

Why Would a Loving God Allow Suffering?

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- Magis Center -

Introduction

In view of what has been said about the unconditional love of God and His redemption of suffering, one might ask the questions, why would God have allowed suffering to occur in the first place? If God intends to redeem every aspect of suffering in His unconditional love, why didn't He simply eliminate the possibility of suffering so that we could avoid pain and He wouldn't have to redeem it? Why not nip the entire suffering business in the bud – at the beginning of the world?

As will be seen, there are several reasons why God would allow suffering to occur in the world, but all of them, according to the Christian view, would have to be linked to the advancement of love – the free appropriation of love. Thus, if God allows human beings to cause suffering to one another, He does so (according to the Christian view) for reasons of advancing the free appropriation of love; and if God created an imperfect world with natural laws, which *indirectly* cause suffering, He would have done so for the same reason. If God is unconditional love (see free article – “[Who is God](#)”), He would not directly cause suffering (except to impede those headed toward imminent self-destruction), and if He *allows* suffering, He does so to advance love and to strengthen His invitation to eternal unconditional love.

Well, then, if God does not *directly* cause suffering (except to impede those headed toward imminent self-destruction), and is therefore only an *indirect* cause of suffering, what or who are the true *direct* causes of suffering? There are three major sources: two, which arise out of conditions extrinsic to our identity decisions, and one, which is related to our identity decisions. The two sources extrinsic to our identity decisions are:

- 1) suffering caused directly by human agents (individuals or groups – e.g., Joe causes suffering to Mary, or a political regime persecutes hated minorities); and
- 2) suffering by natural forces (e.g., tsunamis, earthquakes, draught, disease, old age, etc.).

There are many nuances and combinations of these two sources of suffering. For example, a preventable disease such as leprosy (a natural cause) is not prevented or delimited by a particular country in order that tax money can be used to incite a new war (a human cause); or a tsunami (a natural cause) hits a particular country, but the country next to it decides not to use easily accessible resources to help because the victims are thought to be troublesome or unworthy (a human cause). Many forms of psychological suffering are attributable to such combinations. For example, a person might feel depression because of a chemical imbalance (a natural cause), which causes him to be marginalized by people who are fearful of his peculiar conduct (a human cause), which, in turn, exacerbates his depression and its physical symptoms.

The third source of suffering is a result of the intentional or unintentional decisions we make about our identity, purpose in life, and happiness along the stages of life's way (e.g., a

comparative identity or a contributive identity; a decision to be fundamentally autonomous or interpersonal; etc.). These identity decisions define happiness and life purpose for us, and those definitions, in turn, determine whether we *believe ourselves to be* happy or unhappy, purposeful or unpurposeful, worthwhile or unworthwhile, etc. We have already seen the unhappiness that can come from dominant Level 2 happiness – emptiness and the comparison game, and we have also seen the unhappiness that can come from rejecting transcendent happiness (Level 4) – cosmic emptiness, loneliness, alienation, and guilt (see free article – [“Escaping Your Personal Hell”](#)).

According to Jesus, God does not want anybody to suffer. Indeed, He should be likened to the most compassionate and affectionate of parents (*Abba* – the father of the Prodigal Son), who would gladly suffer in the place of his/her child, but realizes that this child must make her own decisions and must deal with the challenges of life as a free human agent. God suffers with everyone who suffers, and God intends to redeem every scintilla of suffering in His providence for all eternity. Indeed, God the Father sent His only begotten Son into the world to suffer with us and for us – so that He could be a companion with us in our suffering and bring us to our eternal salvation. God *may allow* suffering to occur in the world (for the reasons mentioned below), but His intention is to transform it into love. If He does not do this now, He might do it later; if He does not do this later in this world, He may do it in the eternal world, which is to come. The key idea to remember is that God has an eternal perspective, and that He will transform all suffering into love for all eternity.

Thus, there can be no suffering, which is *completely* tragic. Tragedy may exist for a while, but in the hands of God, it will eventually be turned into love, and that love will last for all eternity. Even incredible tragedies, like the death of a child, are not *ultimately and completely* tragic, they are only *partially and temporally* tragic, for the temporary loss and grief that parents would feel in such circumstances is already compensated in the *life of the child* by God bestowing unconditional love upon him or her in His heavenly kingdom (see the free article – [“Suffering, Love, and Eternal Life”](#)). Yes, God feels the grief of the loving parents who miss their beloved, and He will feel that grief for as long as the parents experience it; but God simultaneously bestows unconditional and eternal love and fulfillment on the child whose loss is the cause of that grief.

Therefore, in the Christian view, suffering is complex. It includes the genuine experience of deep grief at premature loss. It also includes an experience of faith or hope that God is already bestowing unconditional love upon this child. It also includes an experience of trust that one will be reunited with that child in the eternity of God’s unconditional love; and it also includes an experience of “peace beyond all understanding” (from the Holy Spirit) intimating that everything is going to be all right.

This mixture of thoughts and emotions can be quite confusing and even trying for a person of faith, because one might feel guilt about experiencing this sense of peace (from the Holy Spirit) when one “should” be experiencing the terrible loss of the beloved. One might believe that one’s faith in being reunited with one’s child for all eternity should not mitigate the terrible “injustice” of having that child taken prematurely (even if the child were taken by *human* evil or purely *natural* causes). The important point for Christians to remember is that God expects us to

feel all these emotions in all of their complexity throughout a prolonged period of grieving. It is therefore important for us not to let one feeling become more important or authentic than another so that the “more authentic one” mitigates or cancels the “less authentic one.” Christians need to experience “grief – profound loss – hope in unconditional love – hope in eternal reuniting – peace beyond all understanding” all at once, in all its complexity, unmitigated, until Unconditional Love can make transparent sense of it all. This is an incredibly hard thing to do; yet it is a path to the transformation of suffering into love, and therefore a path into the horizon of Unconditional Love’s eternity.

Saint Paul expresses this very hope for the redemption of suffering not only for us, but also for the whole of creation through us, in a remarkable passage from the Letter to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:18-27)

I present the above overriding principle because I am concerned that the reader might think that the forthcoming presentation about why God might permit suffering is a bit too philosophical, too cold, too detached from the real emotion and sadness of suffering. I do not intend this at all. I do not want to distract the reader from the pathos intrinsic to suffering. I do not want to present a detached philosophical view of suffering. I merely want to give a sense of the *logical* parameters, which might surround the *necessity* for God to permit the *possibility* of suffering induced by human and natural causes. I beg the reader’s indulgence to grant me the above overriding principle as I do so.

With this in mind, we may now proceed to the two major extrinsic causes of suffering – and why God would allow them to occur.

I. Why Does God Allow Humans to Cause Suffering?

So why would an unconditionally loving God allow human beings to cause suffering to one another? In a phrase, because love requires the freedom to be unloving, and “unlove” frequently causes suffering. In other words, without the capacity to cause suffering (through choices of

unlove), human beings could not be truly loving, and this would defeat the purpose of an unconditionally loving God. Why does love require the freedom to choose unlove? If one does not have the freedom to choose *unloving* behaviors, then one's *loving* behaviors are not really chosen – they are merely programmed (like impulses, desires, or instincts). Beings, which have no real alternatives, are not the true *initiators* of their actions; they are merely responding to stimuli in the *only* way they can. Thus, if one's love is not chosen, one's love is not one's own. It originates from a cause *other* than one's self.

This insight may be deepened by examining what would happen if God made us incapable of unloving behaviors. Let us suppose that I did not have the capacity to choose unloving behaviors. It would seem that the world would be a better place. After all, I would not have to worry about acting on a greedy impulse that could cause harm to another person; I would not have to worry about insulting my friend out of a sense of fear or pride; I wouldn't even have to worry about any of the Ten Commandments or the seven deadly sins. I would be incapable of lying, stealing, coveting, egocentricity, arrogance, anger, jealousy, contempt, and all of the other attitudes or dispositions which could cause me to do harm to another human being.

There are a few problems with this “better world,” not the least of which is that my incapacity to act on these harmful dispositions and attitudes would reflect rather poorly on my intelligence and reflectivity – indeed, I would be, well, virtually lobotomized. Imagine, for a moment, that you were not capable of fearing another person's superior talent – that you were incapable of being jealous or wanting more than you could ever really need. If you were truly incapable of these things, you would either be incapable of imagining them, or you would not have the self-consciousness to want to make those things your own. In either case, your intelligence (characterized by your powers of imagination and self-consciousness) would be manifestly inferior to what it currently is. Without these powers of imagination, you would not be able to create; you would not even be able to identify obstacles to a better life so that those obstacles could be overcome. The limits to your imagination would be the limits to your apprehension of a future; and the limits to your self-consciousness (your awareness of yourself) would be the limits to your recognition of *your* future. You wouldn't be able to see alternative possibilities in your future – making your apprehension of cause and effect merely a response to stimuli (desire for food → lunge at meat). Cause and effect would certainly not be set within the context of a possible future, but only the satiation of a sensorial appetite or instinct.

Thus, God is caught in a dilemma from the very beginning. If God refuses to create a being capable of unlove, He must also refuse to create a being with the powers of self-consciousness and imagination that would make unlove desirable; and if God refuses to make a being with such powers of self-consciousness and imagination, He would also have to refuse to make a being capable of foresight, self-determination, and creativity. God's refusal to make an agent capable of unlove is also a refusal to make a self-conscious, creative being capable of choosing love. He would be relegated to creating – well – cows and crustaceans.

This supposed self-limitation of God would be contrary to His unconditionally loving nature, for it would be perfectly consistent for a loving God to want to create “beloveds” with the capacity for love. Now, if God refused to create a creature with self-consciousness and powers of imagination capable of seeing a future beyond mere response to impulse or stimulus (because He

wanted to make that creature incapable of unlove), then He could not create a creature capable of love – because love requires freedom of choice, and choice requires the ability to see options in one’s future which may run contrary to impulses and stimuli. Without self-consciousness (the vision of “self”) and the imagination to envision *ourselves* in opposed future scenarios, we could not be held accountable for anything we did. We would not have the power to *choose* loving or unloving conduct, because we could not envision ourselves as both doing and not doing such loving or unloving conduct. Choice requires seeing the alternatives. No choice, no accountability – but only response to impulse and stimulus; no accountability, no ownership of an action; no ownership of an action, no ownership of one’s love. Love, in this case, would be merely a response to impulse or stimulus; it would be merely an accident of one’s nature or programming. It would not be chosen. It would not be one’s own. Love, which is not one’s own, is not love at all. It is merely programmed behaviors for the purpose of producing beneficial effects. Computers can be programmed to do very positive and beneficial actions (and programmed not to do negative actions), but we certainly would not say that those computers are loving.

There is perhaps a simpler approach to seeing God’s dilemma. If God is to create a being capable of love, then He would have to allow this being to make that love its own. Now, if God is to allow a being to make love its own, He must allow that being to create its loving actions *anew*, that is, to have the loving action originate from within itself, and not merely from a program or cause other than the self. If this being is to create its loving actions anew, it must have a *choice* either to perform a loving action or not to perform it. If it does not have such a choice, its actions would originate from programs, instincts, causes, or stimuli *other than itself*. The “loving” action would not be created anew by the self, and hence, the “loving” action would not belong to the “loving” agent. It would not be love but merely an instinctual, caused, or stimulated *behavior* with beneficial consequences. Just because my computer’s actions are beneficial to me does not mean it loves me.

God’s dilemma now becomes apparent. If God is to create a loving being, He must create that being with the capacity to create a loving action anew; and if He is to create a being with that capacity, He must create a being with the capacity to choose love or unlove; and if He creates a being with that capacity, He creates the very *possibility* of unlove leading to suffering.

Note here that God does not create the *actuality* of suffering in the world, but only the *possibility* of suffering, by creating agents who have the real choice, the real power, to act contrary to love. As noted above, God *must* create this possibility; otherwise, He could not create a free agent, and therefore, could not create a loving being – a beloved with the freedom to love others with self-initiated love. God’s purpose in creating “little beloveds who are loving” would be frustrated.

In sum, if God were to create a creature incapable of unlove, He would also have to create a creature incapable of love. Thus, he could not create beings capable of jealousy, egocentricity, or hatred. Yet to create a being incapable of jealousy is to create a being incapable of magnanimity; to create it incapable of egocentricity is to create it incapable of altruism; and to create it incapable of hatred is to create it incapable of forgiveness and compassion. Thus, if God truly wanted to create beings in his own image and likeness (Genesis), He had to create them capable of unloving choices and behaviors – with self-consciousness, creative thought and imagination,

and free will. If He wanted to create beings in His own image and likeness, He had to create them with a power for evil – meaning that He had to create the *possibility* – but not the actuality – of evil.

II. Why Does God Allow Suffering Caused by Nature?

It is somewhat easier to understand why God would allow suffering to occur through human agents than it is to understand why He would allow suffering to occur through natural causation. After all, it would seem that if God creates the natural order, He could have created it perfectly – so perfectly that there would be no possibility of human suffering. He could have created each human being in a perfectly self-sufficient way, so that we would have no need. Or, if we had need, He could have created us with a perfect capacity to fulfill those needs within a world of perfectly abundant resources. So why did God create an imperfect natural order? Why did He create a natural order which would allow scarcity? Why did He create a natural order that would give rise to earthquakes and volcanoes and tsunamis? Why did He create a natural order which would permit vulnerabilities within the human genome that lead to blindness, deafness, or muscular degeneration? Why did He create a natural order, which would permit debilitating diseases?

The brief answer lies in the fact that a perfect natural order would leave no room for weakness and vulnerability; yet weakness and vulnerability induce many positive human characteristics, perhaps the most important human characteristics, such as (1) identity transformation, (2) natural virtues, (3) compassionate love (*Agapē*), (4) interdependence and human community, and (5) the possibility of contributing to the kingdom of God. This list of characteristics represents the most noble of human strivings, the propensity toward greater civility and civilization, and glimpses of a perfection, which is unconditional and eternal by its very nature. Though weakness and vulnerability seem to undermine human potential, they very frequently detach us from what is base and superficial so that we might freely see and move toward what is truly worthy of ourselves, what has truly lasting effects, and what leads us to our true destiny – eternal and unconditional love with Him.

