

SUFFERING AND THE WILL OF GOD

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Talk of human suffering as the will of God is often taken to be either confused or corrupt. This paper suggests that it need be neither. The paper considers different senses in which suffering might be said to be the will of God and different objections to such talk. But the primary objective of the paper is to suggest a conception of suffering as grace, such that it will be intelligible to pray that suffering come to oneself (Juliana of Norwich) and intelligible to view as grace the suffering that comes to those one loves (Simone Weil and Francis de Sales).

I want to consider the idea that a person's suffering might be the will of God. It seems that to many this idea is obnoxious, either because they think it confused or because they think it corrupt or because they think it both. But I do not see that it *must* be any of these, as though one who said that a given instance of suffering were God's will were necessarily guilty of either bad logic or bad morals.

It may be useful to distinguish at the start between what might be called a "weak" sense and what might be called a "strong" sense in which a person's suffering could be said to be the will of God.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims that it is worse to do than to suffer injustice. That one's circumstances can sometimes be such as to limit one to a choice between the doing or the suffering of injustice is something Plato makes clear, I think, in the *Crito*. If such circumstances can arise, then just as Socrates says it is better to suffer than to do injustice, so a religious person might say that it is God's will that he suffer rather than do injustice. I am not concerned to demonstrate that such circumstances can arise, though I think that often enough they do. But even if it were agreed that Socrates is correct, and even if one were to translate Socrates' remark into the claim that it is God's will that one suffer the injustice rather than avoid it by doing injustice, still, the relation between the suffering and the will of God would be what I should call accidental. God, it might be said, does not will the suffering, but only the acceptance of it. Here is what I mean by a "weak" sense in which a person's suffering might be said to be the will of God. Virtue may require that one forego certain means of escape from suffering or even that one embrace certain sufferings as ethically unavoidable. But the suffering here can be called a misfortune—in God's eyes as well as in the eyes of the



sufferer. God, like the sufferer, we might say, wills the suffering only because, in a sense, it cannot be avoided.

My interest is in a stronger sense in which suffering might be said to be the will of God—a sense according to which a person's suffering itself, and not merely the refusal to do injustice, is God's will. One might speak of this as a sense in which the suffering and the will of God are not accidentally but essentially related. But what is surely a very common attitude toward this sense in which suffering might be said to be God's will is found, I think, in this passage from an essay in *The Journal of General Education* entitled "Teaching Cognitive Moral Development":

We begin with the showing of a film entitled "Hunger in America," a survey of different groups of people in the United States who are badly undernourished. We see a graphic picture of a government official who says flatly that poor people are poor (hence undernourished) because they are lazy. We hear a farmer, whose children stare blankly at the photographer, explain that he's proud to be poor: God made him poor, and that's good enough for him. We view case after case of people oversimplifying the problem of malnutrition. Both those who are hungry and those charged with helping them make sweepingly simplistic statements. I stop the film frequently and ask the students to examine the logic of, for example, the farmer's statement "God made me poor, and I'm proud of it." It does not take long for the class to see dualistic thinking among the people in the film, and in this case how such thinking is fostered by their churches.¹

It is enough for present purposes to say that by "dualistic thinking" the author means what he takes to be rather primitive moral thinking, the kind of thinking exhibited by individuals in the first and most basic of six purported "stages" in the development of ethical thinking. So he takes the farmer's statement to be inadequate to his own condition, simplistic or perhaps just simple-minded. But when he wants to call attention to the "logic" of the farmer's statement "God made me poor and I'm proud of it," it is not clear whether he thinks there is some logical fault to be noted. I cannot see any blunder of a logical sort in the farmer's remark. But I can well imagine a kind of moral objection to what he says. One can imagine something akin to what Rousseau says of Christianity in the eighth chapter of the fourth book of his *Social Contract*: "Christianity teaches only servitude and submission... True Christians are made to be slaves." Or one can imagine something akin to Marx's complaint against religion as the "opiate of the people." The farmer's remark, one might say, just shows how religion—or at least "bad religion"—encourages an uncalled-for acquiescence in oppression and injustice. Thus, the religious view that a man's poverty might be for him the will of God is morally objectionable. This kind of religion fosters "false-consciousness," an inadequate grasp of the reality of one's own situation or condition.

But, of course, there is another possible objection to the farmer's statement—a more straightforwardly theological objection. I mean the objection that often generates what philosophers call "the problem of evil": How, it might be asked, can a good God will suffering? Ought God not to work instead to alleviate suffering? Thus "the problem of evil": If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish evil. If He is all-powerful, He must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists. Therefore either God is not perfectly good, or He is not all-powerful. And in either case He is not, then, God.

