

# Marilyn Adams: *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*

## Chapter 8: Resources to the Rescue (and a point from Chapter 9)

Philosophy of Religion

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1. A few key points regarding the thread of argument in the book:
  - i. Central Thesis: Horrendous evils require defeat by nothing less than the goodness of God.
  - ii. Strategy: identify ways that created participation in horrors can be integrated into the participants' relation to God, where God is understood as the incommensurate Good, and the relation to God is one that is overall incommensurately good for the participant.
  - iii. Conditions for a successful solution:
    - a. To show that God is logically compossible with horrendous evils it is *not* necessary to produce a logically possible morally sufficient reason why God does not prevent them. (In fact it is doubly misguided because (A) how bad horrors are finds its epistemic measure in our inability to think of plausible candidates for sufficient reasons why and (B) because the pressure to provides such rationales drives us to advance credible *partial* reasons why as total explanations, thereby making them implausible and attributing perverse motives to God.) Although because God is a person, God acts for reasons and so having a partial *reason why* would be a good thing.
    - b. Show how it is logically possible for God to be *good to* participants in horrors. (For God to be good to a participant in a horror God must guarantee him/her a life that is a great good *to him/her* on the whole and one in which any participation in horrors is defeated within the context of his/her own life. (Note: keep in mind that in order to really make the above clear, you must first explain what Adams means by *horrors* (and not by just giving examples) and then explain what it is for a horror to be *defeated*).
    - c. For a person's life to be *a great good to him/her* requires not only that the life be "objectively full of positive meaning" but that the person him/her-self recognize and appropriate this meaning.
    - d. The values to which one must be aligned in order for one's life to have meaning can be either concrete or symbolic.
2. Two assumptions of Adams' favored solution:
  - i. Since Adams insists that God must be good to every created person in the sense that that person's life has to have been a great good to him or her, Adams's view is *universalist* (i.e., all humans will be 'saved' or end up in communion with God).
  - ii. Adams thinks that while symbolic values are real, in the end God will guarantee an "eventual and permanent over balance of concrete well-being" to all persons. Her reason for thinking this, she says, is that "this is what the Bible seems to promise" (page 158).

### 3. Adams' Solution: Chalcedonian Christology and the Problem of Horrors

Two Fundamental points:

- i. In contrast to contemporary German theologians and to process thinkers, Adams favored account of "God was in Christ Reconciling the world to Himself" is decidedly more medieval. In particular, Adams view is much the same as that of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. In the interest of learning a little history, let's take a look at an English translation of the Chalcedonian Definition:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul {meaning human soul} and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten -- in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality {hypostasis}. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word {Logos} of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers {i.e., the Nicene Creed} has handed down to us.

This has been the traditional understanding of the Doctrine of the Incarnation in the Christian Church.

- ii. Adams will also make use of Julian of Norwich's soteriology (i.e., her theory of salvation) in outlining her solution to the problem of horrendous evils.

### 4. Partial Reasons Why: Divine Commitment to Material Creation

God's goodness to created persons comes from his love of them. This love finds its focus in three ways

- i. God wants creatures to be like God but yet to possess their own integrity. So he creates us with the ability to move and interact, to have life and perception of the world, and with personality and self-consciousness. "Human nature is the culmination and crown of God's efforts to make material creation—while yet material—more and more like God" (page 165).
- ii. God seeks union with humans, even though the metaphysical gap between us makes that very difficult. God gives material creatures life and personality to help in the bridging of the gap. But God wants more so God unites with us by becoming human.

### 5. Identification: The "How" of Horrors Defeated

- i. In the Incarnation, God becomes susceptible to horrors. And in his death on the cross Christ identified with everyone who participates in horrors. Of

course, being innocent he identified with the victims but because his form of death made him ritually cursed, he was also able to “cast his lot” with the perpetrators too (see page 166).