We may turn for a moment to Saint Paul's insight in 2Corinthians 12:8-10:

Therefore, I was given a thorn in my flesh, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from getting proud. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, it is then I am strong (2Corinthians 12:8-10).

Paul probably had a physical malady (possibly progressive blindness), which caused him to experience a loss of power and autonomy, yet he felt that his power had increased. The power about which he is speaking here is love – a love which forced him to make significant changes in his life and identity, and which drew him toward greater virtue, interpersonal relationship,

compassion, community, and zeal. His power is truly perfected by weakness, which reveals why God would create a natural order with intrinsic imperfections that could cause genuine suffering. A perfect world might leave us content with pure autonomy and superficiality, and would deprive us of the help we might need to deepen our virtue, relationships, community, compassion, and noble striving for the common good and the kingdom of God. The “perfect world” might deprive us of the impetus toward real perfection, the perfection of love -- the perfection which is destined to last forever.

Since the time of Jesus, Christians have advocated that *suffering is an indispensable path to virtue* – and therefore, an indispensable means for solidifying and establishing our eternal character and identity.¹ Christians have not made this suggestion cavalierly – but rather *compassionately* within the context of following the example of Jesus. No Christian ever seriously uttered the stoic suggestion – “Shut up and take it – it’s good for you!” Rather, Christians have spent themselves trying to *alleviate* suffering, encouraging trust and hope in God -- while helping those who “find life burdensome” to seize the opportunity within it – opportunities for faith, hope, prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, humility, forgiveness, compassion, acceptance of compassion, and the desire to build the common good and the kingdom of God.

It now remains to explain how an imperfect natural order – and the suffering it produces – can be one of the most powerful opportunities to achieve identity transformation, the natural virtues of fortitude and temperance, and the supreme virtue of love (*agapē*). The imperfect natural world – and all forms of suffering – also provide the opportunity for human collaboration toward the common good as well as the pursuit of the kingdom of God. As we shall see, suffering is indispensable -- for most of us -- in achieving our highest happiness, fulfillment, dignity, and destiny. It is also indispensable for achieving our contribution and legacy for the common good and the kingdom of God. Though life would be less painful and difficult without suffering, it would also be less meaningful, loving, just, good, and transcendent. Our temporary immersion in an imperfect natural order is the perfect pathway to the eternal and perfect order of unconditional love.

We now discuss the above five opportunities of suffering caused by our imperfect world as follows:

Section II.A – the first reason for an imperfect world – the opportunity for identity transformation.

Section II.B – the second reason for an imperfect world – the opportunity for natural virtues.

Section II.C – the third reason for an imperfect world – the opportunity for love (*agapē*).

Section II.D – the fourth reason for an imperfect world – the opportunity for common cause toward the common good.

Section II.E – the fifth reason for an imperfect world – the opportunity to build the kingdom of God.

¹ A complete explanation of this may be found in an upcoming book -- Robert Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), Chapter 3.

II.A

First Reason for an Imperfect World – The Opportunity for Identity Transformation

In a previous article on this landing page, we considered the Four Levels of Happiness. Recall that our dominant view of happiness becomes our purpose in life, and if we pursue that purpose for a long enough time, it becomes our identity – who we are – our second nature. Recall also that we have four kinds of desire based on nine powers or capacities within us:

1. Bodily desires – connected with bodily powers.
2. Ego-comparative desires – connected with the power of self-consciousness.
3. Contributive and loving desires – connected with the powers of empathy and conscience.
4. Transcendental desires – connected with our desires for perfect and unconditional truth, love, justice-goodness, beauty, and home.

We then noted that “happiness” comes from the fulfillment of a desire – and that conversely “unhappiness” comes from the non-fulfillment of a desire. Inasmuch as there are four kinds of desire, then there must also be four kinds of happiness.

We then showed – along with Plato, Aristotle, and many contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and theologians – that these four kinds of happiness could be ranked according to how pervasive, enduring, and deep they are. “Pervasive” indicates the extent to which their effects go beyond the self; “endurance” refers to how long these effects are likely to last; and “depth” refers to the quality of effect – do they come from the highest use of our powers – intelligence, creativity, love, moral reasoning, spiritual awareness, intuition, and will. Using these three criteria, it is clear that the first kind of happiness – physical-material happiness is the least pervasive, enduring, and deep. The second kind of happiness – ego-comparative – is a bit more pervasive, enduring, and deep; while the third kind of happiness – contributive and loving – is even more pervasive and deep; and that the fourth kind of happiness – transcendental happiness – is the most pervasive, enduring, and deep – because it promises perfect, conditional, universal and eternal truth, love, justice-goodness, beauty, and home in a being that can support and ground these perfections – God.

At this point we began to see clearly where prudence was pointing – towards the highest levels of happiness. We noted that all levels of happiness are good – and fulfill important aspects of life’s purpose and dignity – but that the higher ones have to direct the lower ones – lest the lower ones underestimate or undermine the higher ones. We might say then that the wise or prudent person will seek first the transcendentals desires – and then the contributive and loving desires in light of them – and then ego-comparative desires in light of the first two kinds – and then bodily desires in light of the first three kinds. The prudent person will also see the beauty and lovability of this ordering – desire it – and move naturally towards it – which will eventually habituate it.

In the process of explaining this, we noted that one of these levels of desire or happiness will have to be dominant – it will have to be our first priority (either implicitly or explicitly), because we cannot have two first priorities if a conflict of desires should arise. We noted also that the above ordering was not intuitively obvious, because children tend to stress Level 1, and

adolescents (who have a modicum of opportunity) stress Level 2. At this point however, there is no guarantee that adults will move to Levels 3 or 4. They can habituate themselves to Levels 1&2 – even if it is destroying them. Why?

The lower levels of happiness/identity are more surface-apparent, immediately gratifying, and intense. They tend to more easily attract us and hold our attention from without (instead of requiring discipline from within), so we more easily gravitate toward them. If we do not educate ourselves, search for something more, and discipline ourselves to attain the higher levels, we could easily drift into a hedonistic inertia. This would mean living for what is most surface-apparent and immediately gratifying, while neglecting what is most pervasive, enduring, and deep (and therefore, what could express our highest, most noble, eternal, and unconditional purpose, dignity, and fulfillment). Alternatively, if we want to move toward what is most pervasive, enduring, and deep, we will have to allow Levels 1 and 2 to become recessive -- we will have to let go of them (enticing as they are) -- and this is where suffering frequently comes in.

It cannot be said that human beings *require* suffering in order to move from the more superficial levels of happiness/identity to the higher (more pervasive, enduring, and deep) ones, for human beings can see the intrinsic goodness and beauty of making an optimal positive difference to family, friends, community, organization, culture, and even the kingdom of God. They can be attracted to this noble, beautiful, and even transcendent identity as a fulfillment of their higher selves, or even their transcendent eternal selves. However, this more positive impetus to move toward the more pervasive, enduring, and deep identity can be greatly *assisted* by emptiness, weakness, vulnerability, and the negative emotions of the comparison game (see the article – “[Escaping Your Personal Hell](#)”). It is precisely these negative conditions which can break the spell of the lower levels of happiness/identity.

Physical pleasures (Level 1) can be so riveting that they can produce addiction. The same holds true for status, esteem, control, and power. In my life, I have seen how powerful (and even addictive) these lower levels of identity can be. Yet, I truly desired (and saw the beauty and nobility of) the higher levels of happiness/identity. Though this vision was quite powerful in me, I found myself transfixed by the lower levels – almost unable to move myself beyond them. This is where the “power of emptiness, weakness, and vulnerability” came into my life. Experiences of my physical limitation – particularly progressive blindness starting at the age of 31 -- broke the spell of unmitigated pursuit of ego, status, and power. I had a genuine Pauline experience of having to look at life anew – to look for more pervasive purpose in the face of a loss of power – to reexamine what I was living for in light of a loss of control. I had to become more dependent on God, to trust in His ways, and to trust more radically in His logic of love. Thank God for weakness; thank God for the imperfect natural order, which gave rise to those weaknesses. Without them, I would have been unqualifiedly locked into my addiction to ego, status, and power – even though I saw the beauty and nobility of optimal contribution and love. I would have been addicted to the superficial amidst the appreciation of the noble – what an emptiness, what a frustration, what unhappiness – until weakness broke the spell. The irony is, weakness and suffering gave me the freedom to overcome the far greater suffering of living beneath myself, of avoiding noble purpose, of consciously wasting my life. Physical and psychological

weakness helped me overcome the underliving of my life, the underestimation of my dignity, and the emptiness intrinsic to them.

As noted above, there are probably some who do not need suffering to make a move from Level 2 to Level 3 and 4. I was not one of them. Suffering was my liberation, my vehicle, my pathway to what was most worthy of my life, and what was most noble and perduring in me. I suspect that there are others like me (and Saint Paul) who can use a dose of suffering, weakness, and vulnerability every now and then to call them to their most noble, perduring, and true selves. For these, the imperfect world is indispensable. If I had been born in a *perfect* world, I would have been left in a state of superficiality and spiritual deprivation – in even greater pain and loss.

This liberating power of suffering is not restricted to physical or psychological weakness. It applies most poignantly to the anticipation of death. I once had a student who asked, “Why do we need to die? If God is perfect and He intended to give us eternal life, why does He make us die in order to get there? Why not just allow us to continue living without all the mystery about the beyond?” I initially responded that eternal life is not merely a continuation of this current earthly life – it is a *transition* from this life to a completely new kind of life. She responded, “Well, why isn’t the ‘new’ life a continuation of this one? Why wouldn’t God create us immediately in the ‘new’ life?” I indicated to her that the goodness, joy, and beauty of the “new” life did not essentially consist in a perfect, natural order (although this would be part of it), but rather in the perfect love that would exist between God and us, and between all of us in God. I further indicated that this “love” would consist in a perfect act of empathy with another whereby doing the good for the other would be just as easy, if not easier, than doing the good for oneself – where empathy would take over the desire for ego-satisfaction and autonomy – where communion and community would not immolate the individual personality, but bring it to its completion through others and God.

The student almost intuitively agreed that this would be perfect joy, which led her to re-ask the question, “Well, why didn’t God just create us in a situation of perfect love?” At this point, the reader will probably recognize my answer to her question that love is our *free* choice. God cannot create us into a “world of perfect love;” we have to create the condition of love for ourselves and others by our free decisions. As noted immediately above, our decision to love (to live for a contributive identity) can be assisted considerably by weakness and vulnerability; but even more importantly, it can be assisted by the anticipation of death.

As many philosophers have noted (both those coming from a transcendental perspective (such as Karl Rahner² and Edith Stein³) and a purely naturalist perspective (such as Martin Heidegger⁴ and Jean-Paul Sartre⁵), death produces a psychological finality which compels us to make a decision about what truly matters to us, what truly defines our lives, sooner rather than later. It really does not matter whether we have a strong belief in an afterlife or not, the finality

² See Karl Rahner 1961 *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder).

³ See Edith Stein 2002 *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being* (Wash, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publishing).

⁴ See his extensive treatment of “Being Toward Death” in Martin Heidegger 2008 *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics) pp 237-299.

⁵ See the role of death in Jean-Paul Sartre 1993 *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press) pp 65-66, 76, 165-166.

of death incites us to make a statement about the “pre-death” meaning of our lives. Most of us view an ongoing deferral of fundamental options (such as to live for love or not, to live for integrity or not, to live for truth or not, etc) to be unacceptable because death calls us to give authentic definition to our lives – the finality of death says to our innermost being that we must express our true selves prior to the termination of the life we know.

Death might be the best gift we have been given because it calls us to our deepest life-definition and self-definition, and in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, to the creation of our essence.⁶ If we believe in an afterlife, we take this authentic self-definition (say, love) with us into our eternity. But even if we do not believe in an afterlife, death still constitutes an indispensable gift of life, for it prevents us from interminably delaying the creation of our essence. It calls us to proclaim who we truly are and what we really stand for – sooner rather than later. We cannot interminably waste our lives in indecision.

In light of death, the choice of one’s fundamental essence (say, love) becomes transformative and “life-giving.” Death gives life – an authentic, reflective, and free life through a more pervasive, enduring, and deep purpose.

Ironic as it may seem, our need to *freely* move to higher levels of happiness, purpose, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny makes emptiness, weakness, vulnerability, the negative emotions of the comparison game, and death indispensable. Without them, most of us would be left in the inertia of superficiality, underrated dignity, and underestimated destiny. Left in unhindered hedonism and ego-comparative identity, many of us, if not most of us, would fail to choose, develop, and make habitual, the prudence, virtue, and love, leading to our eternal transcendental fulfillment.

II.B

Second Reason for an Imperfect World – The Opportunity for Natural Virtues

Weakness and vulnerability (arising out of an imperfect natural order) are the conditions necessary for two of the cardinal virtues – courage and self-discipline. Notice that these virtues define our character precisely because they are chosen in the midst of adversity. They define our ability to “pay a price” for our principles and ideals. This “price” gives existential weight to our principles and ideals, for we cannot hold them cheaply.

This is particularly evident with respect to courage. The principles of love, truth, and justice are good in themselves, and they are honorable in action, but when we have to choose them in the midst of the possibility of injury, embarrassment, mortification, or death, we not only admire them for their intrinsic goodness, we make them our own. The greater the price we must pay to live the principles and ideals we admire and honor, the more they become part of us, the more they define our being by the “hard choice” we make. If we admire an honorable ideal because it is honorable, it speaks only partially to who we are; but if we choose an honorable ideal not only because we honor it, but because we want to live it even at the cost of injury, embarrassment, or death, then it truly defines us. Ironically, an imperfect natural order (which gives rise to the real

⁶ See Jean-Paul Sartre 1993 *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press). pp 15, 60, 129, and 724.

possibility of injury or death) not only gives rise to the possibility of courage, but also to that courage lending existential weight (and therefore dignity) to our choice of the honorable ideal.

