



ORIGINATORS: Brian And Lynne Jackson
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Absurdism

ABSURDISM: GOD, SUFFERING, AND BELIEF

The Howard Burckle book, *God, Suffering, and Belief* has many strong, logical and pivotal statements in it which bear out the premise for will. The first thing to do is get them into this manuscript for use.

These [] brackets will be used in the editorial text to clear up breaks in the references; these < > brackets will be used to include comments from the editor, myself.

"We shall consider the four forms of suffering--the faces of absurdity, we might call them--which seem to pose the greatest threat to belief in God. Some persons today see all humanity as abandoned in a spiritually empty, purposeless and ultimately destructive universe.

Others are stunned because God seems to have betrayed His people into the hands of genocidal murderers.

There are others who think that perhaps God hates their racial group and has locked them within a social system dominated by racist oppressors. There are others who say the Father God regards women as inferior to men and sanctions women's suppression.

Whether we can confront all the faces of absurdity and still feel justified in believing in God remains to be seen. Abandonment we can deal with well enough, I think. It is the absurdities of genocide, racism, and sexism which are most threatening to belief. Theologians have neglected them--fled from them, actually. We have not come to terms with the murder of the Jews and the oppression of blacks and women, and I doubt that we can do so successfully without giving up certain venerable assumptions about what God does in the world."

*'In 1959 [Alasdair MacIntyre] wrote an acute little book called **Difficulties in Christian Belief**, which focuses on the problem of evil as the chief obstacle to believing in God. The problem arises, MacIntyre says, from the logical inconsistency among the three statements "God is Omnipotent" "God Is wholly Good" and "Evil occurs in the universe." He examines five standard solutions having to do with evil which are sometimes thought to remove the inconsistency: 1) evil is punishment 2) evil is discipline 3) evil is education 4) evil is a consequence of free will, and 5) evil is mystery.*

MacIntyre weighs each of these possibilities and concludes that they all fail. <First of 'Editor's Notes:' Without the consequence and scenario of "A Matter Of Will," these authors are close, but do not have the tools to finish the picture. Such is the purpose of

this document--to show how will is the answer.>

Then he considers a sixth possibility, that evil occurs because God has created the world as a place for self-determining agents to exercise responsible choices. God wishes human beings to be capable of moral failure and of refusing to grow. Thus, God will that the world be a place where both good and evil are possible, and although he does not desire evil, he does in a sense will it. 'For God will that men should do what they will, even if it is not what God would wish them to do.' <He has just, in a rough form, stated the outline purpose and basic premise of "A Matter Of Will.">

MacIntyre assesses this argument; and, although he finds it not beyond criticism, he endorses it. It will serve because, with it, we can 'see in outline how the facts of evil have their place in the Christian scheme and how we are not faced by a stark contradiction at this point.' At least it provides a basis on which those who already believe in God may continue to do so without involving themselves in sheer irrationality.'

'Jean-Paul Sartre says.....God does not exist.....; Martin Buber declares.....God is in 'eclipse'.....; Dietrich Bonhoeffer says.....this is a 'post-Christian period'.....; Alistair Kee terms it a 'post-religious era; Theodore Roszak describes Christian-scientific culture as a 'spiritual wasteland.'; Catholic philosopher Michael Novak call this the 'experience of nothingness'.

Not everyone admits to such feelings of desperate spiritual isolation, and those who do may not attribute them to the absence of God. Nevertheless, according to many of our foremost theologians, these feelings are pervasive and profound." <Underlining the urgency of "A Matter Of Will," which points out why these feelings are present: what the Divine Master Plan was (in my estimation) and how this situation is resolved.>

'Along with the indifference of the world goes a sense of purposelessness. Human history does not flow toward a meaningful goal; the living forms on this planet seem to have no reason for existing; the vast inanimate world gives no evidence of having been deliberately created. The world presents itself as a vast collection of mystifying stellar systems mindlessly pulsing to pointless rhythms.

On the planet Earth--and where else, we do not know---life just happens to have emerged. <All this seems apparent to him who knows not God, and His plans; I do not presuppose to know God's mind, or understand His plans, but through 'A Matter Of Will' we may emerge from the darkness of inner despair>

I am convinced that the absence of God from the center of our lives, and the intense

feeling of abandonment that is latent in this, is one of the salient spiritual maladies of our day. Paul Tillich is surely right that 'meaninglessness' is the dominant form of the 'threat of nonbeing' in the contemporary Western society. People in this society do have extraordinary difficulty living in such a way that God plays a direct and vitalizing role in all they do and feel. Too often even those who say that they believe in God reveal by their timorous and self-preferring behavior that their belief is not rooted in the deep soil of God's presence. If genuineness of belief is measured by the degree to which persons derive the strength and guidance for their daily lives from their relation to God and through God correlate their short-range and self-centered desires with a universally fulfilling global purpose, then belief is indeed rare.'

