

TRUTH AND SUFFERING

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1. Introduction

Some years ago, while delivering a paper in Nova Scotia, Canada, I made the claim that there can be no attainment of genuine truth without suffering. The vehement reaction of the audience to this claim was surprising. They were angered and insulted by what I regarded as a simple fact that I had learned at eight years of age.¹ Some of them thought that it was absurd to make such a claim. A series of arguments followed, which demonstrated that this assertion touched a very sensitive nerve or sore spot at the very center of their worldviews. Some audience members were blinded by the categories of truth in their contemporary conceptual scheme, which they assumed to be exhaustive and unquestionable, even though some held simultaneously that there were no absolutes truths to be recognized.²

The audience's response to this assertion exemplifies a certain modern and post-modern obsession with skepticism and radically empiricist epistemology as the only justifiable account of truth. This obsession has led many to adopt an anti-intellectual and self-

¹ Throughout my life, I have had some acquaintance with suffering. Without going into detail, I have lived with some level of pain (from moderate to intense intractable pain) from the time I was eighteen months old, when I contracted polio the first time. When I was eight years old, I was put in a large Quonset building to die with other children, when I contracted polio for the second time. Many of the children in that room died. I have experienced paralyzing pain and spent numerous years in a wheelchair due to injuries to my spine from automobile accidents. I have also had a bout with cancer.

² It is not the author's intent to place himself on an equal footing with Jacques Maritain. However the audience's response brings to mind Etienne Gilson's description of the French Society of Philosophy's reaction to Maritain in 1936, as stated by Bouglé: "What is the matter with him. I think he is crazy." Etienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, translated by Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 203.

destructive *modus operandi* lying at the root of this contemporary epistemological attitude. According to this mindset, when the intellect turns reflexively on itself, it concludes that we are incapable of attaining genuine knowledge pertaining to the truth or goodness of the human person, including moral wisdom and the extra-mental realities of God and the universe. This deflation of truth and goodness leads also to the obscuration of beauty.³ Following this path has led many persons to the intellectual, moral and personal desert of nihilism, in which a voluntary spiritual death is inescapable. Rhetoric and dialectics on this view⁴ take the place of metaphysics and philosophical wisdom. One sees a world that is devoid of saints or sinners—a world devoid of vision⁵ or insight. Inhabitants of this world lose an understanding of the meaning of a well-ordered appetite, especially a well-ordered will, and the existential final cause of the acting person is forgotten.

2. Adolescence and the ‘isms’—the idols of our time

It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to discuss the preambles to the discovery of the relationship between truth and suffering. We also cannot treat the questions of God’s existence, omnipotence, and goodness⁶, the nature of the human soul, the

³ The synthesis of truth and goodness in the existential experience of beauty is one of the principal ways the human person can discover God.

⁴ To the logician who is only a logician, and thus rejects the possibility of achieving genuine physical and metaphysical truth, what follows would be nonsense. Unfortunately, too many of our contemporaries have chosen this dead-end path. For such persons, it is nonsense to speak of truth and the meaning of suffering. For a further development of the difference between the dialectician and the logician, see the author’s article “On the Nature of Being and the Division of the Speculative Sciences,” *A Thomistic Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Étienne Gilson*, edited by Peter Redpath (Amsterdam & New York: Value Inquiry Book Series, 2003), pp. 79-93.

⁵ “Where there is no vision the people will perish...” (Prov. 29:18).

⁶ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, translated by Lewis Galantieri & Gerald Phelan (Garden City, New York: Double Day Image Books, 1958); *God and the Permission of Evil*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce, 1965). Cf. also Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1986); William J. O’Malley, *Redemptive*

facticity of unmerited suffering⁷ or the kind of reality attributable to evil. These questions, when they are answered in a way contrary to what follows, are all arguably rooted in a state of spiritual adolescence. Intellectual, spiritual and moral adolescence are at the foundation of atheism, agnosticism, rationalism, deism, relativism, skepticism, and other social and political 'isms' characteristic of contemporary popular culture.⁸

Such views tend to inhibit in varying degrees the intellectual and moral development of the human person beyond the immaturity of youth to a spiritually mature life in God. They are rooted in a perspective that gives precedence to one's own ideas of what God ought to be—the idols of our minds and hearts—over the God who is. Such idols are easily manufactured and more easily put to the torch, since they have no more reality, truth and life than the straw men of materialism or the gods of ancient Egypt.⁹ They, each in their own way, proclaim that if they were God, they would have done it all differently. But, since the world has not been created according to their particular plan, the existence of God, His omnipotence and His goodness, which are the foundation of all that exists, must be thrown into doubt. In other words, such views involve a kind of self-deification.