Is it worth it? Is it worth injury and death to choose the noble thing in the midst of adversity? Only the reader can answer for him or herself. Would you rather have a very safe world where you can only be a bystander -- or would you rather have an unsafe world where you can enter into the fray and see who you truly are -- how you truly embrace the honorable -- even at the cost of injury or death? What would you want for your children -- a safe world without the possibility of challenge or self-sacrifice -- without the dignity and self-definition of challenge and self-sacrifice -- or an unsafe world, holding out the possibility and actuality of that ultimate dignity?

For some, the answer to these questions may depend on whether we believe in eternal life -- though not necessarily. If one does believe in eternal life, then the answer will very probably be, "I would rather have challenge, the possibility of courage, and the possibility of self-sacrifice for a noble cause -- for then I will know who I truly am -- and I will be able to define myself -- in the face of adversity throughout all eternity." This view is shared by some naturalistic and atheistic thinkers, such as Heidegger⁷ and Sartre⁸, but of course, they acknowledge only a temporary benefit of knowing and defining our true selves.

I am presuming that most readers are open to at least the possibility of eternal life with an unconditionally loving God, otherwise you would not have made it this far in the *Quartet*, and would not be considering why an unconditionally loving God would allow suffering and evil. If I am correct, then you probably will not want to limit the project of self-definition through suffering and sacrifice to this life alone. The suffering you endure for the sake of the noble, love, and the kingdom of God defines your being -- not just in this life -- but throughout eternity -- where suffering, according to Jesus, is replaced completely by the joy of unconditional love. We do not need to suffer for an eternity -- the suffering we endure in this short life leaves an indelible mark of who we are forever.

Now use the lens of eternal love to ask yourself the above questions once again -- would you rather have a very safe world where you can only be a bystander -- or would you rather have an unsafe world where you can enter into the fray and see who you truly are and will be throughout eternity? What would you want for your children -- a safe world without the possibility of challenge or self-sacrifice -- or an unsafe world, holding out the possibility of establishing a meaningful identity throughout eternity?

We now move to the second natural virtue -- self-control or self-discipline. While courage is the pursuit of virtue over against the possibility of pain, self-control is the pursuit of virtue through the avoidance of destructive indulgence in pleasure and passion. Many philosophers have recognized that an unmitigated pursuit of pleasure can interfere with, or even undermine the pursuit of what is most noble, most pervasive, and most enduring. It can even lead to the destruction of ourselves and others. Yet these pleasures are not intrinsically evil. Food is obviously good for human beings, but an unmitigated pursuit of food (to the point of gluttony)

⁷ See Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* pp.272- 274.

⁸ See Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* pp. 140-143, 177, 465-467.

will likely undermine (or at least slow down) the pursuit of the noble. A glass of wine may be good during a convivial meal, but excessive indulgence in it could lead to alcoholism and the undermining of family, job, and friends. Sexuality is a powerful binding force within marriage and family, but excessive indulgence in it can lead to broken relationships, a sense of betrayal, breakdown in commitments, and crimes of passion.

Similarly, ego-satisfactions can also play a beneficial part in life. Success in a speech might encourage one to do more speaking. Achievement in studies might encourage one to pursue a Ph.D. Praise from others could build up self-esteem, but an unmitigated pursuit of success, achievement, and praise (as ends in themselves) will produce egocentricity and all of the negative emotions of the comparison game -- jealousy, fear of failure, ego-sensitivity, blame, rage, contempt, inferiority, superiority, self-pity, and emptiness (see the article – [“Escaping Your Personal Hell”](#)).

Both sensorial and ego pleasures are a mixed blessing – in their proper place they can bring happiness, conviviality, and encouragement toward certain forms of achievement; but pursued uncontrollably as ends in themselves, they will very likely interfere with, and even undermine the pursuit of what is noble, pervasive, and enduring -- what is most meaningful and purposeful in life.

This gives rise to the question of why God didn't create a more perfect human being in a more perfect world. Why didn't God just give us an “internal regulator” which would not allow us to eat too much, drink too much, desire too much? Why didn't God put us in a world with just enough resources to satisfy our sensorial and ego-longings just enough for health but not enough to undermine our deepest purpose in life? We return to the same words we have seen time and time again – “choice” and “freedom.”

Choosing to limit pleasure can be just as difficult as enduring pain for the sake of the good or noble. Thus the limiting of pleasure can be just as self-definitional as enduring pain. There is a real sacrifice involved in limiting pleasure -- sometimes it entails saying “no” amidst an irresistible urge; sometimes it means dealing with an addiction; sometimes it causes a profound restriction to freedom because we deny ourselves what we could have otherwise pursued; and sometimes it can make us look prudish in the midst of friends who do not share our view of happiness/identity.

So, why didn't God just create us with a behavioral governor inside our brains? Why didn't God create a better human in a better world without the possibility of unmitigated desire for pleasure and ego satisfaction? Because God wants us to define ourselves in terms of ordinary, non-heroic choices – by choosing noble aspirations above the world of material pleasures. In the day-to-day, ordinary, non-heroic choices we make, an essence (self-definition) begins to form, etched in our character beyond mere thought and aspiration, through the constant pursuit of the little things that enable nobility to emerge from our souls.

We might fail in this pursuit countless times, but our perseverance in the midst of struggles and failures can be extraordinarily effective in etching self-definition into our eternal souls. In God's logic of unconditional love (which includes unconditional forgiveness and healing), our

acts of contrition, our hope in forgiveness, our perseverance in the struggle for self-control, and our undying desire for the noble are all “part of the cost” of virtue, which makes that virtue more than a mere thought or aspiration. This struggle is the cost, which etches that virtue into our very eternal souls – the precious cost of self-definition.

For this reason, God has created us with the capacity for all seven “deadly sins” (gluttony, lust, sloth, greed, anger, envy, and pride) and a capacity to desire more than we need even to the point of undermining a good and noble life. God has done this to give us the privilege and freedom to choose the noble over against the possibility of the ignoble so that our virtue (or at least our struggle in pursuit of the virtuous) might be our own; so that it might be etched into our eternal souls; so that it might be part of our self-definition for all eternity.

Up to this point, we have discussed why God would create us in an imperfect world giving rise to pain, weakness, vulnerability, death, and grief – so that we might *freely* choose the higher levels of purpose and identity as well as the virtues of courage and self-discipline for the sake of the noble. Yet if this is part of the reason why an all-loving God allows suffering, then we would waste our suffering if we fail to seek these opportunities in it. It is very difficult to concentrate on seeking opportunities in suffering when we are besieged by fear, anxiety, loneliness, anger, bitterness, and grief. This is precisely why I did not present the opportunities of suffering until this late point in the book. The first step in dealing with suffering is to bring fear, anxiety, and other negative emotions into perspective with prayer, rationality, prudence, and friends. Once we have a modicum of peace and stability – workable backup plans, a sense of God’s presence and help, and support from our friends – then we can begin to mine our suffering for the riches of higher purpose and identity, courage, and self-discipline – not to mention the forthcoming virtues of *agapē*, contribution, and seeking the kingdom of God.

How do we begin the process of mining our suffering for these virtues? *Ask questions* directed at these virtues. In the case of the above virtues, we might ask, “Is there something more I should be living for? Is there a way I can enter more deeply into Level 3 contributive purpose and identity? Is there a way I could enter more deeply into Level 4 transcendent identity? Is there a way I could deepen my faith and my relationship with the loving God? Is there a way I could be more deliberate about pursuing the noble – even at the cost of self-sacrifice? Is there a way I could be more temperate and disciplined for the sake of the noble?” These questions are not meant to be answered immediately. They are meant to stimulate both conscious and subconscious reflection – and when we repeat them in the midst of our suffering – they direct our conscious and subconscious mind to look for answers within ourselves, our dreams, our conversations, and every other aspect of our lives. We become like Archimedes – with open-ended anticipation of an answer to our questions – and eventually when we see the water rising in the baths of Syracuse, we get the clue and shout – “Eureka, I have found it!”

I think it would be just like an unconditionally loving God not only to give us the free choice to appropriate higher levels of purpose and identity as well as the virtues of courage and self-discipline, but also to give us the opportunity and creativity to discover, pursue, and develop our own particular way to do this. Though suffering is painful and negative, it provides this opportunity for growth, creativity, and self-definition.

II.C

Third Reason for an Imperfect World – the Opportunity for Love (*Agapē*)

We now move from the natural virtues of Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers to the religious virtue of *agapē*. Though most religions acknowledge the importance of love, philosophers have not given it its due – leaving it on the periphery of philosophical reflection.⁹ Among religions, Christianity alone has made love central, taking great care to define it in detail.¹⁰ The reason for this is obvious. Jesus made love the highest commandment, asserted the unconditional love of His Father, and demonstrated His unconditional love through His relationship with sinners and His self-sacrificial actions.¹¹ I will again make the assumption that most readers are at least open to Christianity; otherwise you probably would not be asking “Why an *all-loving* God (distinctive in and central to Christianity) would allow suffering?” If this is the case, this section will be of paramount importance – for inasmuch as love is the highest virtue for Jesus (which all other natural virtues must be consistent with and serve), it must be at the heart of Jesus’ explanation for why His Father would allow suffering.

Another article “[Who is God?](#)” is dedicated to defining Jesus’ distinctive view of love – for which early Christians used the term “*agapē*.” This will be briefly summarized in Section II.C.1, after which six specific characteristics of *agapē* will be considered in their relationship to suffering – empathy (Section II.C.2), love’s vulnerability (Section II.C.3), humility (Section II.C.4), forgiveness (Section II.C.5), compassion (II.C.6), and acceptance of compassion (Section II.C.7).

II.C.1

Definition of *Agapē*

Agapē is a gift of self, which is frequently expressed in self-sacrifice. It is grounded in empathy with the other which makes transparent the unique and *intrinsic* goodness, worthiness, and lovability of that other, which creates a unity with that other whereby doing the good for the other is just as easy, if not easier, than doing the good for oneself. As such, *agapē* arises out of a desire to give life to the intrinsically valuable and lovable other. That other could be a stranger or a friend. Furthermore, *agapē* seeks no reward – neither the reward of romantic feelings intrinsic to *eros* (romantic love), nor the reward of reciprocal commitment and care intrinsic to *philia* (friendship), nor even the feelings of love and delight intrinsic to *storgē* (affection). In *agapē*, it is sufficient to see the other as valuable and lovable *in him or herself*. The wellbeing of the other is a sufficient reward for the commitment of one’s time, future, psychic energy, physical energy, resources, and even self-sacrifice. It is its own reward.

II.C.2

Empathy

⁹ The notable exceptions to this are the Christian philosophers such as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and contemporary Christian philosophers such as Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, and Gabriel Marcel.

¹⁰ See Robert Spitzer 2015 *The Soul’s Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), Chapter 1, Section V.

¹¹ See the upcoming book – Robert Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), Chapters 1-3.

As can be seen, *agapē* begins with empathy, a feeling for another, or perhaps better, a feeling *with* another, which produces “caring about” and “caring for” the other (in him or herself). This, in turn, produces a unity with the other whereby doing the good for the other is just as easy if not easier than doing the good for oneself. Most of us would agree to the proposition that this “feeling for and with another” is quite natural. We can meet another for a few moments and get a sense of the goodness and lovability of another from a mere benevolent glance. We can see another in need and intuit the worthiness of that other by merely looking into their eyes. We can meet our students on the first day of class and intuit from the ethos exuded by them that they are worth our time and energy. Mere presence, mere tone of voice, mere benevolent glance engenders a recognition of unique and intrinsic goodness and lovability which causes us to care about the other, to protect the other, to attend to the other’s needs, to spend time with the other, and even to sacrifice oneself for the other – even a total stranger. It is as if we have a receptor, like a radio antenna, which is attuned to the frequency of the other’s unique and intrinsic goodness and lovability, and when the signal comes, whether it be from a smile, an utterance, or a look of need, we connect in a single feeling which engenders a gift of self.

Even though most would agree that empathy is natural to us, we must hasten to add that our own desires for autonomy and ego-fulfillment can block our receptivity to the other’s “signal.” We can become so self-absorbed or self-involved that we forget to turn on the receiver, and even if we have turned on the receiver, we have the volume turned down so low that it cannot produce adequate output in our hearts. It is at this juncture that suffering – particularly the suffering of weakness and vulnerability arising out of an imperfect world, proves to be most helpful.

This point may be illustrated by a story my father told me when I was an adolescent. I think he meant it more as a parable about how some attitudes can lead some people to become believers and other people to become unbelievers and even malcontents. But it became for me a first glimpse into the interrelationship between suffering and compassion, love and lovability, trust and trustworthiness, co-responsibility and dignity, and the nature of God.

Once upon a time, God created a world at a banquet table.¹² He had everyone sit down, and served up a sumptuous feast. Unfortunately, He did not provide any of the people at the table with wrists or elbows. As a consequence, nobody could feed themselves. All they could do was feel acute hunger while gazing at the feast.

This provoked a variety of responses. At one end of the table, a group began to conjecture that God could not possibly be all-powerful, for if He were, He would have been all-knowing, and would have realized that it would have been far more perfect to create persons with wrists and elbows so that they could eat sumptuous feasts placed before them. The refrain was frequently heard, “Any fool can see that some pivot point on the arm would be preferable to the impoverished straight ones with which we have been provided!”

¹² This parable is attributed from Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, who used it as an allegory to illustrate the difference between hell and heaven. In hell, everyone tries to feed themselves, and gets nothing, while in heaven people reach across the table and are fed. Apparently my father made a very creative adaptation of this parable.

A second group retorted, “If there really is a God, it would seem that He would *have* to be all-powerful and all-knowing, in which case, He would not make elementary mistakes. If God is God, He could have made a better creature (e.g., with elbows). If God exists, and in His omniscience has created us without elbows or wrists, He must have a cruel streak, perhaps even a sadistic streak. At the very minimum, He certainly cannot be all-loving.”