I have noted, then, two plausible objections to the farmer's statement, while dismissing the idea of a "logical" objection to it. These could be taken as objections to the "strong" sense of the idea that a person's suffering is the will of God. I have characterized one of these as a moral objection, the other as a theological one. Yet neither seems to me to show that there must be some confusion or even corruption on the part of one proposing the idea that a person's suffering is the will of God. If for no other reason, this is because both objections seem to beg the question. To express moral indignation at a religious man's willingness to counsel patient acceptance of suffering is to have already construed that suffering as an evil to be avoided. And to object that a good God cannot will suffering on the grounds that He cannot or does not will evil is also to have construed that suffering as an evil to be avoided. But in one sense the question I mean to be raising is precisely this question of whether some suffering might not be an evil to be avoided after all. Indeed, if I suggest that some suffering might be the will of God, then I might as well be taken as suggesting that some suffering is not evil. So it is no good to object to the idea that God wills suffering by appealing to reasons grounded in the assumption that suffering is an evil to be avoided. On the contrary, it would seem necessary to retreat a step and ask why one resists calling suffering a good. Put differently, why does one resist identifying suffering and the will of God?

It may well be thought that an answer to this last question is obvious. I do not will that my children contract cancer, so how can I conceive of a good God willing such a thing? But not all thinkers have refused to identify suffering and the will of God. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus puts these words into the mouth of the chorus:

Zeus, who guided men to think,
...has laid it down that wisdom
comes alone in suffering.²

Elsewhere the chorus remarks that "Righteousness so moves that learning comes only to the sufferers" (1.250). *Agamemnon* is at least in part the story of the sins of Agamemnon, and the story of the consequences of those sins. The wisdom and the learning of which the chorus speaks concern, I think, the limits of human power. Pride is the failure to recognize those limits. When

Aeschylus goes on to speak of "Righteousness" shining in the houses of the poor (1.772) it is plain, I think, that Righteousness shines there because the poor do not share in the pride that is the downfall of Agamemnon as well as the downfall of his wife Clytemaestra. It is in failing to understand the limits of human power that one is liable, in pride and "sinful daring"(see 11. 763-770), to bring disaster upon oneself and one's children:

The curse on great daring
shines clear; it wrings atonement
from those high hearts that drive to evil,
from houses blossoming to pride and peril. (L1. 374-78)

Now if there is some understanding that comes alone through suffering, then it will be a kind of confusion to look for someone to have this understanding without the suffering. One possibility is this: there is an understanding that consists in the recognition of the limits of human power, and there is a suffering that necessarily accompanies and often occasions this understanding, namely, the suffering—the pain—one feels in running up against those limits. So the understanding and the suffering cannot come one apart from the other. Nor, of course, could one arrange for them to come to oneself—or to anyone else, for that matter. This point, I think, is particularly important; for in it one might see what could be called "the limits of asceticism": Any kind of renunciation or penance or deprivation that one might arrange for oneself would indeed be just that, arranged for oneself, while the understanding at issue here is precisely an understanding of the limits to one's powers of arranging the world or one's own life in the world. I take it that this is part of what is at issue in the following remarks in Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

If you wish to know which are the best sorts of abjection, Philothea, I tell you plainly that the ones most profitable to our soul and most acceptable to God are those that come to us accidentally or because of our state in life. The reason is that we have not chosen them ourselves but have accepted them as sent by God, and his choice is always better than our own. If we were to choose any form of humiliation, we should prefer the greatest, and those most contrary to our inclinations are such, provided that they are in keeping with our vocations. To say it once and for all: our own choice and selection spoil and lessen nearly all our virtues.³

Now if, as de Sales puts it elsewhere, "choice takes away the better part of our merit,"⁴ and if suffering, including what he calls "abjection," is the path to a certain wisdom, then in recognizing what I have called the limits of asceticism, one might recognize a motive to pray for one's own suffering. Mother Julian of Norwich, for example, prayed for her own suffering. But I shall return to this.

So might not a man who says he is proud to be poor and that God made him poor be taken to be saying that he is proud to have been chosen for a certain

kind of understanding? A given individual might of course mean a host of different things with such a remark, and he might well be thoroughly confused in making the remark. But my concern is only to point to a possibility, the possibility that some suffering is not an evil to be avoided—or even to be merely accepted. I mean to point to the possibility that suffering can be a grace.

