

Bringing value and joy into the universe

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High school volunteers from St. Mary of the Hills Church in Rochester Hills, Mich., clean trash and debris from an alley in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood July 17. (CNS)

If you were God, would you have created a world like ours? Can't you imagine doing a better job of it? How can you justify God's creating the messed-up planet we live on?

The classic Christian answer is the so-called free will defense. But first a word about the classic wrong answer, Adam's fall.

Almost all Jewish and Christian theologians coming out of our nation's best schools consider the story of Adam's fall unhistorical. They label it an ancient Jewish myth. The most obvious problem with the story is that all Adam's children are punished for his sin. If God thinks like that, we're in big trouble. Now only fundamentalists take the story literally -- that Adam and Eve were real people, that Eve came from Adam's rib.

Now the free will defense. Let's begin with an analogy. What do we most want for our child? Good looks, smarts, popularity, wealth, power, fun, happiness? Nothing wrong with these, but are they what we most want? If we are wise, what we most want, or should want, is noble character, virtuous habits, plain old goodness. Another way to put it: What do we most admire in others? The answer would be, or should be, the same.

Accordingly, what would God want in us, his earthly children? The same. But how does one go about creating goodness? Can God snap his fingers and, poof!, out pops a good person? No. That's a logical impossibility, like a square circle. As C.S. Lewis put it, God can do all possible things, and a square circle is not a possible thing to do. Neither is a good person who's never been tested or challenged. Not even God can crank such a person out.

Goodness has meaning only in a world where beings can freely choose something that demands a sacrifice from them -- such as being patient with someone who irritates us. By contrast, when we choose to do something we're already inclined to do -- such as playing tennis with our friends -- there is no nobility in that, for there is no sacrifice.

When raising our children, don't we, when we have the energy, tell them to tackle the difficult duty rather than drift into meaningless activity? To clean their rooms instead of vegging out in front of the TV? Why do we do

this? Because we want them to grow up into dutiful, thoughtful, compassionate human beings rather than narcissistic selfniks.

According to the free will defense, that's what God wants too, but nobility of character does not come cheap. Unless morally challenged, we don't grow, just as spoiled children don't mature. Since God desires nothing so much as for us to become noble beings, God challenges us continually. And we experiment: We learn what works and what doesn't, what brings us praise and what brings us censure, what counts as sensitivity and what counts as cruelty, what can make us flourish and what can kill us. God has designed our world to be a moral gymnasium. We are souls in training. Some athletes prefer to play teams they can beat, but others prefer stiffer competition. If we are wise, we will not wilt under the pressure of the "stiffer competition" -- the rejection by the one we love, the being passed over at work, the tumor -- but will fight on. Trusting in God, we will bear in mind that the greater the suffering, the greater the potential for growth. God has given us a world full of physical and moral challenge, and God hopes that we will use our freedom to choose the good over the bad, and do it habitually, in spite of tremendous temptation to capitulate. To choose the good is to bring value, excellence and ultimately joy into the universe, and that is what God wants. It's what we should want too.

Does this explanation of suffering work for you? I can foresee several objections. First, what about all the people who fail to compete successfully? Are they rejected by their Creator? Second, what about the glaring differences in starting positions, with some of us blessed from birth and others cursed? Is God arbitrary? And third, what about prayer? If God wants us to be challenged, if God sees the need for us to suffer for our own eventual good, does it make sense for us to ask God to remove the challenge, as Jesus did in his agony in the garden?

Also, when it comes to particulars, mysteries remain. Why does a child suffer so much from Tay-Sachs disease? Why does a wonderful grandma slowly die of protracted Alzheimer's? A daughter killed in a car crash by a drunk driver -- why?

On the other hand, the general drift of the defense makes good sense. The Protestant philosopher John Hick, whose masterly book *Evil and the God of Love* is our generation's best expression of the defense, put it this way: "It would seem, then, that an environment intended to make possible the growth in free beings of the finest characteristics of personal life must have a good deal in common with our present world."

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