A third group responded by noting that the attributes of “all-powerful” and “all-loving” would seem to belong to God by nature, for love is positive, and God is purely positive, therefore, God (not being devoid of any positivity) would have to be pure love. They then concluded that God did not exist, for it was clear that the people at the table were set into a condition that was certainly less than perfect (which *seemed* to betoken an imperfectly loving God). They conjectured, “We should not ask where the banquet came from, let alone where we came from, but just accept the fact that life is inexplicable and absurd. After all, we have been created to suffer, but an all-loving God would not have done this. Our only recourse is to face, with authenticity and courage, the absence of God in the world, and to embrace the despair and absurdity of life.”

A fourth group was listening to the responses of the first three, but did not seem to be engaged by the heavily theoretical discourse. A few of them began to look across the table, and in an act of compassion, noticed that even though they could not feed themselves, they could feed the person across the table. In an act of freely choosing to feed the other first, of letting go of the resentment about not being able to “do it for myself,” they began to feed one another. At once, *agapē* was discovered in freedom, while their very real need to eat was satisfied.

This parable reveals a key insight into suffering, namely, that “empathy has reasons that negative theorizing knows not of.” The first three groups had all assumed that weakness and vulnerability were essentially negative, and because of this, they assumed that either God had made a mistake or He was defective in love. Their preoccupation with the negativity of weakness distracted them from discovering, in that same weakness, the positive, empathetic, compassionate responsiveness to the need of the other which grounds the unity and generativity of love. This lesson holds the key not only to the meaning of suffering but also to the life and joy of *agapē*.

The experience of the fourth group at the table reveals why God would create us in an imperfect world – because the imperfection of the human condition leads to weakness and vulnerability, and this weakness and vulnerability provide invaluable assistance in directing us toward empathy and compassion, and even to receiving the empathy and compassion of others.

Weakness and vulnerability are not *required* for empathy and compassion, for many people will find empathy and compassion to be their own reward. They will see the positivity of empathy and compassion as good for both others and themselves.

This was certainly not the case for me. Though I saw the intrinsic goodness and worthiness of empathy and compassion (for both myself and others), my egocentricity and desire for autonomy created such powerful blocks that I could not move myself to what I thought was my life’s purpose and destiny. I needed to be knocked off my pedestal; I needed to be released from

the spell of autonomy and egocentricity through weakness and vulnerability – I needed a “thorn in the flesh – an angel of Satan to beat me, to keep me from getting proud” (2Corinthians 12:7). This happened to me – the weakness and vulnerability of an imperfect genome (leading toward the deterioration of my eyesight) in imperfect conditions in an imperfect world.

Like the fourth group in the parable, my imperfect condition gave me a moment to reconsider the entire meaning of life – what really made life worth living, and it was here that I discovered empathy, love, and even compassion. The process was gradual, but the “thorn in the flesh” gave me the very real assistance I needed to open myself to love as a meaning of life.

As will be explained below, the first step to unleashing the power of empathy was the impossibility of being self-sufficient. Looking back on it I was never self-sufficient, I was content to live under the *illusion* of it. Nevertheless, the dispelling of the illusion made me confront the reality of human life – we are interdependent and therefore, we need one another -- we need each other’s friendship, support, companionship, complementarity, inspiration, and compassion. The second step was harder still – it required accepting help and compassion from others. Once again, suffering, weakness, and need were indispensable for entering into this vulnerable condition. Though this was hard, it contained hidden treasures – layers upon layers of authenticity and humility that awaited my slow and grudging discovery. The third step consisted of empathy itself – namely, recognizing and appreciating the goodness and lovability of the people who were trying to help me. I noticed that they saw some intrinsic goodness and lovability in me, and were trying to help me for no other reason than to respond to my need. They recognized something in me that I did not even recognize in myself, because I had long since replaced my “lovable self” with a merely “esteemable self” – a “thingafied self” -- and I had to recapture the lovable self through the love that others gratuitously offered to me.

Thus, my weakness and vulnerability *freed* me to empathize with others. Honestly, if I did not have the weakness and vulnerability of progressive blindness, I am not sure I would have ever discovered the beauty of empathy and the lovability of both others and myself. In retrospect, I can say with St. Paul, that I thank God for my weakness and suffering, because it broke the spell of the sufficiency of Level 2 satisfaction and the myth of autonomy – and virtually compelled me to accept the help of others. At this stage of greatest weakness, I had the *opportunity* to appreciate others’ gratuitous love, their lovability in that love, and my lovability as a reflection of that love. Without suffering, my life would be categorically different, catastrophically superficial, and filled with the darkness, emptiness, and loneliness that the myth of self-sufficiency inevitably brings.

II.C.3 Love’s Vulnerability

Love has vulnerability built into it. There is a softness to love; it opens itself to being completed by the other; it reveals weakness (the need for complementarity by the other); it is forgiving of the other in times of failure; it anticipates forgiveness by the other in one’s own failings; its empathy can elicit tears.

Some of us are able to accept and even live in this vulnerability through a simple vision of its intrinsic beauty and goodness. Others like myself (as illustrated above), need some extrinsic prodding to break the spell of self-sufficiency and autonomy, which is built on the delusion that complementarity, weakness, and gentleness are negative -- undermining "true" happiness and fulfillment. Some of us need to experience vulnerability from the outside in order to see the goodness of love's vulnerability. Some need the assistance of weakness to accept the love of another. Some of us need to be reduced to tears in order to experience the tears of sympathy. Some of us need extrinsic weakness and vulnerability to accept the weakness and vulnerability intrinsic to the beauty and goodness of love. We cannot seem to reach our true happiness without some impetus, which makes us unhappy -- for a time; for a brief time by comparison to love's eternal joy.

There is a silent -- if not overt -- suspicion of and hatred for weakness and vulnerability in our culture. The reason for this lies in a false view of courage and self-discipline. As noted above, God wants us to possess the natural virtues of rational reflection, prudence, courage, and temperance. He does not want us to be helpless and overly dependent on others for everything -- the archetypal "needy person." Instead, He wants us to be strong and self-reliant in every way that is feasible. *However*, He does not want us to be self-reliant, rational, prudent, courageous, and self-disciplined to the *exclusion* of real interdependency and need for others. God does not want us to lie to ourselves -- or others -- and create a facade of being *purely* self-reliant, rational, courageous, and self-disciplined. He wants our rationality, courage, self-discipline, and self-reliance to be based on reality and truth -- and therefore to acknowledge our interdependency with others as well as the areas in which we truly need their help and support.

The façade of being *purely* self-sufficient is not only dangerous to self and others -- it reveals an arrogance that reduces us to complete inauthenticity. To perpetuate this arrogance, we have to make ourselves believe the most fundamental lie of all -- complete autonomy -- and if we can be that false to ourselves, then it must follow as the night, the day, that we will be false to every other person.

So how do we acquire love's vulnerability -- which leads to gentleness and humbleness of heart -- without abandoning the natural virtues of rationality, prudence, courage and temperance? We must be truthful to ourselves -- discerning where we have genuine needs -- and how we can respond to other's genuine needs -- *then* cultivate the natural virtues around this truth. Doing it the other way around, won't work. Speaking for myself, this would be tantamount to developing my view of prudence, courage, and temperance without any acknowledgement of my blindness or the ways in which I can respond to the needs of others. The resultant view of the natural virtues would be mere fantasy, completely impractical and useless.

II.C.4 Humility

As Jesus and virtually every saint recognized -- humility is the condition necessary for the possibility of *agapē*. Most of us recognize the necessity of humility in empathy and "gift of self." Self-absorption does not permit the "signal" of the other to be received. Moreover, one is so obsessed with fulfilling one's ego needs that one barely notices the goodness and mystery of the

other, and feels compelled to use the other as a mere instrument of self-satisfaction. These conditions undermine the very possibility of love.

Some people are able to see the goodness and beauty of humility and to move almost effortlessly toward it, but judging from the history of philosophy, most of us do not belong to this group. We have all heard the phrase from the Book of Proverbs, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18), and Jesus’ proclamation, “The greatest among you will be your servant; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23: 11-12). Jesus illustrates this further in the Gospel of Luke when he notices guests trying to pick the places of honor at table at a Pharisee’s house:

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 14: 7-11).

It is no accident that Jesus places humble heartedness (the poor in spirit) as the First Beatitude which affects and conditions not only the rest of the Beatitudes, but the entire Sermon on the Mount – and so we should not be surprised that Jesus in one of the few references to His personal characteristics states, “For I am gentle and *humble* of heart (Matthew 11:29).”

Though Socrates recognized the need for humility in inquiry and wisdom,¹³ he does not link it specifically to love. As noted above, most non-Christian philosophers do not spend considerable time or energy on the definition or virtue of love, and so they do not recognize the importance of humility in achieving *agapē* as the highest virtue. Christian philosophers are a notable exception to this. St. Augustine said that “It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”¹⁴ Christian philosophical tradition has followed this prioritization of humble love until the present day.¹⁵

The Christian philosophical tradition acknowledges that the wisdom and goodness of humility is not easy to see, appreciate, and appropriate because it is contrary to our propensity to

¹³ See Plato *Apology* (20e-23c).

¹⁴ This is attributed to St. Augustine in a popular medieval Latin handbook used for sermons called *Manipulus Florum* (*A Handful of Flowers*), edited by Thomas Hibernicus (Thomas of Ireland) in about 1306. He was an anthologist who collected over 6,000 patristic sayings from the libraries at the Sorbonne. He bequeathed it to the Sorbonne – and it was printed in 1483 as a patristic handbook for sermons and writings.

¹⁵ Though the contemporary Thomistic tradition acknowledges the importance of humility, Christian existentialism, beginning with Soren Kierkegaard, makes it *central*. Robert Roberts shows that humility and gratitude underlie the whole of Kierkegaard’s writings on virtue – and is integral to the whole of Christian moral psychology. See Robert Roberts (2003) *Emotions: an essay in aid of moral psychology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). The centrality of humility is followed by other Christian existentialists and phenomenologists – most notably Gabriel Marcel, Carl Jaspers, Max Scheler, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. See especially Dietrich von Hildebrand 1976 *Humility: Wellspring of Virtue* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press).

pursue ego-gratification, comparative advantage, status, and power. I have elsewhere described this propensity as the outcome of a dominant Level 2 view of happiness – the comparison game (see the article – “[Escaping Your Personal Hell](#)”).

I, for one, never belonged to the group that found the wisdom and goodness of humility to be transparent. It was difficult for me to understand, even more difficult to appreciate, and still more difficult to appropriate. Nevertheless, humility is the entryway to *agapē* – and *agapē* the entryway to true joy. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John:

If you keep my command [to love], you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s command [to love] and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment – “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:10-12).

I believe that I was about 20 years old when I first got an inkling about the “possible value” of humility. At that time, I was still equating my lovability with my esteemability and respectability. Yes, I was a friend to others; I could have a great time with my friends; but I wanted these friendships to be on my terms – and to be based on my friends’ respect for me. Though I had a sense that my friends loved me for *who* I was, and that they appreciated my presence and personality, I really wanted them to respect my accomplishments and potential first. Esteemability trumped lovability. I needed extrinsic prodding from deprivation and difficulty to reexamine what I considered to be friendship.

At that time, I saw intelligence, courage, achievement, and my newly burgeoning faith to be valuable. But to be honest, I didn’t even notice humility, empathy, and the vulnerability intrinsic to *agapē*, so I was in no position to consider them virtuous. It took gentle but insistent extrinsic prodding – an accumulation of little weaknesses, little vulnerabilities, and little deficiencies – to make me realize that there was more to my personal value than the above characteristics. These weaknesses, deficiencies, and vulnerabilities loosened my grip on my purely esteemable characteristics and caused me to look for life’s meaning beyond Level 2 happiness and the comparison game. This caused me to “leap over” Level 3 happiness (contribution and love) to Level 4 happiness (transcendence and faith)¹⁶ which not only fascinated me, but filled me with a sense of God’s presence and grace. I found myself with an ultimate meaning, dignity, and destiny – as well as in a relationship with a Deity who I knew – both intuitively and from my Catholic upbringing – loved me. The grace of my burgeoning faith was so powerful that I decided to pursue it even more deeply by entering the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) – a religious order in the Catholic Church.

In my novitiate, I experienced the *heart* of Christ during my 30-day silent retreat, and this experience, combined with my experience of vulnerability, led to a re-examination of life’s meaning, dignity, and fulfillment. Curiously, I came to an awareness of Level 3 through my faith (Level 4). When I experienced the profound love of Jesus and His Father for me – and began to see how important love (*agapē*) is for meaning, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny, I knew that I would have to take Jesus’ teachings on love very seriously. This led to a slow and reluctant, but

¹⁶ The Four Levels of Happiness are explained in detail in the free video – Four Levels of Happiness and the free article by the same name on this [page](#).

nevertheless effective appreciation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Beatitudes. I had to look at these passages in light of the crucified Jesus – noting carefully what He tried to show us and give us through His suffering. This allowed me to view my weaknesses and vulnerabilities through the lens of St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians:

Therefore, I was given a thorn in my flesh, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from getting proud. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, it is then I am strong (2Corinthians 12:8-10).

I began to get a little glimmer of the value of weakness and vulnerability to extricate myself from the darkness of pride and egocentricity, and it gave me a new freedom – to ask for the desire to desire humility.

There is a reflection in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius called “The Three Degrees of Humility.” When I encountered it during my 30-day retreat, it produced great fear and anxiety, because the greater degrees of humility seemed to be beyond my reach. St. Ignatius counseled that we should not pursue this as a stoic enterprise but rather to imitate the love and goodness of Jesus – who loves us unconditionally. Even with this understanding, I found myself resisting Ignatius’ direction quite strenuously. Fortunately, St. Ignatius anticipated people like myself, and counseled that if we cannot desire such humility, then we should begin by trying to desire *the desire* for humility (*whewwww* – that got me through the meditation).

I made recourse to this story because it speaks to a truth of the heart – namely, that vulnerability and weakness seen within the context of the love and suffering of the Son of God, opened my otherwise tightly closed heart to both humility and the efficacy of suffering. It started a journey, which lasts to this very day, and will not be completed until after I leave this world. In a word – suffering in light of the love and suffering of Christ is the pathway to humble love, patient love, compassionate love, gentle love, and self-sacrificial love – what the early Christians called *agapē* - and *agapē* is the pathway to ultimate authenticity, meaning, dignity, destiny, and above all, joy. As St. Paul says, “In our weakness, is our strength.”

