannot be. But we cannot sift experience and take only the part that does not hurt us. Let me say simply and straight out that simple knowledge the whole world knows. I breathe like everyone else my century’s thin, faithless air, and I do not want to be sentimental. But the blackest sentimentality of all is that *trahison des clercs* which will not recognize the good it has been given to understand because it is too simple. So, then: this experience we did not choose, which we would have given anything to avoid, has made us different, has made us better. Through it we have learned the lesson that no one studies willingly, the hard, slow lesson of Sophocles and Shakespeare -- that one grows by suffering. And that too is Jessy’s gift. I write now what fifteen years past I would still not have thought possible to write: that if today I were given the choice, to accept the experience, with everything that it entails, or to refuse the bitter largesse, I would have to stretch out my hands -- because out of it has come, for all of us, an unimagined life. And I will not change the last word of the story. It is still love.”