This is why in our contemporary world, where the idols of modernity and post-modernity reign, adolescence is worshiped, exalted and glorified, rather than God. Adolescence is glorified beyond its intrinsic value because of an unwillingness to accept reality and

Suffering (New York: Crossword Books, 1997); Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

⁷ The unmerited suffering of children may be for many the source of the greatest difficulty with the following argument.

⁸ Cf. the author's previous work on suffering: "Human Suffering and Our Post-Civilized Cultured Mind," in *From Twilight to Dawn*, edited by Peter A. Redpath, (Notre Dame: American Maritain Association, 1990), pp. 203-14.

⁹ "Their idols are silver and gold; the work of human hands. They have mouths but they cannot speak; they have eyes but they cannot see; they have ears but they cannot hear; they have nostrils but they cannot smell. With their hands they cannot feel; with their feet they cannot walk. No sound comes from their throats. Their makers will come to be like them. And so will all who trust in them" (Ps. 115:4-8).

cultivate the humility required of the human person before God. Personal maturity, on the other hand, requires that one put aside thinking and acting like a child,¹⁰ so that genuine personality can be achieved through self-discovery. Personal maturity is required for the transcendent achievement of an integrated personality and an abundantly meaningful life.¹¹ In spite of many discussions with so-called 'atheists,' I have never met one who has moved beyond adolescence in thought or temperament. Atheists, too, have their absolutes—the 'gods' or idols that they worship. Whether expressed or implied, they could be the ancient idols of absolute power, wealth, pleasures of the body, or soul for example. In other cases, they worship their own ego as the highest power in existence.

3. A few words on the five ways of understanding the nature of truth

Truth is an analogical reality and there are at least five ways in which we speak of truth, including among others the epistemological notion of truth. We should note that truth is a relationship between an intellect and a being, and that truth or falsity is found in the act of judgment. Speaking epistemically, a judgment is true when it conforms to or is an adequation of what exists independently of the intellect. True judgments unite what is one in reality, and separate what is separated in reality, independent of the intellect. The being of the thing known is therefore the measure of the truth of a judgment.

A second way we speak of truth is the notion of a true friend as opposed to a false friend, who might be a true enemy, or a true love as opposed to a false love (e.g. infatuation), or true gold as opposed to iron pyrite—"fools' gold." Here the judgment concerning a being is rooted in a proper understanding of the essential nature of a thing, and also its excellence, which makes it a being of a certain kind. Intellectual

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 13: 11: "When I was a child I used to talk as child, think as child, reason as a child; when I became a man I put aside childish things."

¹¹ Adolescence may be a stage of development through which we all pass, even though many psychologists believe it is artificial, rooted in the extension of childhood in modern industrial societies. Whether it is necessary or artificial, it is not a stage of life in which one should seek to remain permanently, especially if one seeks the integration of one's personality and one's life, as a good to be achieved.

knowledge of a nature, specifically the identifying activity or characteristics of that nature, is the measure of the truth of the judgment. It is, by analogy, an "acid test" that permits us with certainty to distinguish truth (genuine gold) from falsity (iron pyrite).¹²

A third way in which we speak of truth concerns the identity of a being in and to itself. In Thomistic terms, each and every being, as distinct from God, has its own unique intensity of *esse*, that is its own act of existing, limited by its essence which actualizes it as an *ens habens esse*, a being having its own act of existing.¹³ Thus, God does not create essences as such, but He conveys different intensities of 'to be'—*esse*—that define or limit a being to having a determinate essence.¹⁴

We can thus speak of natural things as true in so far as they are effects, caused by the Divine intellect and will. We can also speak of natural beings as causes of knowledge in the human intellect and as beings in their own right.¹⁵ The foregoing analogical notions of truth

¹² This is similar to the use of sulfuric acid in order to identify genuine gold, and litmus paper to distinguish an acid from a base. All qualitative chemistry operates on this principle, which is related to the principle *operatio sequitur esse*. Thus, we know what a thing is by its operations.

¹³ See Califano, "Human Suffering and Our Post-Civilized Cultured Mind."