In sum, humility has been essential in loosening the grip of Level 2 dominance, the comparison game, and the esteemable self – and so it has been integral to my freedom to love and the rediscovery of my “lovable self.” My path to humility was somewhat convoluted, involving three components:

1. My discovery of God, and then Jesus, and through Him, the value of suffering and humility.
2. The encounter with weakness and vulnerability in my life – first in my initial formation (1974-78), and then much more profoundly in my progressive blindness (starting in 1983).

3. The interpretation of my weakness, vulnerability, and suffering through the words and actions of Jesus and St. Paul, who not only showed me the efficacy of suffering, but also the light and exaltation of humility – being freed *from* the darkness and emptiness of pride so that I could be free *to* love others as Jesus has loved me.

II.C.5 Forgiveness

Forgiveness requires both humility and empathy because it entails letting go of a *just* grievance against another. If someone has intentionally insulted or hurt us without provocation, it is difficult not to desire retribution or, at the very least, some form of retributive justice. Yet this retribution generally produces a cycle of vengeance begetting vengeance and violence begetting violence. If we are to interrupt this cycle of vengeance and violence, if we are to allow the parties in the cycle to begin the long process of healing, and if we are to restore equanimity to a shattered peace, we will, to some degree, have to let go of our *just* claims against the other. But how is this possible? We must see the intrinsic value and need of the unjust perpetrator (like the priest in *Les Miserables* who sees the goodness and need of Jean Valjean “beyond all appearances”); we must see the goodness of interrupting the cycle of vengeance begetting vengeance and violence begetting violence; and we must want the good of our enemy (even though we may have to protect ourselves against him in the future). But how can we do this – particularly when we are still stinging from the injustice of a seemingly callous attack?

In my novitiate, this occurred through a recognition of the truth in the Parable of the Wicked Servant who maltreated his fellow servant (after having been forgiven by his master for a much greater debt – Mt 18:23-35). I had an intuitive recognition of the truth of this parable and its general applicability to everyone. But eventually, the direct applicability to me became “painfully” obvious. My deepening appreciation of empathy and humility opened the way to seeing the dignity and goodness of others, which, in turn, led to a deepening care for them. My past disregard, thoughtlessness, and callousness became painfully apparent. I reflected on some of the times in college when I intimated that people were not as quick or knowledgeable as I might have “expected.” I also let people know the privilege of my family background without regard to the hardships they may have had to endure. As I considered these things, I realized how much the Lord of unconditional love had forgiven me for my arrogance, insensitivity, and heartlessness.

I realized that if I had been forgiven for so much, I too would have to forgive others. The “have to” in that recognition was not one of fear (i.e., “If I don’t forgive others as God has forgiven me, then I will be punished like the wicked servant”). Neither was it a “have to” arising out of duty (i.e., “If God did it for me, then I would be an ingrate if I did not do it for other people”). Rather, it was a “have to” borne out of love. When I recognized how much I had been loved by God, I was moved to do the same for others out of both a profound sense of gratitude, and a simple desire to love in the same way as the One who loved me.

Yet, none of this would have occurred if I had not appreciated empathy and humility (which led to the recognition of the unique goodness and lovability of others). As noted above, my appreciation of empathy and humility was greatly assisted by suffering, which allowed me to

move (partially) beyond the spell of self-absorption and autonomy. Weakness and suffering enabled me to see the goodness and lovability of others *and* what I could have done to befriend them through empathetic and humble love. Though this filled me with another kind of suffering – the guilt and regret for my indifference, callousness, and arrogance – it led me to realize that I had been forgiven much and loved much – by both God and neighbor -- and this led me – albeit gradually -- to the freedom to forgive others who had unjustly offended me. I could ask the Lord for the grace to imitate Him in His forgiveness, and I could pray for my persecutor by putting the entire matter in the hands of the just and merciful judge. This *freedom* which came through a combination of suffering and the love of God has enabled me, albeit imperfectly, to forgive from the heart.

I have a long way to go in the pursuit of humility and empathy, of care and respect, and forgiveness; so I expect that I will need further assistance along that path. But I have come to realize that God’s unconditional love in combination with suffering is one of the best vehicles to this freedom to love and forgive in the very imitation of Christ. I have also come to realize that true happiness consists in this love, which seems, at least in my life, to come inevitably through the vulnerability of an imperfect physical nature in an imperfect world.

II.C.6 Compassion

Compassion is yet another gift which suffering helps to appropriate. “Compassion” means “to suffer with.” Though the Ancients recognized the nobility of this virtue, Jesus elevates it to the very perfection of the Father: “Be compassionate (*oiktirmones*) as your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:36). This passage parallels Matthew’s rendition, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). The Greek word here, *oiktirmones*, has multiple connotations. It implies mercy in the sense of forgiveness, and also in the sense of genuine sympathy for the poor and the marginalized. It carries with it every implication of the heart of the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15) where we see the root of compassion quite deeply.

The father of the prodigal son (who represents God the Father, for Jesus) is not simply merciful to him, he sympathizes with him *in his suffering*. Even though the boy has betrayed him, his family, his country, his election, and the Law, the father cannot help but be moved by his son’s misery. He so sympathizes with his son in his suffering that he forgives him and restores him to full membership with the family (signified by giving him a signet ring). Compassion (“loving sympathy with another who suffers”), here, is not only the source of forgiveness, it is also the source of healing and the imparting of dignity. We are now getting to the essence of compassion.

When we *are* compassionate (not merely *showing* compassion, which feels like pity to the receiving party) we become like the prodigal son’s father. We don’t feel misery in the same way that the son feels misery (i.e., starving, deprived, alone, regretful), but we feel miserable because the one we love is miserable, and this sense of “sympathetic sadness” moves us to do as much as we can to comfort the one who is suffering. Comfort sometimes takes the form of *doing* something beneficial (restoring the son to the family, giving a medical treatment which is successful, giving a poor person a meal, etc.). But frequently enough, we cannot *do* anything but

give our time, presence, and attention; we can only *be with* the other. We are capable only of using our presence, our friendship, and our love to give comfort. Yet this imparts dignity. Spending time with another proves to the other that he is valuable, because most everyone intuitively recognizes the preciousness of time. Children certainly do.

No matter how compassion is manifested (doing something for someone, or simply being with someone), it always has the capacity to impart dignity. There is something about “an act of loving sympathy with another’s misery from which comfort naturally comes” which proves to another that he not only has esteemability or status, but genuine lovability (belovedness), which is much deeper than a mere accolade for talent or a job well done. This “loving sympathy giving rise to comfort” is the deepest and most positive gift which can be given -- for the awareness of belovedness, genuine belovedness, is a recognition of our truest dignity. We intuitively know that it is better to be loved than “accorded esteem,” and when we receive such love, it brings with it a flood of dignity, a freedom to be oneself, an appreciation of the goodness of one’s personhood – one’s being -- and not merely one’s accomplishments. This is true joy.

There is only one hitch. We generally have to be suffering in order to receive compassion. When you really think about it, you can only receive “the loving sympathy for suffering which naturally gives rise to comfort” when you are suffering! You can’t be the recipient of a genuine gift of “suffering with,” unless you are suffering. Thus, we can see one of the most paradoxical aspects of the human condition – if we are to receive the deep affirmation of our belovedness which leads to our deepest moments of dignity, freedom, self-affirmation, and joy, we must be in a state of weakness, pain, or need.

Most children experience this when they are sick and stay home from school. Instead of their mothers being revolted by their illness, or angry at the inconvenience of their illness, they probably receive loving sympathy, comfort, and a genuine affirmation of their belovedness. This gift of compassion leaves an indelible mark on children. If it recurs again and again, an intuitive belief begins to form that they are intrinsically lovable. They are beloved just in themselves, without all the accomplishments and comparative advantage that can make them *exteriorly* esteemable. This will eventually enable them to love themselves and to accept love from another, which will make all the difference between a life of love and a life of trying to win the love that we believe we do not deserve. The former strategy leads to lasting friendships and good marriages, but the latter one substitutes the loveable self for the esteemable self. Notice how suffering is integral to the difference between these two self-conceptions.

Though suffering is exceedingly helpful for breaking the spell of a dominant Level 2 identity and helping us to sympathize with others who are suffering (the first step in being free for empathy, humility, and compassion), it does not automatically lead to compassion. In order for this to happen, the suffering person must fulfill two other conditions:

1. See the value or goodness of a Level 3 contributive identity, and
2. Be relatively free from fear and anxiety.

This article is devoted to showing how to fulfill these two conditions. In my view, the most important step for fulfilling them is *faith* – which includes:

- belief in an unconditionally loving God,
- belief that His intention is to bestow eternal life on us in His kingdom of love,
- belief that He suffers with us while we are suffering and continuously brings goodness and opportunity out of it
- belief that He is inspiring, protecting, and guiding us through our times of suffering,
- spontaneous prayers that can act as conduits of grace, and
- the ability to recognize how He is guiding us through the actions of His Spirit.

Faith transforms the other critical elements for “suffering well” by focusing them on eternal life and love and complementing them with God’s grace and inspiration. These other elements include:

- prudence – the ability to know that Level 3 and 4 happiness give rise to a more pervasive, enduring, and deep, purpose, dignity, fulfillment, and destiny than Levels 1 and 2.
- rationality to make backup plans, strategies for limiting negative effects, plans for utilizing others’ skills and connections, etc.
- connecting with friends for both support and complementary skill sets and connections
- reshaping our expectations and avoiding negative comparisons

With faith as our foundation and with these other natural abilities to complement it, suffering will almost inevitably lead to a deeper appreciation and appropriation of empathy, humility, and compassion. This can happen either by directly recognizing the intrinsic goodness of contribution, empathy, humility, and compassion, or by seeing the goodness of these qualities through the eyes and mind of Jesus Christ who loves us and is redeeming us. As noted above, I was in the second group, but I know many who are in the first.

II.C.7 Acceptance of Compassion

Most of us who have reached our mid-twenties no longer have the attitude of children who are capable of accepting the compassion of parents, friends, and teachers. We have learned that we are supposed to be capable of taking care of ourselves, carrying our own weight, and that our respectability depends on this. We have also learned that we should never take another person’s time for our personal needs. Even though we could not possibly live this way, we try to believe the myth so that we can content ourselves with our autonomy and self-sufficiency. If we believe the myth, we tell ourselves that we are not needy, and we would never explicitly admit to being needy, but we do find ways, “acceptable ways,” of getting our needs met.

How do people find the freedom to accept another’s compassion? As implied above, some people do this naturally. Others remember the acts of compassion they received as children and carry them over into adulthood. And still others, like myself, *need suffering* in order to do this.

As I mentioned above, I suffer from retinitis pigmentosa (a degenerative eye disease). This caused me to lose my driver’s license when I was 31. Now if there is one thing in this culture that proves we are self-sufficient and autonomous, it is the fact that we can get into our cars and

go wherever we want whenever we want. But I found myself, at the age of 31, not being able to get into my car and go wherever I wanted whenever I wanted. Quite the contrary. I lost my insurance, and therefore, my driver's license, and therefore became dependent on others for rides.

At first, I could not bear to ask anyone for a ride out of sheer embarrassment. I felt that the mere admission of bad eyesight and an inability to drive *myself* (not carrying my own weight, as it were) would produce utter shock and disdain among the people I asked. This shock and disdain really never happened, but after two years of having my secretaries ask for rides for me, I still did not believe that people respected me as much as they would have if I had not been losing my eyesight. I thought they were disguising it incredibly well. So, as I took the rides from compassionate people, I would sit there believing that they were annoyed at the inconvenience, troubled by my inferiority, and pitying me for that inferiority. I really hated getting into those cars.

One day, I was accepting a ride to my parish when a lady mentioned to me that she was really grateful that she was able to get on the list of people who wanted to give me a ride. I said, "A list? Why would there be a list?" And she said that this was something that many people thought they could do, that it was relatively easy, and it would give them some time with me. I was truly surprised. They were not annoyed at my weakness. They found it a rather pleasing and interesting idiosyncrasy in a person who seemed, at times, distant because of his use of complex sentences and concepts. They said that my eye problem made me human, and that they were able to empathize with a person that they had otherwise found to be somewhat intimidating. In fact, this lady said that it made me "un-intimidating!"

After some reflection on this incident, I discovered that people liked me – just for myself, not for my intellect or my gifts of speaking. They wanted to get to know me, they wanted me to be un-intimidating. They enjoyed being around me not despite my weakness, but in the midst of my weakness. They really enjoyed being of service – and giving a ride was something they could do (which I obviously could not do). I had the peculiar role of *allowing* these wonderful people an opportunity to obtain dignity from their selfless service to another. In their attempt to make my life easier, in their loving sympathy with my weakness, in their self-sacrifice to care for me, I too was able to impart dignity back to them by merely *accepting* their compassion as compassion, by *accepting* their love as genuine love. I often wondered why people were so happy when they were giving me a ride. It began to occur to me that the smile was not an act, but a genuine bit of joy produced through an authentic act of empathy, graciously accepted by someone in need.

But how did I get there? Suffering. In this case, deprivation – a problem with my eyes. But more than this, I had to go through a period of embarrassment and humiliation (more suffering) before I began to realize that people were better than I ever expected them to be. The reason I did not think they were better than I ever expected was because *I* was not up to their level. *I* was not capable of that kind of compassion. Formerly, I believed that their compassion really was a disguised act of shock and disdain (they were doing it because the pastor had put pressure on them, and so they were making the best out of a bad situation). But when that lady told me about the list, it occurred to me that people *are* really that good; they *are* much better than I expected;

and so I felt called to be more compassionate in imitation of *them*. The more I responded to this call to become genuinely compassionate myself, the more I was able to accept the compassion of others.