'I am convinced that no one is entitled to believe in God who has not faced and accounted for the basic negativities with which Camus deals <accepting the condition of abandonment as the essential condition of humanity--and proposing to live nobly despite this absurdity>.'

'The world contains not only natural beauty and human nobility, by the twin evils of death and suffering, which ultimately control our fate.

It should be plain to all who are honest that the world is fundamentally structured not only to nurture but to injure and, finally, destroy us <impersonal: the same water that slakes our thirst, drowns us; the fire that cooks our food, warms our homes--kills us>.'

'When the world does not value us, we become free to value ourselves.

When the world assaults us, we act. We decide not to accept indifference and murderous hostility. We 'rebel.' As we do so, we discover that there is reason to value ourselves, that we are beings of extraordinary worth. We do not merely decree that we are of value; we discover that we are so.'

'First, by the direct testimony of our senses we are sure that there are objects before us; there is a world.

What the world is, we are most unsure. Even science in the end proves to be a tissue of probabilities and cognitive constructs. 'Poetry,' Camus calls it. Second, we know we exist and that we feel and think such and such.

The human 'heart' is to this extent open to itself. <I think, therefore I am> With an intuitive directness we grasp the existence of ourselves and the flux of feelings and thoughts that compose our conscious life.

Third, we know that our situation is absurd <The reason that this author calls it 'absurdity' is that, without an understanding of 'A Matter Of Will,' it seems only to be so>.'

'Everything depends on the sense in which the plague <from Albert Camus' novel, The Plague> is in accord with God's will. Only something willed for humanity's benefit or for the benefit of the entire creation should be loved, and I do not think this can be said about the plague. Although plague is a part of God's creation and thus a consequence of God's will, it is not, I think something God willingly decrees for our benefit. It is, rather, an unavoidable accompaniment of the system; we must bear it, but we need not love it.'

'Not every event which seems unintelligible to our human, all too human, intelligence, is God's direct intention. The world contains not only mystery (that is, more than humanly intelligible, divinely-wrought occurrences), but outright irrationality; and part of the human task is to distinguish them.'

'I should say that it is God's will that we should struggle against them, that we should fight to preserve life. This holds true even though by God's will we are mortal' <Only indirectly; man's original sin is what made him mortal; it is man's will which accounts for that mortality>'

'For [the creature], dying is an essential ingredient in living, and it is as important to die well as to live well.'

'When we permit ourselves to think openly about the Nazi assault upon Jewry, we see concretely what is meant by absurdity. Here was institutionalized irrationality, organized destructivity, programmed nihilism--the ultimate in the sadistic use of human efficiency.'

'How can the Holocaust possibly be reconciled with the traditional belief that every human being is precious in God's eyes and that Jews are especially beloved? How can destruction of such diabolic magnitude occur in a world ordered by a God of love and justice? <'A Matter Of Will!>'

'What we shall do, therefore, is try to comprehend how the Holocaust could have occurred if, as the Bible teaches, the world is ruled by a God of wisdom, justice, and power who loves all humanity and cares for Jews as His special people. <'A Matter Of Will!>'

'[Emil Fackenheim] agrees with Rubenstein that the absurdity of Auschwitz seems to

belie the presence of the God of history. Nevertheless, he refuses to give up wither God or the belief in Jewish chosenness."

'The time for the Messiah to come <for the first time, for the Jews> was then <at Auschwitz>; a Messiah who is able to come but who at Auschwitz did not come, has become an impossibility <Outside of 'A Matter Of Will!>.'

'The basic evidence is the satanic nature of nazism. The Jew was 'singled out by a demonic power which sought his death absolutely, i.e., as an end in itself.' No Jew--not even the most convinced secularist--can escape this much of the supernatural. Jews know 'that the devil, if not God, is alive.' Further, all should recognize that this absolute negation must be countered with an absolute affirmation.

Someone must will Jewish life as totally as the demons of nazism will Jewish death.'

'What human being can understand how the just and loving Lord of all humanity could choose to deliver Israel from slavery by drowning his other children, the Egyptians? What human mind can comprehend a God who is at once transcendent and immanent, eternal and linked with time, unchanging and involved in historical process?'

'If God is Truth, then whatever happens in God's world must have an explanation accessible to some degree to every rational creature. <I believe He is making some of the answers known through 'A Matter Of Will!>

Even the Holocaust must be intelligible. Neither its admitted uniqueness nor its unparalleled savagery can entirely block our understanding. Although the Holocaust is in some ways unique, it is not entirely unlike what happened to Jews in earlier tragedies <The Roman Coliseum> and to what has happened to other peoples <The enslavement and oppression of blacks>. It is best understood, in Michael Wyschogrod's words, as 'a first among equals.'