¹⁴ Reflection on his experience of the gradation of *esse* led Thomas to assert that oneness, truth, goodness, beauty, life and all other pure perfections are identical to the *esse* of finite beings. There is only a logical distinction between the pure perfections of a finite being and its *esse*. The fact that finite beings do not possess pure perfections completely leads to the conclusion that these perfections are not identical to the essence of finite beings. This is evidence that the *esse* of finite beings is received from the one who has these pure perfections perfectly as identical to His essence, namely, God. God is the only being whose essence is His *esse*. Thus, God does not create essences as such, but He conveys different intensities of *esse* that define or limit a being to having a determinate essence.

¹⁵ The truth of natural beings as effects of divine art or causes of knowledge in us is understood via the analogy of attribution, that is *secundum intentionem, sed non secundum esse*. It is only when we view a being as existing in its own right, as an *ens habens esse* that we have an analogy *secundum intentionem et secundum esse* that preserves both the sameness and differences in beings qua beings. The analogy of a genus which is an analogy *secundum esse sed non*

are really distinct from one another, but they cannot be separated without dismantling the nature of truth and falling into nihilism. This is why the unity of these various notions of truth is so important to us. When our intellect is adequated to a natural being, which is the product of Divine intellect or art, it also achieves a proportional adequation to the Divine intellect and will. This, in turn, constitutes one of the many ways in which we are called to unity with God in our very being.

There is a fourth way we can speak of truth when we look at the life of Christ and the lives of the saints and we see how he lived his life and they lived their lives as exemplars or models for us to follow in living our lives. We see that our lives can only be genuinely true insofar as they conform to the way Christ and the saints lived their lives. Speaking of truth in this way delineates a relationship between the various notions of the true cited above and reveals an inseparable connection between truth and the ideas of beauty and moral goodness.

A fifth way of speaking about truth is to identify what may be called certain 'definitive truths'. 'Definitive truths' provide a fully differentiated and developed solution or answer to some difficulty. My contention is that there are definitive truths that can only be discovered with certainty through human suffering. These truths provide a foundation for self-discovery and the dynamic force necessary to achieve the personal integration that renders a life meaningful, even in the face of intense suffering. To speak of the 'meaning of suffering' or the 'meaning of life' presupposes that there are underlying truths that give meaning to life and suffering. Meaning, in other words, is a second intentional notion that requires first intentional discoveries as its foundation.

4. The question suffering poses to us at the center of our hearts

Intense suffering and confrontation with imminent death is unparalleled in posing a concrete, singular, and unique challenge to the human person. This challenge concerns whether such a person possesses a definitive truth that gives meaning to suffering and life. The suffering person needs a definitive truth that will satisfy the

secundum intentionem and the poetic analogy of metaphor, *secundum intentionem, sed non secundum esse*, do not apply here.

questions of the human heart in the biblical sense of the 'heart' as the absolute center of our being.¹⁶ Definitive truths fill the human heart—the place of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—with meaning. Without them, there is a critical absence of the spirit of God in the lives of men and women. This is especially true of the challenge to come to grips with the mystery that God loves us in spite of the fact that He permits evil, while never willing or condoning it. Intractable and intense pain challenges us to recognize God's love for us, and to live the relationship between faith, intelligence, and surrendering lovingly to God that we are called to achieve in this life. Suffering is the two-edged sword that cuts through the Gordian knots of our spiritual struggle and renders the definitive truths of life accessible to us in a concrete personal way.

It is because we are “a stiff-necked”¹⁷ people, “uncircumcised in heart,”¹⁸ and always opposing the Holy Spirit, that suffering can serve as a necessary “wake up call.” It leads us to the purity of heart¹⁹ required to attain our existential final cause, which is union with God.²⁰

¹⁶ The key to understanding the Judaeo-Christian tradition's view of good and evil is the biblical notion of the human heart as the place of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, or conversely as the absence of the spirit of God in the lives of men and women. The Hebrew word for heart: Lev—Levov, pronounced Lab or Labab, and the New Testament word for heart: Καρδια, refer to the absolute center of a human being, where the knowing and appetitive powers are united to the good by the presence of God or to evil by the absence of God. The absence of God in the heart of men and women leads only to disarray, meaninglessness and the destruction of the person.

¹⁷ Acts 7:51. Cf. Exod. 32:9; 33:3, 9; Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:16.

¹⁸ Ibid. Cf., also “The human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

¹⁹ “How good is God to Israel to those who are pure of heart” (Ps. 73:1). “Blessed are the clean (pure) of heart for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8).