I deduced from this a cycle for people like myself, namely, that a small act of accepting compassion induces an awareness of how genuinely good people can be, and this awareness, in turn, called me to imitate them, which, in turn, freed me to accept their compassion. Not a bad deal! Suffering induced not only the compassion of others, it made *me* aware of goodness in the world, called *me* to compassion, and allowed *me* to accept the compassion of others, which imparted true dignity to the one giving compassion. All of this through one manifestation of suffering.

There was another hidden benefit underlying my increased ability for compassion and the acceptance of it – the recovery of my loveable self. As noted above, before my eyesight problem, I struggled with substituting my “loveable self” with my esteemable self. I am not sure how my esteemable self-conception grew so strong, because my parents never emphasized Level 2 characteristics, but rather Level 3 and 4 characteristics. I suppose it happened throughout my academic studies because I was in competition with other students in three masters programs and a doctoral program—and I wanted to win the esteem of my professors as much as my religious superiors—perhaps more (I hate to admit it). Strangely, this emphasis on intelligence, research, writing, and lecturing (Level 2) did not undermine my faith (Level 4), but it did undermine my capacity for love (*agapē*), empathy, and compassion (Level 3). Though I was always willing to help people with their final exams and comprehensive exams, they would hint that “I did not suffer fools gladly” or “Wow you were a little rough with that guy” or “Intellectual precision is not the most important thing—you know.” I would always ask, “You really think I was that overbearing?” Most people would just say, “Figure it out for yourself,” which gave me enough room to convince myself that I really wasn’t that bad.

My eye disease changed that. It removed the delusion of compassion, and laid bare the fact that I had replaced my loveable self with a merely esteemable one—an objectified self—a “thingafied” self. As I began to accept the genuine acts of compassion from others, and to see how truly good people really were—I began the long process of going back to what my parents had taught me through their loving actions. Thinking back on it, if I had not been blessed with this gift of progressive blindness, I might have become quite heartless—and if that occurred, I do not think I could have sustained my vocation as a priest. I would have found a much better vocation for the heartless—the *interiorly* blind. This would have been true darkness—something far worse than a thorn in the flesh. And so I discovered as St. Paul says that in my weakness Christ grows stronger in me—and it is then that I am truly strong.

I have been going through this for thirty years now, and I have received a lot of rides – I mean a LOT of rides. I have seen the benefits of accepting and giving compassion again and again; and I feel that God called me to be a magnet of compassion (with a concomitant deepening of my own compassion) in all of these circumstances of need – need that was met by my accepting the compassion of others. If I lived for this alone – skip the books, the teaching, the degrees, the presidency, etc. – it would have been more than enough – simply living to induce compassion by the simple act of asking for and accepting a ride.

II.C.8 Conclusion

Is suffering really *necessary* for *agapē* (empathy, the acceptance of love's vulnerability, humility, forgiveness, compassion, and the acceptance of compassion)? For God, it is not, for He can, in a timeless, completely transparent act, through His perfect power and love, achieve perfect empathy, perfect acceptance of love's vulnerability, perfect humility, perfect forgiveness, and perfect compassion. As I have indicated many times above, I believe there are some people who can more easily move to this position without much assistance from suffering. But for people like me, suffering is absolutely indispensable to removing the blocks to *agapē* presented by my egocentric and autonomous desires, my belief in the cultural myth of self-sufficiency, my underestimation of the goodness and love of other people, and all the other limitations to my head and heart.

I have to believe that God allowed an imperfect physical nature and an imperfect world for people like me not only to actualize *agapē* freely (well, at least partially), but also, and perhaps more importantly, to even notice it. I really believe that God asks people who are better than me in love to patiently bear with the trials that are indispensable for people like me to arrive at an insight about empathy, humility, forgiveness, and compassion. But then again, they already have the empathy, humility, and compassion to do this, so God's request is truly achievable.

God works through this suffering. He doesn't waste any of it. For those who are open to seeing the horizon of love embedded in it, there is a future, nay, an eternity for each of us to manifest our own unique brand of unconditional love within the symphony of love which is God's kingdom. Without suffering, I do not think I could have even begun to move freely toward that horizon which is my eternal destiny and joy.

II.D Fourth Reason for an Imperfect World – the Opportunity for Common Cause toward the Common Good

We now move from an individual and personal perspective on suffering to a social and cultural perspective. We saw in the previous three sub-sections how God uses an imperfect world (and the challenge/suffering it can cause) to call and lead individuals toward life-transformations, courage, self-discipline, empathy, humility, love's vulnerability, compassion, and *agapē*. However, the value of an imperfect world and suffering is not limited to this. God can also use suffering to advance the *collective* human spirit, particularly in culture and society.

As John Donne so eloquently said:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

The interpersonal and social nature of human beings has been acknowledged by most philosophers since the time of Plato¹⁷ and Aristotle,¹⁸ so we might expect that suffering is not purely a personal matter. Evidently, our personal suffering affects the people around us, and the collective suffering of a group, society, or culture affects all the people within the group. As such, suffering stands at the root of societal interdependence, common cause, *esprit de corps*, and the common good.

Collective suffering can lead to profound societal change—sometimes quite positive when a culture is open to Level 3 and Level 4 ideals. However, if a culture is mostly on Levels 1 and 2, collective suffering can lead to even greater deprivation, suffering, and evil. We will examine this contention more closely below, but for the moment let us begin with the three cultural benefits of collective suffering: (1) interdependence, (2) room to make a better world, and (3) the development of progressively better social and cultural ideals and systems. Each will be discussed in turn.

(1) Interdependence. We cannot be completely autonomous – we need each other not only to advance but also to survive. Our imperfect world has literally compelled us to seek help from one another, to open ourselves to others' strengths, to make up for one another's weaknesses, and to organize ourselves to form a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts. We could say that our imperfect world is the condition necessary for the possibility of interdependence, and that interdependence provides an almost indispensable impetus to organize societies for mutual benefit.

The reader might respond that this is a somewhat cynical view of human nature because we probably would have formed societies simply to express empathy and love. I do not doubt this for a moment. However, I also believe that necessity is not only the mother of invention, but also the mother of social organizations for mutual benefit and specialization of labor. An imperfect world complements the human desire for empathy and love. While empathy and love allow us to enjoy one another, the imperfect world challenges us to extend that love to meeting others' needs and making up for others' weaknesses. Challenge (arising out of an imperfect world) induces us to extend our empathy, friendship, and enjoyment of one another into the domain of meeting one another's needs, organizing ourselves for optimal mutual benefit, and creating societies which take on a life of their own beyond any specific individual or group of individuals. Yet an imperfect world does far more than this. It calls us to make a better world,

¹⁷ Plato believed that the social nature of human beings is revealed in the origin of society—see Plato *The Republic* Bk. 1.

¹⁸ “Man is by nature a social animal”—Aristotle *Politics* Bk. 1 (1253a).

to the discovery of the deepest meaning of justice and love, and even to create better cultures and systems of world organization.

(2) Room to make a better world. An imperfect world reveals that God did not do everything for us. He has left room for us to overcome the seeming imperfections of nature through our creativity, ideals, and loves – not merely *individual* creativity, ideals, and loves, but also through *collective* creativity, ideals, and loves. As noted above, individuals can receive a tremendous sense of purpose and fulfillment by meeting challenges and overcoming adversity. Yet we can experience an even greater purpose and fulfillment by *collectively* meeting challenges, which are far too great for any individual; challenges which allow us to be a small part of a much larger purpose and destiny within human history.

It would have been noble indeed, and a fulfillment of both individual and collective purpose to have played a small part in the history of irrigation, the synthesis of metals, the building of roads, the discovery of herbs and medicines, the development of elementary technologies, the development of initial legal codes, the initial formulation of the great ideas (such as justice and love), the discoveries of modern chemistry, modern biology, modern medicine, modern particle and quantum physics, contemporary astronomy and astrophysics, the development of justice theory, inalienable rights theory, political rights theory, economic rights theory, contemporary structures of governments, the development of psychology, sociology, literature, history, indeed, all the humanities, arts, and social sciences; to have played a small part in the great engineering and technological feats which have enabled us to meet our resource needs amidst growing population, to be part of the communication and transportation revolutions that have brought our world so much closer together; to have been a small part of the commerce which not only ennobled human work, but also generated the resources necessary to build a better world; to have been a small part in these monumental creative efforts meeting tremendous collective challenges and needs in the course of human history. Yet, none of these achievements (and the individual and collective purpose and fulfillment coming from them) would have been possible without an imperfect world. If God had done everything for us, life would have been much less interesting (to say the least) and would have been devoid of the great purpose and achievement of the collective human spirit. Thank God for an imperfect world and the challenges and suffering arising out of it. We were not created to be self-sufficient, overly-protected “babies,” but rather to rise to the challenge of collective nobility and love – to build a better world.

(3) The development of progressively better social and cultural ideals and systems. We not only have the capacity to meet tremendous challenges collectively, we can also build culture – the animating ethos arising out of our collective heart which impels us not only toward a deeper and broader vision of individuals, but also of groups, communities, societies, and the world. This broader and deeper vision includes a deeper appreciation of individual and collective potential and therefore a deeper respect for the individual and collective human spirit. Thus, we have the capacity not only to build a legal *system*, but also to infuse it with an *ideal* of justice and rights, a scrupulous concern for accuracy and evidence, and a presumption of innocence and care for the individual. We have the ability not only to make tremendous scientific discoveries, but also to use them for the common good rather than the good of just a privileged class. We have the ability not only to build great structures, but also to use our architecture to reflect the beauty and goodness of the human spirit. We have the capacity not

only to do great research but also to impart the knowledge and wisdom gained by it in a humane and altruistic educational system. And the list goes on.

Perhaps more importantly, we have the capacity to build these more beneficent cultural ideals and systems out of the lessons of our collective tragedy and suffering. One of the greatest ironies of human history, it seems to me, is the progression of the greatest human cultural achievements from the greatest moments of human suffering and tragedy (whether these be caused by natural calamities like the plague or more frequently out of humanly induced tragedies such as slavery, persecution of groups, world wars, and genocide). The cruelty of Rome—particularly its harsh form of slavery and the blood thirsty entertainment of the coliseum led many to seek humane solace in the Christian Church—particularly its care for the sick, the needy, and the uneducated. Eventually it led to the conversion (and humanization) of the whole empire—thanks to Constantine.

The horrific abuses of slavery in Africa and the new world eventually led to the abolitionist movement and the proclamation of the universality of individual rights—intimated first by the Dominican Friar Bartolomé De Las Casas in his defense of the Indians against the slavery of the Spanish and Portuguese *Conquistadores*. This led to the first formalization of the universal and inalienable rights to life, to liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness by the Jesuit philosopher Francisco Suarez in his tractate *De Legibus* in 1612. The famous Calvinist philosopher and father of international law, Hugo Grotius, read the works of Suarez quite carefully and used his doctrine of universal natural rights to develop the basis for international law—particularly maritime law. John Locke soon discovered the doctrine in the works of Grotius, and used it as the foundation for his *Second Treatise on Government*. Thomas Jefferson and other European Democrats used these foundations to establish the inalienable rights doctrine standing at the heart of every modern democracy.

It should be noted that though the issue of slavery was instrumental in the development of natural rights—and that maritime disputes and wars were instrumental in the foundation of international law—these terrible social evils alone were not the impetus for the doctrine of universal natural rights. Every one of the above philosophers and statesmen were Christians who not only took their faith (Level 4) seriously,¹⁹ but also took from their faith the central idea of the intrinsic dignity of *every* human being and the inviolability of their life and freedom to advance themselves and pursue happiness (on all four levels). Standing at the base of their conviction was no doubt Jesus' teaching: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

The outbreak of plagues led eventually to advances in medicine and public health, as well as a deeper appreciation of *individual* life and personhood; large-scale economic marginalization and injustice during the industrial revolution led eventually to economic rights theories (and to systems of economic rights); world wars led eventually to institutions of world justice and peace. There seems to be something in collective tragedy and suffering that awakens the human spirit,

¹⁹ Bartolomé De Las Casas was a Dominican Friar in the Catholic Church, Francisco Suarez was a Jesuit priest in the Catholic Church, Hugo Grotius was a Calvinist philosopher and a noted Christian apologist, and John Locke was a Calvinist—who modified his Christological position throughout his life—and was a significant philosophical Christian apologist, writing *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695).

awakens a prophet or a visionary (such as Jesus Christ, St. Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, Mahatma Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr.), which then awakens a collective movement of the human heart (such as the abolitionist movement), which then has to endure suffering and hardship in order to persist, but when it does persist, brings us to a greater awareness of what is humane. Through the leadership of Level 3 and 4 prophetic figures like these, the ashes of collective tragedy lead to the advancement of the social good and human culture; and more than this – a collective resolve, a determination of the collective human spirit which proclaims, “never again;” and still more – a political-legal system to shepherd this collective resolve into the future.

As may now be evident, the greatest collective human achievements in science, law, government, philosophy, politics and human ideals (to mention but a few areas) seem to have at their base not just an imperfect world, not just individual suffering, not just collective suffering, but epic and even monumental collective suffering. Was an imperfect world necessary for these greatest human achievements? It would seem so (at least partially); otherwise there would have been no room to grow, no challenges to overcome (either individually or collectively), and no ideals to be formulated by meeting these challenges. God would have done them all for us.

Nothing could be worse for a child’s development and capacity for socialization than overprotective parents who think they are doing the child a favor by doing her homework for her, constructing her project for her, thinking for her. To remove all imperfections from a child’s living conditions; to take away all challenges and opportunities to meet adversity, all opportunities to rise above imperfect conditions; to take away all opportunities to create and invent a better future; and to remove the opportunity to exemplify courage and love in the midst of this creativity would be tantamount to a decapitation. God would no more decapitate the collective human spirit than a parent would a child; and so, God not only *allowed* an imperfect world filled with challenge and adversity, He *created* it.