'A God who exercises total control over absolutely everything that happens and exercises His will regardless of the inclinations of those affected is not supreme goodness but sheer power--awesome but not deserving of worship. A God deserving of worship shares power with His creatures, allowing them, as far as possible, to make their own decisions, teaching them to decide wisely, controlling them by helping them control themselves <in this era>. Perfect power nourishes that power in others, thus bringing new and greater power into being.

Through His creatures' deeds, He calls into being absolutely new, voluntary motions. He

gives existence to independent, living images of Himself.

Thus, divine perfection implies <self-imposed!> limitation. Being perfectly powerful, God allows rational creatures room to think and choose for themselves. God makes them able to be wrong as well as right, foolish as well as wise; God arranges the world so that creatures can initiate and carry through projects both creative and destructive. God exercises 'adequate' power, as Charles Hartshorne says; that is, God does for the world everything which can 'be done and need be done by one universal or cosmic agent <found within the work of the Holy Spirit, the agent for this era> and leaves to 'local agents' the power and right to do as much as they can for themselves.'

'Again and again in the biblical narrative God's will for humankind is negated; and each time God sends someone through whom the alienation is overcome <using man to do His will corresponds with man's will being the determining agent in God's action--obedience, in other words--and 'A Matter Of Will' is fulfilled>: Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Judges, the Prophets, Saul, David, Solomon <Jesus!>. Surely this view of a God who can be temporarily thwarted by human beings is at least as Jewish as Christian.'

'If enough human beings respond to the inducements of God <'A Matter Of Will!>, God will overcome our destructiveness. What God cannot <by predetermined choice, or will not!> do is override our free determinations by some magical intervention <in this era>.'

As Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits observes, 'God cannot as a rule intervene whenever man's use of freedom displeases Him <in this era>.' To do so would abolish good and evil, and man as well.'

Whoever says that Auschwitz absolutely should not have occurred and that God should, at all costs, have prevented it, says that human beings should not exist.'

The Holocaust occurred because God wills radical evil as a possibility in this world and because human beings, contrary to God's primary intention, willed to translate that perverse possibility into actuality. The Holocaust occurred because God, willing it as a possibility and human freedom as an actuality <in this era>, had to concur in its actualization.'

Given genuine human self-determination, it is inevitable that God be involved in the evils which flaw this world, and it is inevitable that the world be flawed. The first is so because God makes us free, knowing that we will sin <in this era>. The second is so because only God can be absolute perfection.'

'The term 'evil' is reserved for those feature of the world which develop our of the world's intrinsic imperfections. The world is not evil, but it is vulnerable to evil, and sooner or later it will be marred by it. Evil, then, is the loss of some appropriate value already possessed, or the failure to acquire some value needed or innocently desired.'

'At the same time, there is no need to say that God wills the evil of the evil events. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, there is an ambiguity in the sentence, 'Everything happens by the will of God,' which can be eliminated if we say that 'God wills that men should do what they will, even if it is not what God would wish them to do.'

Thus there is a reservation in God's willing the world. God consents freely and fully to our right to do what we will, but resistingly to any evil we do. For the sake of creaturely creativity, God exposes the divine good to contradiction.'

God willingly allows the frustrations of His aims, assumes the ultimate responsibility for the evil that is done, opens Himself to the suffering which comes with the world's suffering. This is the price God is prepared to pay and the measure of the high value God puts on the world <a price He did pay--in Jesus, sacrificed for the sins of the world>.'

'I am agreeing with Berkovits when he says that God is obliged to create the possibility of evil <represented by the existence of Satan> in order to establish the possibility of good <or the choice to do good versus evil>; however, I am going beyond that and saying that indirectly God also creates the actuality of evil <in Satan, presumably>.'

'God does not infallibly control human history--that is, He does not deal with human beings in the same way He deals with atoms and galaxies--because this cannot be done. Human beings are categorically different from atoms and galaxies. The very concept of a totally manipulated human being is a contradiction, a nonsensical concept, as incapable of actualization as a round square <especially so in this era>. If God wants this world, He must will the evil <indirectly> which His creatures enact.'

'I do not think that this commits us to saying that Auschwitz is a good thing and that the world would be deficient without it; but it does imply that the world would be deficient without the possibility of Auschwitz, because it would not be a place where freedom carries the maximum of risk and persons bear the full consequences of their actions.'

'The Holocaust speaks not only to Jews but to all human beings, and it tells of the radical evil which has been in the world as a possibility from the beginning and which threatens us all, at all times. Because of the Holocaust, we know the depths to which humanity can fall.'

'Blacks should accept no cosmology which does not give human beings full responsibility for their own affairs. Human beings must choose their values and goals, make their decisions, initiate and carry out their projects.'

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