If suffering can be a grace, then it can be seen as a gift from God, in which case it might be said that God willed that we suffer. And saying this will be quite different from saying that some suffering is, as I have suggested above, ethically unavoidable and in that weaker sense “willed by God.” But the suggestion that suffering can be a grace can itself amount to a variety of things. So, for example, it might mean something akin to “Adversity builds character.” In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, “Philosophy” says to Boethius:

Remember, too, that all the most happy men are oversensitive. They have never experienced adversity and so unless everything obeys their slightest whim they are prostrated by every minor upset, so trifling are the things that can detract from the complete happiness of a man at the summit of fortune.⁵

So we may agree that a certain amount of hard luck or misfortune is beneficial. But I am after a sense for the expression “Suffering is a grace” that is by no means identical to “Adversity builds character,” at least if the latter is taken to mean that the value of the adversity or the suffering lies in the fact that it builds a kind of endurance that may be useful in the future. For on such an account of the “grace” of suffering it would appear that without future trials or hardship the suffering—the “preparation”—were idle. And if the endurance could be found in some other way then the suffering would be superfluous. Indeed, on such an account it might seem that suffering would not be a grace at all to one who already possessed whatever it might take to face life’s ups and downs. But what I am concerned with here is the possibility of a grace that will show itself precisely in the recognition that on one’s own one *cannot* possess “whatever it takes” to face life’s ups and downs. Here suffering will be seen as a grace without reference to what the future holds. The suffering will be seen as a grace—a gift—not because it may prove useful in the future—in which case it also might *not* be useful—but because, as one might put it, the suffering brings one into contact with the truth. Doubtless, talk of “coming into contact with the truth” will seem more than a little odd to some. But the truth I have in mind here could be said to concern the contingency of the world, or the contingency of one’s own being. It might be said to concern the finitude of one’s human existence and powers. Such a truth might seem a counter-weight to our own tendency to pride, to the kind of pride Aeschylus depicts in the *Agamemnon*. Such a truth might also open the door to an understanding of the nature of God, or the nature of God’s love for the world. Consider these lines from the first meditation in de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

Consider that a certain number of years ago you were not yet in the world and that your present being was truly nothing. My soul, where were we at that time? The world had already existed for a long time, but of us there was as yet nothing...Humble yourself profoundly before God, and like the psalmist say with all your heart: "Lord, before you I am truly nothing. How were you mindful of me so as to create me?" Alas, my soul, you were engulfed in that ancient nothing and you would still be there if God had not drawn you out of it. What could you have done in that nothingness?⁶

The suffering that shows me the limits of my own powers may also show me the role of "grace" in my life. It may show me that my life itself is a grace, as de Sales wants us to see in this meditation. And in this way it may show me God's love, God's love for me as a created being, a being that might not have been.

Now I have not argued that the attitude that sees suffering as grace is the best or the correct attitude to take in the face of all suffering or, for that matter, in the face of any suffering. I have only tried to suggest how such an attitude need not be a sign of confusion. Still, there may be something in such an attitude that could lead one to call it corrupt. It is this: It is all very well for a man to view his own suffering as God's will and to call it a grace; but what of his neighbor's suffering? What of the poor man's children who "stare blankly" at the television camera? At this point, whatever understanding is supposed to come through suffering may begin to look less like understanding and more like the opiate of which Marx speaks, a kind of numbing comfort that enables one not only to tolerate one's own suffering but to tolerate the sufferings of others as well. The difficulties here, it seems to me, are many and great. So, for example, in the passage in de Sales from which I quoted above there is to be found no talk of "tolerating" even one's own suffering. On the contrary, in one of his letters to a woman suffering an undisclosed "illness," far from there being talk of tolerating suffering, he encourages her to "offer to suffer even more" and to "love and cherish these afflictions as coming from such a gentle hand"—the hand of God. Yet at the same time there is the direction that she do all she can to find remedies for her illness.⁷ There may seem to be a contradiction here, and I shall return to that possibility below.

The central difficulty with respect to the suffering of others has, I think, been well put by R. F. Holland. In an essay titled "On the Form of the Problem of Evil," Holland discusses the possibility that one could see one's suffering as God's love, and he makes reference to Mother Julian's remark: "But freely the Lord giveth when he will; and suffer us in woe sometimes. And both is one love." Holland notes that among the gifts for which Mother Julian prayed to God was "bodily sickness in youth." He goes on:

Someone who did not find this (prayer) incoherent might still wonder how far it touched the most difficult aspect of the problem. An attitude possible

for an exceptional person in suffering is not necessarily adoptable towards the suffering of another. Could Julian have wished that the serious illness which was to come to her should go to someone else? Obviously not.⁸

But consider these remarks by Simone Weil in a letter to her friend Father Perrin:

Goodbye. I wish you all possible good things except the cross; for I do not love my neighbor as myself, you particularly, as you have noticed. But Christ granted to his well-beloved disciple, and probably to all that disciple's spiritual lineage, to come to him not through degradation, defilement, and distress, but in uninterrupted joy, purity, and sweetness. That is why I can allow myself to wish that even if one day you have the honor of dying a violent death for Our Lord, it may be with joy and without any anguish; also that only three of the beatitudes (*mites, mundo corde, pacifici*) will apply to you. All the others involve more or less of suffering.