We must remember at this juncture that God’s perspective is eternal. As noted above, God intends to redeem every scintilla of our suffering and to transform it into the symphony of eternal love, which is His kingdom. Therefore, the people who suffered in Nazi concentration camps—an unimaginably horrific condition that led ultimately to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights (1948) and to the current system of international courts—did not suffer for the progress of this world alone, as if they were pawns in the progress of the world. According to Jesus, their suffering—a veritable martyrdom—would lead ultimately to eternal life, love, and joy. The good of suffering does not stop with this world alone. All of it will be used by the unconditionally loving God to bring optimal salvation and consolation to us and the people we touch (Blessed are the sorrowing,²⁰ for they *shall* be consoled—Mt 5:4). At the moment of what seems to be senseless suffering and death, God takes the individual into the fullness of His love, light, and life while initiating a momentum toward a greater common good within the course of human history. People of faith must continually take precautions against reducing themselves to mere naturalists, for the God of love redeems each person’s suffering individually and eternally while using it to induce and engender progress toward His own ideal for world culture and the human community.

²⁰ The Greek verb “penthountes” can refer to mourning, grieving, being sad, or sorrowing. It need not be restricted to grief alone.

The above points only answer part of our question about the necessity of suffering to advance the common good; for even if an *imperfect world* were truly necessary for such advancement, it does not seem that something as monstrous as a world war would be so necessary. True enough. But here is where moral evil and human freedom exacerbates the conditions of an imperfect world. Unlike natural laws, which blindly follow the pre-patterned sequences of cause and effect, human evil has embedded in it injustice, egocentrism, hatred, and cruelty which are all truly unnecessary. Nevertheless, even in the midst of the unnecessary and gratuitous suffering arising out of moral evil, the human spirit (galvanized by the Holy Spirit, according to my faith) rises above this suffering and seems eventually to produce advancements in culture and the common good in proportion to the degree of suffering.

In conclusion, the annals of human history are replete with examples of how tremendous moments of collective human suffering (whether caused by human depravity or the imperfections and indifference of nature, or both) induced, engendered, accelerated, and in many other ways helped to create the greatest human ideals and cultural achievements. Suffering alone is not sufficient to bring about this phoenix-like phenomenon. It also required Level 3 and 4 prophetic leaders possessed of courage, commitment, and enduring fortitude as well as Level 3 and 4 individuals who allowed themselves to be moved by the call of these leaders to sacrifice themselves to make a better world out of the ashes of human suffering.

If one has faith one will likely attribute this “phoenix-like” phenomenon to the Holy Spirit working within the collective human spirit. If one does not have faith, one will simply have to marvel at the incredible goodness of the collective human spirit. Perhaps the human spirit is capable of such goodness, but in light of the evils that it has also produced, the seemingly continuous victory of good over evil should make us wonder. Are we really that good in ourselves—or is an unconditionally good God orchestrating our goodness to His ultimately good end?

In any case, the imperfect world and the history of human suffering have given rise to a concrete reality of remarkable beauty and goodness in the areas of justice, rights, legal systems, governance systems, medicine, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, sociology, and every other discipline which has as its noble end the advancement of the common good. Without an imperfect world, without some suffering in the world, I find it very difficult to believe that any of this would have arisen out of the collective human spirit in the course of history.

It would seem that the price paid in pain has been at least partially offset by the gains made in culture, society, the individual spirit, and the collective human spirit—and if Jesus was correct in asserting the unconditional love of His Father, this pain would lead assuredly to eternal salvation in love for *all* people “who seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience.”²¹

²¹ This universal promise of salvation to every person of good will following the dictates of their conscience is evident in the New Testament, and is solemnly defined as doctrine by the Roman Catholic Church in its Dogmatic Constitution (*Lumen Gentium*) in the Second Vatican Council. The precise wording in the text is taken from: *Lumen Gentium—The Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Church in The Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. by Austin Flannery Chapter II, sec. 16 (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company), 1975.

I do not mean to trivialize the history of human suffering and tragedy nor the lives of individuals ruined by human injustice and an imperfect natural order. Yet we should not fail to find some hope in light emerging from darkness, and goodness emerging from evil. Inasmuch as God is all-powerful and all-loving, He can seize upon this goodness and light to reinforce its historical momentum, and more importantly to transform it into an unconditionally loving eternity. If this is correct, then an imperfect world shaped by an imperfect, yet transcendently good human spirit brought to fulfillment by an unconditionally loving God, will equate to an eternal symphony of love.

II.E

Fifth Reason for an Imperfect World -- the Opportunity to Build the Kingdom of God

As noted above, suffering can be of invaluable assistance in leading us to our eternal and loving reward. In Section II.A we saw how suffering could be truly helpful to moving from a merely materialistic identity (Level 1) and an egocentric identity (Level 2), to a contributive, loving identity (Level 3) and a transcendently good and loving identity (Level 4). The movement toward a Level 3 / Level 4 identity is not for this world alone, for love is eternal by nature, and faith is oriented toward a loving eternity. Hence, any progress toward Level 3 and Level 4 is also progress toward the eternal Kingdom of God. If suffering helps us to progress toward Levels 3 and 4, it must also help us to progress toward the Kingdom of God.

The same holds true for the points made in Section II.C. We saw there how suffering could be helpful in embracing deeper empathy, humility, compassion, and *agapē*, and in Section II.B, we saw how suffering could be helpful in appropriating deeper courage and self-discipline, which are intrinsic to the pursuit of authentic love. Inasmuch as suffering is helpful in developing the elements and conditions of authentic love, and unconditional love is intrinsic to the eternal Kingdom of God, suffering must again be helpful in moving toward the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, if Jesus was correct in asserting the unconditional love of His Father, then His intention is to redeem every dimension of suffering. Thus, whenever we suffer, God is already working through it to bring about optimal empathy, humility, authenticity, compassion, courage, and self-discipline, and through these, to bring about the optimal path toward eternal salvation in His love. We may not clearly apprehend the direction, timeline, and nuances of this plan, but we may be sure that an unconditionally loving God will do everything to optimize our salvation (without violating our and others' freedom).

There are three other ways in which suffering is involved in the road to salvation: (1) room to participate in building the kingdom, (2) deeper appropriation of faith and greater participation in church community, and (3) offering up our suffering as an act of love for the salvation of the world.

II.E.1

Room to Participate in Building the Kingdom

The more we cooperate with God's plan to bring love and salvation out of suffering, the more we can become instruments of God's hope, love, and salvation to others, which allows us, in turn, to be genuine participants in building the kingdom of God.

God does not need our *perfect* cooperation to bestow salvation upon us, because His love is unconditional and He can redeem and heal our imperfections beyond our limited powers. This is a very happy truth, because the vast majority of us (or perhaps I should speak only for myself) are incapable of even approaching *perfect* cooperation with God's loving plan. Yet God has left enough room for us to participate in His work of salvation (albeit imperfectly) and so, the more we consciously cooperate with His plan, the more good we will be able to do for ourselves and others in the work of eternal salvation.

The above thought provokes a question: Why try to cooperate with God's loving plan, if God will save repentant people (amidst their imperfections) anyway? Because cooperating with God's loving plan will (1) make suffering less painful and depressing for us and others, (2) deepen *our* conversion toward authentic unconditional love more quickly (which brings us closer to true joy), and (3) help *us* to play an important role in actualizing eternal salvation. The first two points may by now be evident from the explanation of suffering given above, but the third point merits closer consideration.

As noted in the previous section, God did not do everything for us. He created us in an imperfect world so that we might be able to make a significant contribution in bringing about both love in the *world*, *and* unconditional love in His eternal Kingdom.

Consider the following: God did not create a perfectly loving kingdom on earth. This is obvious not only in the imperfect natural world in which we live, but also in the millions of unloving human actions awaiting redemption in His future eternal kingdom. In God's kingdom there will be no acts of unlove because God's grace will eventually purify our freedom so that our actions truly reflect a pure desire to love authentically and unconditionally. Inasmuch as our freedom is not yet completely purified, the Kingdom of God is not and cannot be perfectly manifest on earth.

So how do we move from imperfect freedom to perfectly purified freedom? Christians believe this occurs through the redemptive act of Christ, our desire for His redemption, and the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and minds. We believe that Christ's unconditionally loving death and resurrection, and the action of the Holy Spirit will redeem every person of good will (who even implicitly desires this redemption). Yet, Christ did not redeem the world in a way that would preclude us from participating in His work of salvation. Quite the contrary. Just as the Creator gives us room to make a better world, so also Christ gives us room to participate in the work of salvation. Paul acknowledges this in an often misinterpreted passage from the Letter to the Colossians:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I *complete* what is *lacking* in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which

I became a minister according to the divine office, which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.... (Col 1:24-25, italics mine).

At first glance, one might get the impression that Paul is saying that something is *intrinsically* lacking in the sufferings of Christ. This would be both heretical and self-refuting, for if something were lacking in Christ's redemptive act (necessary for salvation) then we could not be saved! Paul clearly does not intend this for both doctrinal and logical reasons. Moreover, he argues the precise opposite many other times throughout his corpus.

One may also get the impression that Paul is being arrogant when he claims that *he* completes what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Once again, this must be a misinterpretation, because it conflicts with his desire for humility and love, and his awareness that humility and love are the essence of Christ and His Father.

So, what *does* he mean? He means that there is nothing necessary for salvation lacking in the sufferings of Christ, *but* that Christ has left enough room for us to participate in His redemptive work. Christ's redemptive act (His incarnation and passion) constitutes an unconditional gift of self (an unconditional act of love) indelibly actualized and concretized in the world. This is sufficient to redeem every person who freely accepts it. Yet He does not complete every aspect of the *propagation* of this salvific love. Rather, He leaves this open for the Church and us to accomplish (partially). He gives us the Holy Spirit to *help* with this ministry, not to take it over. He lets us be His instruments and participate in the greatest of all possible earthly actions, namely, the propagation of His *eternal* love and joy. He allows us to play an integral part in giving His greatest gift to humankind. What could be a greater dignity, privilege, and purpose in life? What could be a greater joy?

Yet, as Paul makes clear, this great joy is punctuated by suffering ("Now I rejoice in *my sufferings* for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"). Though Paul is speaking of *his* sufferings here, he is also implicitly referring to all our sufferings in spreading the Gospel and building the kingdom. It seems that the noble project of giving away the eternal and unconditional love of Christ can involve misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and even heresy. It can engender resentment, infighting, and jealousy; inauthenticity and hypocrisy; having to face false allegations for the sake of Christ, having to be courageous to stay true to his word, and having to make sacrifices of a thousand other kinds. This is why Jesus concludes the Beatitudes with the promise that every kind of persecution for the faith will be redeemed in the kingdom of God:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you (Mt 5:11-12).

It seems that the privilege, purpose, and joy we have been given in preaching the unconditional love of God entails many pitfalls and sufferings, but there is no greater dignity or purpose we can have than this salvific project – because its effects are *eternal*. If we help someone to find faith and stay on the road to salvation, that has an *eternal* effect; if we help to

prevent a person from discouragement, despair, or unbelief, that too has an eternal effect; and if we inhibit a destructive momentum – which might cause the loss of transcendence or virtue – within the culture, that too has an eternal effect. So if we are ridiculed, harassed, or even persecuted for doing these things, it is worth it – for it is a temporal sacrifice for an eternal effect. Moreover the trusting and courageous endurance of such sufferings can be an act of *self-sacrificial love* in imitation of Jesus who turned hatred and persecution into a self-sacrificial love for the world (see below Section II.E.4).

This is why St. Paul says, “Now I *rejoice* in my sufferings for your sake....” He knows that suffering is anything but meaningless because it is filled with eternal salvific significance. Paul rejoices because the eternal and unconditional dignity of the ministry he has been given far outweighs the sufferings he must endure to carry it out. This does not reduce the hardship of spreading the Gospel, but it does infuse that hardship with a profound meaning of eternal and unconditional love.

Furthermore, this hardship is a manifestation of *our* love, a purification of our freedom, an act of love for the One who redeemed us by His blood, a gift of self to complement Christ’s total gift of self on the cross. Thus, the suffering intrinsic to spreading the Gospel is not only filled with meaning – eternal meaning – but also with self-transformation and love destined to last throughout eternity.

II.E.2

Deeper Appropriation of Faith and Greater Participation in Church Community

Suffering also has a peculiar way of leading people to God and church community. This is clearly evidenced in 12-Step programs and in many adult re-conversions to religion. As noted above, suffering can compel us to look for more profound meaning in life, to seek purpose in places we had never anticipated, and to find meaning and consolation in those new places.

Most of us will probably settle for mediocrity and superficiality in our life’s purpose if we feel like our Level 1 and 2 needs are well met. This feeling is so satisfying that we would sacrifice breadth and depth of meaning in order to preserve it. Much of the time we would rather fill “on top of the world” in a very small world than to feel somewhat subordinated in a big world. The only way we can overcome this self-imposed superficiality is to give up the need to be “on the top of the world.” But how? Being on top of the world feels so good; it makes me feel so much better than everyone else; and that too makes me feel so good. It can sometimes be more addictive than drugs. How can I let go of the feeling of being on the top of the world in order to enter humbly into a huge domain over which I might only have a small influence, but one that will echo in its love throughout the many consciousnesses and “eternities” it affects? Think about it for a moment. If you’re anything like me, there seems to be one initial step, namely, suffering.

I grew up in a faith tradition, and so, when suffering and the feeling of powerlessness entered into my life, I reflexively turned toward God to hold the center when I could not hold it myself. I have known other people who did not grow up with faith and whose turning toward God had to be learned over the course of months or years in Alcoholics Anonymous (or other 12-

Step programs), in religious counseling, through hospital chaplains during protracted medical treatments, through reading of religious books or magazines, or even through religious television and radio. In the case of those who are professed believers or agnostics, God has a way of appearing in the midst of suffering. When we reach out to Him in that suffering, we find that the sense of powerlessness is replaced with the consolation of God's power in the midst of our humility and creatureliness. When we realize that we are powerless, we have a perfect opportunity for a radical humility opening upon radical faith. All that is required is an admission of our *need* for the One who is *really* at the center of reality – in the words of Alcoholics Anonymous, a “higher power.”

The radical admission of need (humility) *allows* the God of love to move into our center, for He would not do this unless we, in our freedom, invite Him to do so. Odd as it may seem, God's love is so great that He will not impose Himself on us; He will not come into our lives if we do not want Him. He subjects Himself and His love to our freedom because He is unconditionally loving.