- ii. God in Christ crucified cancels the curse of human vulnerability to horrors. Participation in horrors does not thereby lose its horrendous aspect, but that which had looked like something that could annihilate meaning altogether is now seen as a “secure point of identification with the crucified God.”
  - iii. From the point of view of the postmortem beatific intimacy, the victims of horrors will “recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories. Those who have perpetrated horrors will see that their acts did not separate them from God, that they are forgiven, and that the lives of their victims were made good in the end.
  - iv. Horrors are not necessary for the individual’s incommensurate good, but the individual who suffered (perpetrated?) the horror wouldn’t want it changed.
  - v. The crucifixion of God Incarnate gives an objective and symbolic value to the suffering that comes from horrors for anyone who has suffered from one whether or not s/he recognizes it. Read from bottom of p. 167 and top of 168.
6. Divine Suffering:
- i. A lot has been made here of God’s suffering as part of the solution. But there is a tradition that says that God is impassable (that is, cannot suffer). But even if God can have the same *feelings* we have, he can’t have the same *emotions*. For an emotion involves much more than feelings. The frightened child in the dentist’s chair might have the same feelings as her mother who has just had her teeth worked on, but the child’s lack of experience and understanding of just what is going on accounts for her considerably more frantic emotional state.
  - ii. But here are the seeds to an objection to Adams: for if God can have the same feelings but not emotions, is the kind of suffering-solidarity that is the cornerstone of her account a real possibility? And do we even want God to have our emotions? Doesn’t the child find comfort in the fact that her mother isn’t as frightened as she is?
  - iii. Response (A): It is easy to overstate the above point. Knowing that, for example, everything will be all right in the end doesn’t stop the parent from feeling frustrated and grieved by the pain the dentist’s needle is causing her child. Even God’s knowing that every person will be fine in the end doesn’t prevent God from being frustrated, grieved, and even angry by the circumstances that lead to humans perpetrating horrors.
  - iv. Response (B): Chalcedonian Christology provides resources for having it both ways. The human mind of Christ was not omniscient. Although without sin, Christ was subject to the standard cognitive limitations and emotional fluctuations of human beings. So Christ could have had the anxiety and fear, the pain and suffering that humans had. Of course, there are limits. Not being a parent, for example, he couldn’t have felt earthly parental fears. But there are a great many universal feelings and emotions that he would have had that no God who was not incarnated could have had. Unlike most of the medieval

philosophers who provide significant inspiration for her, Adams also thinks that the divine nature of Christ is capable of “God-sized” suffering.

7. Three Closing Points:

- i. Adams is responding to what she calls the “logical problem of horrendous evil.” Remember, this is the claim that the existence of God and the existence of evil in the amount, kinds, and distribution that we find at the actual world are not compossible. As with the standard LPE, one can defeat the LPHE if one can show that there is a possible world containing both God and horrendous evils. So Adams needn’t claim that her solution is true but only that it is possible. (However, she admits that *showing* (i.e., demonstrating or proving) that a given philosophical claim really is genuinely logically possible is a tricky business.)
- ii. In chapter nine, Adams addresses the objection that her theodicy effectively undermines morality. Her response is to say that while she stands by her claim that we are too small to have obligations to God, human society nevertheless “involves role expectations and some system(s) of mutual evaluation and accountability” (page 192). So her view is that morality is a good thing. But questions of morality are pretty much irrelevant where horrors are concerned because they don’t get at the heart of what’s so bad about them.
- iii. A potential problem: the bottom line here is that because of the Incarnation, suffering provides a means of union and “identity” with God. God is, we are told, a suffering God. But is there the hint of something circular here? We look around and see all this pain and suffering. We wonder how those who suffer the worst of it could have lives that are or were, on the balance, worth living. We’re told (in the tiniest of nutshells) that yes, indeed, their lives are a great good to them in large part because their suffering produces a union and identification with the Suffering God. But why, one might wonder, is God suffering? Presumably, it is because of our suffering. Now we can recognize that anything that brings us into union with God is a good thing but still wonder if God couldn’t have found some other means of unity. Why not unbridled happiness, say? If (as at least one of the theologians Adams discusses says) God is *necessarily* a suffering God, then we would have an answer. God allows our suffering in part at least because God must suffer and our suffering too provides common ground. But if we think that there is no necessity in God’s suffering and if God could have made us not to suffer, then why would God not have done that?