²⁰ Maritain quite correctly pointed out that there is no purely natural final cause to the human existent. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Neuf Leçons Sur Les Notions Premières De La Philosophie Morale* (Paris: Editions Pierre Tequi, 1950); English: *An Introduction To The Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, translated by Cornelia N. Borgehoff (Albany New York: Magi Books, 1990).

This attainment must be preceded by the emptying of ourselves in imitation of Christ that is described in Philippians.²¹

C. S. Lewis, who was at one time an atheist, suffered much and was eventually converted to Christianity. He argues that it is precisely because God loves us that suffering is part of His creation. God calls us in this way to respond to His love for the sake of our ultimate fulfillment.²² Pain reminds us that the pleasures of this life are never intended to possess our hearts.

St. Thomas Aquinas expresses a similar viewpoint when he states that the ills of this life, concomitant with the effects of original sin, may be ordained to help “against future sin, or for progress in virtue, either of him who suffers it or of another.... But the very fact that man is in such a condition that he must be helped, either to avoid sin, or to advance in virtue, by means of these misfortunes or defects pertains to

²¹ Phil. 2:25-8: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus. Who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself taking on the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

²² C.S. Lewis: “The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it... pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world... I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world, and my only real treasure is Christ,” *Readings for Meditation and Reflection* (Harper, San Francisco, 1996), p. 71. “Christ said it was difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven referring, no doubt, to riches in the ordinary sense. But I think it really covers riches in every sense—good fortune, health, popularity and all things one wants to have. All these things tend just as money tends--to make one feel independent from God because if you have them you are happy already and contented in this life. You don't want to turn away to anything more, and so you try to rest in a shadowy happiness, as if it could last forever... But God wants to give you a real eternal happiness. Consequently, he may have to take all these riches away from you: if He doesn't, you will go on relying on them. It sounds cruel doesn't it? But...cruel doctrines are really the kindest of all...think of this world as a.... place of training and it's not so bad” (Ibid., p. 103).

the weakness of human nature... just as the fact that the body of man is so disposed that it needs surgery to cure it pertains to its weakness."²³

The famous psychiatrist Viktor Frankl similarly describes three psychological stages that prisoners in Nazi concentration camps went through when confronted with indescribable and unavoidable suffering, and impending death.²⁴ At first they experienced shock, and then they became emotionally numb. Finally, those who were able to survive realized that they must ask what life (and God) was asking of them, not what they should ask of life. We put God to the test when we formulate questions we should ask of Him. The more important questions are those that God—who is life—is putting to us. People who had faith in the camps realized that life—God—was challenging them to bear witness to a truth that helped them to avoid despair. In the same way, Job realized this and persevered in his trust and love of God.²⁵

Suffering poses a concrete, singular, unique question that requires self-transcendence, a going beyond oneself to a love of life, God and other persons. The task for each of us is to find the enduring love of the personal God who transcends all of the idols or 'isms'—the straw gods—of our day. The true personal God is the only one who can bring peace within our suffering. Suffering may be the only way we can genuinely find that personal God to whom we are called to surrender in love. Suffering may be the necessary path to experiencing authentically the love of God that enables us to love God, and our neighbor as ourselves. The central issue is not the fact that we suffer, but what we do with our suffering, or more precisely what we let God do with our suffering. The God who loves us loves us enough that He created us, even knowing that we would reject his love and sin. He freely created us out of nothing, giving us the greatest gift of all—our very existence. What is even more overwhelming is the fact that he freely chose to love us,

²³ QDM q. 5, a.4c, translated by Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 223-24.

²⁴ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books edition, 1984), pp. 98, 104-05.

²⁵ Jb 1:21: "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked I shall go back again. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. We accept good things from God."

suffer for us, and even die for us. These definitive personal truths cannot be captured or comprehended by a merely impersonal deism.

Suffering is a critical existential path to transcendence for the individual, who must move beyond the pleasure principle and the dictates of the sense appetites. The human person must get beyond self-absorption with pain in order to attain spiritual enlightenment, in which one's relationship to God as love becomes concrete in a singular fashion. God desires intimacy with each and every individual soul, created as an object of God's love. Through that intimate love relationship, one discovers the definitive truth that His life is an offertory, and that the spiritual life within God is the final cause of each and every acting person. Suffering calls forth from us transcendence of the limitations of human reason, not by rejecting reason, but by seeing all things in a new and different light that reveals what is genuine in the truths of reason. God is therefore most properly understood as the loving final cause of our being.