However, if we do invite God into our lives, to be our control, our center, a higher power, and to be Creator, then God most assuredly will enter into our lives to help us. This help may not be a *direct* solution to our problems, it may not be the help that *we* ask for or expect; but most assuredly this help will open us up to an awareness of His unconditional love. Much of the time, this awareness occurs through a church community.

The awareness of God's love can occur on a variety of levels – some of them quite tacit. Sometimes it can be in the form of expressions or actions of love from fellow church members; other times it can come through clergy, or can leap off the page of the New Testament; sometimes it can be imbued with the beauty of church life: the beauty of the people serving in the church, the beauty of faith exemplified by those individuals, the beauty of the doctrine of Christian love, the beauty of the Eucharist, the sacraments, the liturgy, the liturgical year, the beauty of music, art and architecture, the beauty of tradition and the saints – we are invited into an ethos of beauty which leads deeper and deeper into the mystery of God's love and majesty.

This mysterious beautiful love calls us into itself. It enchants us, fascinates us, enriches us, and fills us quietly but deeply. We become very interested in things theological; almost addicted to asking questions about God, heaven, Scripture, Tradition – everything having to do with this mysterious, beautiful love. God might not solve our problems or resolve our sufferings immediately, but He will make us aware of His mysterious, beautiful love through our admission of need, and He will invite us more deeply into that mystery, enchant and enrich us with it, and then lead us by *His* own path to a new meaning of life in humility, service, and love. To be sure, this path may not be easy, but in the long run, it will lead us out of abject superficiality into a life filled with transcendent Truth, Love, Goodness, Beauty, and Home, to a life betokening our eternal destiny of love with Him.

But that's not all. When we have been “rescued” from a life of superficiality, meaninglessness, or hopelessness, we develop a *natural* inclination to share it with others. At this point, the Lord of love again inspires us, enflaming us with wisdom and energy, with knowledge and compassion, and with a love and faith beyond our temporal understanding, to go

out and share the good news that we do not have to be at the center, we do not have to be in complete control. We can trust the One and only one who can be in complete control, and we can content ourselves with being a very small part of the utterly immense and eternal kingdom of love.

This desire to share the Word of hope with others, to share the Word that gives more than superficial life, the Word that reaches into mystery, perfection, and eternity builds on itself. When we see the depth and breadth, the hope and love, the richness and joy that comes from our ministry and service, we cannot resist the inspiration to do more – increasingly more. We want to serve the Lord of love who has made this possible for us. As we do this, we not only find an increased meaning, depth, love, and joy in our lives, we grow in certitude that we are being led. God then becomes for us more than higher power, more than Creator (though ironically this should be enough), He becomes the God of providential love concerned not just for me but for us, concerned to lead us toward greater freedom and love, caring enough to invite us into His very divine life of love. After living a life of service and ministry, one can scarcely doubt the love and the presence of God. Certitude has worked its way into our life experience through the acceptance of God’s invitation given to us in suffering.

The unfolding of these “loving tactics of God” has certainly been the story of my life, but I have seen it manifest even more profoundly in the lives of those with greater challenges than my own. Sometimes the people with the greatest challenges in life – physical, familial, mental – give some of the strongest and most articulate testimonies to the love of God. Their faith, peace, confidence, awareness of God, capacity for compassion, and above all, their joy and “being at home with God” are incredibly profound. I frequently find this to be a sign of God’s presence because I cannot fathom how they could have all these qualities without some direct inspiration from the God of love.

This holds true even for children, particularly those who face illness and physical deprivation. Many of the children I have met in hospitals, who are facing severe illnesses and even death, have a profound faith, peace, and confidence, which allows them to console their parents when their parents are incapable of consoling them. When I first heard children say, “Don’t worry, Mom – everything is going to be alright;” I used to think, “Well, that is the naïve optimism of a child.” But then I came to realize that most of these children didn’t think their life *in this world* was going to be all right; they thought their life with God would make everything all right. I asked some of these parents whether they had brought up their children in a religious household. Many of them had, but interestingly enough, many of the children who had not been brought up in a religious household expressed just as profound a peace and confidence in the life to come as the ones who had been raised with that expectation. One might maintain that this is yet another iteration of the naïve optimism of a child, but I don’t think so, because the prospect of death (powerful as this finality is) did not seem to shake the peace which these children felt.

One can make out of this whatever one wishes. But there is one major point, which is shared by children and adults who experience this “peace beyond all understanding” (Phil 4:7), namely, they both have acknowledged their need for God and have invited Him into their center. Children seem to do this naturally – not just with God, but also with their parents and with everyone else for that matter. That is the distinctive advantage of children. But adults can do

this too; they can acquire the heart of a child; but they generally need to do this through suffering which causes them to invite God into their center, which, in turn, allows God to invite them more deeply into His mysterious loving beauty, which, in turn, induces them to serve God by sharing the life and meaning of eternal and perfect love, which, in turn, leads to peace beyond all understanding. Adults frequently need suffering to reach the state of abject openness to God. Children seem to possess it in their very being. Far from naïveté, they exemplify a confidence, peace, and love originating in God Himself.

II.E.3 Serving and Building the Kingdom of God

When suffering shocks us out of superficiality – when it leads us to humility and to the search for God – and even the need for God – when suffering has worked its “miracle” of opening us to the world of eternal significance and eternal effects, we will want to *do* something about it. This “doing” frequently consists first in getting involved in a church community – and then learning more about our faith. This leads invariably to the desire to share with others the eternal significance and salvation we have received. We need to act on this natural inclination when we fill it most strongly – near the time we have drawn closer to God and eternity. Unfortunately, our desire to share the eternal gift we have been given with others tends to diminish if we do not follow through on it – if we do not put it into action. However, if we do put it into action, the sense of our eternal significance and destiny grows stronger and stronger – creating the impetus to share it with more people – as often as we can.

Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom frequently reflect this theme. He compares this gift of eternal significance and destiny to a mustard seed that when planted in the ground (shared with others) turns into the largest of trees where the birds of the sky come and make their nest. He also speaks of it as leaven that a woman kneaded into a small batch of flour until the entire dough began to rise. Though He speaks most often about the growth of “the Kingdom” when we share the gift of eternal significance and destiny with others, He also speaks of the opposite effect.

The parable of the talents speaks of both growth and diminishment. Two of the servants invest the master’s money (eternal significance and destiny) and they predictably make much more. One servant decides not to do this, burying his talents in the ground. The master then takes the “money” from that servant and gives it to the others who have more, and concludes by saying, “For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Mt 25:29). The meaning of the parable is clear – if we do not share the gift of eternal significance and destiny with others, it will simply grow weaker and weaker in us until we no longer recognize it or care about it. But if we do share it with others, it will grow into abundance – not only for others but for ourselves – because sharing this gift enables us to produce eternal effects in the world, and this cannot help but deepen the eternal significance of our lives and being.

Therefore, when we have been given the gift of faith whether we received it directly without the need for suffering -- or indirectly because suffering shocked us out of our superficiality – then we will want to act on our natural inclination to share it with others, and this

means finding some way to be light for the world and salt for the earth. As noted above, there can be no greater dignity than this because the effects of our efforts are eternal and universal.

When considering how we might share our faith, it is advisable to begin with those closest to us – and then, if we are in a position to reach farther, to do so in proportion to the time, energy, and talent that we have. Thus we will want to start with *personal evangelization* – our personal witness to family, and then to friends, and then to colleagues and associates at work or in the community. Personal witness does not have to be deep and complex. We need only testify to how faith has helped us in our lives – how it has helped us in life’s trials, in our relationships, to give direction to our lives, and to elevate our sense of meaning, fulfillment, dignity, and destiny. This testimony does not have to be as interesting as a novel – but only a light for people to reorient their lives.

This personal witness is especially important in times of *suffering*. Sometimes we feel reticent to talk about our faith out of respect for our friends and colleagues, because it seems like it might be “laying a trip” on them. However, I have found in the vast majority of instances, when I felt such reticent to do this (because I suspected it might not be greeted well), my friends and colleagues have responded with gratitude and appreciation. I truly think it is worth the risk to take the opportunity of a friend’s or colleague’s suffering to introduce them to Lord – and with Him – a whole new transcendent meaning, dignity, and destiny.

We can expand beyond the domain of personal evangelization by getting involved in our church or in our diocese. This can take dozens of forms, because there are so many ways of making contributions –serving on one of the church committees, being a lector or Eucharistic minister, working with the poor of the parish or diocese, taking communion to the sick, teaching catechism or confirmation classes to young people, etc. If you are unsure of how or where to make a contribution, ask the pastor for a list of committees on which you might serve or other ministerial opportunities. Getting involved in a church or diocese is an excellent way of building the kingdom of God.

When we move beyond our families, friends, colleagues, churches, and dioceses, we enter into a less personal realm in which it is more difficult to make a direct contribution to the kingdom of God, but there is still a need – particularly the need for evangelization. Since we cannot rely on personal connections and personal witness, we will have to become more familiar with the rationale and arguments that address peoples’ questions and difficulties with faith. There are many websites which have a large number of apologetical, catechetical, psychological, and spiritual resources to help seekers move beyond their doubts and difficulties.²² We do not have to be experts in all of these areas to help those who are seeking to deepen their faith. Most of the time, it is sufficient to give them access to videos and articles which will give a direct answer to their questions. If they want to proceed further, and you are not able to help them, refer them to the “contact us” button on the relevant websites. They are likely to answer questions from those

²² For apologetical resources in the areas of science, reason, and faith; happiness and suffering; virtue and freedom; and the reality of Jesus, I would recommend the Magis Center website – www.magiscenter.com. There are dozens of free resources on this site which answer many, if not most of the fundamental questions seekers have about God, the soul, Jesus, and virtue.

seriously pursuing faith. If you are interested in mastering some of the information on these websites – all the better -- because you can help seekers in a more personal and detailed way.

In sum, the opportunities for building the kingdom of God are immense – and we need not go beyond the areas with which we are acquainted and comfortable. If we do what we can, we will create gifts of unconditional and eternal truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home – by introducing seekers to the One who has been calling them to Himself. This is a very good use of our time and talent because the effects of our efforts will endure throughout an eternity of love.

II.E.4

The Mystical Opportunity of Suffering – Self-Sacrificial Love

There is an even deeper meaning and love in the hardship of spreading the Gospel and building the kingdom, indeed in all suffering. It is manifest in Christ's dying words and Paul's understanding of "the body of Christ." This deeper meaning and love is captured in the traditional Catholic Morning Offering where we offer up our *sufferings* for the sake of the entire mystical body of Christ. We believe that offering our sufferings to God transforms them into a gift of self (an act of love), which God can shower upon all who are in need, both living and deceased.

This is precisely what Jesus did on the cross. It is clearly evidenced in His dying words "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" These words represent the first phrase in Psalm 22, and they (in the absence of official titles or numeration systems) represent the title of the *entire* Psalm. This Psalm not only portrays events uncannily similar to Jesus' crucifixion (though written hundreds of years before), but also reflects the mind and heart of the suffering Messiah who cries out for help, is overwhelmingly confident in that help, and sees the ultimate result of that help in a salvation that will not only reach to the ends of the earth, but to all future generations on the earth, and even to those who are raised on high and those who "go down to the dust."

What was Jesus doing on the cross? He was offering himself in sacrifice, which He viewed as a "gift of self" (an unconditional act of love). His intention is revealed in His Eucharistic words: "This is My body given for you." Notice that the Greek word used to translate Jesus' Hebrew/Aramaic word for "body" is "*soma*" which means not only "flesh" or "corporeal body," but also "whole self." Thus we may translate Jesus' Eucharistic words as "This is my whole self given up for you" (i.e., "gift of self" – unconditional gift of self). This corresponds to the definition of love given in John's Gospel: "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Therefore, for Jesus, every act of suffering is a potential "gift of self" (act of love) if it is offered to the Father for the salvation of the world.

Jesus did not give this ultimate meaning of suffering for Himself alone. He intended it to be imitated by us. This is communicated in His Eucharistic words "Do this in memory of me." These words, of course, primarily refer to the Eucharistic rite, which effects His real presence in the Eucharist, but they also secondarily point to the action through which the Eucharist came into the world, namely, His self-sacrificial act on the cross. Furthermore, Jesus does not refer solely to *His* self-sacrificial act in His dying words on the cross. He uses Psalm 22 – a six hundred year

old tradition – to interpret His self-sacrifice for the salvation of the world, and therefore invites us – all of us – to enter into the tradition, which has been given new and definitive significance by Him.

I can still hear my mother’s voice echoing in my mind when I encounter suffering, injustice, or some other bewildering challenge, telling me, “Offer it up!” When I was young, I didn’t understand the profound significance of this instruction. However, over the years, I have come to realize what a privilege it is to be able to imitate Jesus Christ in making suffering into an act of self-sacrifice (love) offered to the Father as a gift to be showered upon anyone in need. We will only know in heaven how much good this has done, and how much salvation it has affected – but we can be sure that the Lord who left us enough room to help build up the kingdom, would join that act of love to His own, and put it to good use in the world. If we offer our sufferings as a gift of self (love) for the salvation of the world; if we trust the God of unconditional love to distribute that love (grace) to those who most need it; and if we believe that God left enough room for these acts of love to make a difference to the work of salvation, then it would be sufficient to live for this one purpose alone. Suffering would always have an intrinsic value because every act of suffering offered in sacrifice to the Father would be an act of love for the salvation of the world. Inasmuch as the Father gives that love to the world according to its salvific need, what more noble purpose could there be?

III. Conclusion

Why would God create an imperfect world? In a word, for the sake of love; for the sake of people like me; for the sake of love manifest as life transformation, virtue, empathy, compassion, humility, *agapē*; love manifest in creating a better world and even building up the very kingdom of love – the kingdom of the unconditionally loving God. As we have seen, every one of these reasons not only gives noble purpose to *this* life, but also carries forward to its fulfillment in an eternal and perfectly loving life. It is the noble purpose, which lasts forever. Temporal imperfections in this world lead to eternal perfection in the next. This is the logic of unconditional love.