This wish is not due only to the frailty of human friendship. For, with any human being taken individually, I always find reasons for concluding that sorrow and misfortune do not suit him, either because he seems too mediocre for anything so great or, on the contrary, too precious to be destroyed. One cannot fail more seriously in the second of the two essential commandments.⁹

Now the following entry can be found in Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* of 1914-18:

It is generally assumed that it is evil to want someone else to be unfortunate. Can this be correct? Can it be worse than to want him to be fortunate?¹⁰

And in the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is the suggestion that one mark of the greedy—and as such the unjust—man will be that he desires too many of those goods of fortune which, when considered unconditionally, are good, but which are not always good for this or that person. Aristotle goes on:

Though human beings pray for these (goods of fortune) and pursue them, they are wrong; the right thing is to pray that what is good unconditionally will also be good for us, but to choose only what is good for us.¹¹

Does all of this introduce the possibility that love for another might involve the hope that the beloved meet with certain misfortunes? Not quite, I think, but very nearly.¹² Here once more is Francis de Sales:

I am beseeching God, my dear Daughter, to give you this holy patience; and the only thing that I can ask of him on your behalf is that he may fashion your heart entirely according to his liking so that he may live and reign there eternally; that he may fashion it, I say, with a hammer or with a chisel or with the stroke of a brush: it is for him to do as he wills, don't you agree...? Surely this is the attitude we should take.¹³

The attitude is one of willing that God's will be done. And it involves a recognition that suffering may be the grace through which His will is done. So that while we do not have here a prayer that someone will suffer, we are far from any conception of suffering as an evil to be avoided. Even here,

however, it will be important to remember de Sales' counsel to his correspondent that she seek all available remedies for her suffering. If this seems paradoxical, it might seem less so when coupled with his suggestion that the best form of abjection is the form we do not choose. To fail to seek remedies would be to choose. On the other hand, to seek remedies in a certain spirit will be to fail to will God's will.

It seems important to acknowledge here that even if someone could pray such a prayer as de Sales prays and be innocent of both confusion and corruption, it would not follow that just anyone could do so. At the same time, if not just anyone can do so, it does not follow that no one can do so. It is possible that certain ways of talking about suffering—and so, too, certain ways of praying about suffering—are available only to those who have themselves suffered, or suffered greatly. So that the same talk—or the same prayer—from the mouths of others will signify either confusion or corruption. This in turn suggests the possibility that one might have suffered too little to say or even to understand some things that are nonetheless true about suffering. It is sometimes suggested that only the comfortable can talk of suffering as a grace, and that if they suffered more themselves they would see that such talk is in fact a cruel lie. But perhaps it is only for those who have suffered greatly to see that the “lie” is true.

Certainly it has not been my purpose to demonstrate that it is true. It may be that the best that many or most of us can do with these matters is to note what some others have said. No doubt, among the things that others have said will be prayers. So it is likely to happen that some people, perhaps aware of their own confusion or unclarity, and perhaps even acknowledging some kind of corruption on their own part, will nonetheless imitate those who have said those prayers in the hope that they, too, might learn to pray them without confusion or corruption. It does not seem to me that such an attempt to learn must itself be either confused or corrupt, even if it is the attempt of human beings who in many other respects *are* both confused and corrupt. On the other hand, like most learning by imitation, it is likely to be rather messy, and not always entirely successful.

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NOTES

1. Francis L. Gross, “Teaching Cognitive Moral Development in College,” *The Journal of General Education* (Winter, 1981), p. 291.

2. I quote Richmond Lattimore's translation of the *Oresteia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 11. 176-178.

3. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, translated with an introduction by John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1950), Part III, Chapter 6, pp. 141-42.

4. *Selected Letters*, translated with an introduction by Elizabeth Stopp (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 228.
5. *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by V. E. Watts (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 63.
6. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part I, Chapter 9, p. 53.
7. *Selected Letters*, p. 198.
8. "On the Form of the Problem of Evil," in *Against Empiricism* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1980), p. 242.
9. "Spiritual Autobiography," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), p. 26. The letter appears in the collection *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 1966).
10. *Notebooks, 1914-1918*, edited by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, second edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 78.
11. *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terrence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1129b.
12. I am grateful to Peter Winch for reading an earlier version of this essay and helping me to avoid some serious mistakes here.
13. *Selected Letters*, pp. 197-98.