In suffering, we are moved of necessity beyond philosophy and theology ordinarily understood. We do not jettison their insights, but they are elevated in the life-giving light of actual grace. We, in turn, must freely accept or reject the concrete union God offers freely and individually to each of us. The suffering human person either turns towards God in love or turns away from God.

We are thus reminded of the three degrees of darkness and separation from God and the three degrees of union with God indicated by the parable of the sower.²⁶ There are those who hear the word of God with joy and then spend their rest of their lives not understanding it, but explaining it away. These are the proponents of various 'isms' cited above. In the second degree of separation from God, persons become blind to their relationship with God as their end or final cause. Finally, one may lose all contact with the reality of unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, collapsing into nihilism, and even despair and death.

Opposed to the above, we find in the lives of the saints the three degrees of union with God: purgative prayer that empties one's heart of the need to accumulate material things, contemplative prayer that

²⁶ Cf. Matt. 13, Mark 4.

empties the heart of intellectual self-centeredness, and unitive prayer, which enables us to live in the reality of God's presence. This unity permeates our very being, beyond the depth of emotions or merely intellectual understanding. It involves surrendering our whole being to God's love so that we experience life completely. It is the center of all genuine contemplation and the source of our anticipation of seeing God face to face.²⁷ It must include a lived experience in which God's word becomes alive in the center of our being: "It strikes to the heart. It pierces more surely than a two edged sword."²⁸

What God seeks from us is that we turn to God in our pain, including physical, psychological, and emotional suffering. God seeks a response to His infinite act of love for us, which He manifested by surrendering himself and by becoming one of us in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the second person of the Blessed Trinity. He suffers for us and with us in so far as we identify with him and to the degree that we enter into his mystical body the Church as the fulfillment of his loving salvific will.

God's knowledge and love for us is not merely abstract. He knows and loves each of us as an individual. It is in living a person-to-person relationship with God (in three persons) that one discovers the definitive truth that this life is an offertory, and that the spiritual life within God is an offertory.²⁹ Secularism, and to some degree secular psychology, neglects the integration of one's life and personality that takes place by reason of this recognition. On the other hand, peace while suffering comes to the human heart in unitive offertory prayer,

²⁷ "Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm; For stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods sweep it away. Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked" (Sg. 8: 6-7).

²⁸ *The Liturgy of the Hours* (Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1973), Vol. III, Morning prayer, Common of pastors, Ant. 3., P1751.

²⁹ Rom. 12:1-2; St. Paul reminds us of how the apostles suffered for the sake of the Gospel and the martyrs offered their very lives for the truth: "Brothers, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect."

which demonstrates the shortcomings of the contemporary mindset and the 'isms' noted above. The contemporary world is increasingly devoid of saints or sinners, and so it lacks vision and truth in respect to life and suffering. The truth about suffering is not only that there could be no saints or sinners without suffering, but also that there could be no achievement or failure in the integration of our personalities—no personal transcendence—without suffering. The spiritual level is the only level within which it can be achieved. For many suffering persons, this emerges in the dark night of the soul, when all one has to hang on to is the love of God and there is nothing more than the hope of the unseen of which St. Paul speaks³⁰ and the sufficiency of God's grace.³¹

Each and every genuine definitive truth I have ever discovered was discovered contemplating the offertory of the Cross of Christ in the Eucharist. Suffering is a gift. It is the key that fits the lock that opens the door to the transcendence that enriches one's heart with the meaning of human existence and the inherent value of life. Look at the saints.³² They exemplify this truth just as our Lord did: his life was an offertory. That is why He is the head of the Church and why the saints are the Church's successful members. May we all be so successful in our Lord Jesus Christ!

If I discover a fact, I have added data to my data bank. If I discover a truth in the natural order of things, I have gained some limited understanding of some natural phenomena. If I discover a definitive truth that defines my relationship to the one true personal God and my

³⁰ Rom. 8:24-25: "In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; how is it possible for one to hope for what he sees? And hoping for what we can see means awaiting it with patient endurance."

³¹ 2 Cor. 12:7-9: "Therefore that I might not become too elated a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness.' I will rather boast most gladly of my weakness, in order that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

³² Heb. 7-8; St. Paul reminds us again of how the apostles, saints, and martyrs suffered for the Gospel: "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."

neighbor, a truth that integrates me personally, making me whole, then I have life-giving, heart-enriching, life-sustaining, saving wisdom.