

The Incommensurate Good in a World View

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Marilyn Adams claims in the opening statement to her essay, "Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil," that her

bold contention will be that the Christian approach to evil through redemptive suffering affords a distinctive solution to the problem of evil, for believers and unbelievers as well.

Her solution is the notion of an 'incommensurate good,' namely the first-hand realization and experience of God Himself, which upon death, would outweigh any temporal evils experienced on Earth such that the witness would not wish away the suffering experienced in life but would count it as a valuable experience. She also contends that the evils and suffering humans experience here in the temporal realm may be glimpses into the inner life of God, which could consist of deep pain as well as rapturous joy.

I will examine Adams' solution and show that, although it may work for the Judeo-Christians and those who have been presented with this faith, it does not work for the sizable portion of people who have never heard of God's word or teachings. How can the suffering of these people, whom we will call the 'forced non-believers,' be justified if they cannot experience the 'incommensurate good' as decreed by God Himself? We will show that, even if God decides to judge the goodness of the 'forced non-believers,' he will become stuck between having to decide between those who were good and those who had the

potential to be good if they had heard about Him. Objections to my thesis will also be dealt with, including two scenarios in which God must decide between giving his 'incommensurate good' to evil people or denying it to good people.

In the first half of her essay, Adams examines redemptive suffering through the mechanism of martyrdom. She illustrates how the martyr, through his suffering, can bring about a closer relationship between God, himself, his tormentors, and the bystanders. She also shows how God uses this mechanism to strengthen the bonds between Himself and the temporal beings that he loves. However, she does not feel that redemptive suffering is sufficient enough to explain the problem of evil, which is why I will not go into detail with it. Her idea for the justification of evil and suffering lies in the 'incommensurate good,' which, as defined above, is the face-to-face meeting and experience of God upon death and welcome into His kingdom. This magnificent vision would crush the scales of good and evil with such a wondrous good that the deceased would forget even the worst evils of his life. Even the anticipation of this event can give the Christian such hope as to relieve him of the problem of evil on Earth, such as it did with St. Paul when he wrote that, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

This solution to the problem of evil works quite well for the believer. Adams, also a believer, claims that it works for the non-believer who has denied God, even though he may not like it, because God has the right to judge us and show us the error of

our sinning ways. However, she does not address this solution in light of the 'forced non-believer.' It is clear that there is a problem here because Adams would be reluctant to say that all of these people will go to Hell due to their non-Christian beliefs when they had no other option to the belief system they maintained.

Supposing that she did address this problem, she might have countered that on the day of those persons' deaths God in his goodness would examine their lives and judge them, while keeping in mind that they had never heard of him. He would then reveal himself only to those who had lead good lives and were thus worthy of salvation. However, we can counter that God in his omniscience would also know who would have been good if they had been exposed to His teachings, and that this presents him with a problem. To illustrate this further, we can logically contend that there is a subset, E_g , of people created by God who lived evil lives, but that would have lead good lives if only they had heard his message. How can God condemn those in E_g when it was not really their fault that they went astray, for they were never under the guidance of God to begin with? Also, how is the suffering in the lives of E_g 's accounted for if they can't receive God's gift of revelation? These questions are not clearly answered by Adams' solution, and, in the case of E_g , God is forced with the decision of whether or not to admit evil people into heaven.

However, Adams' may make another objection to my thesis. She might say that God could disregard the temporal

actions of the 'forced non-believers' and judge them on the potential goodness they would have had if they had been exposed to His word, assuming that the people who had actually lived good lives would have also done so in reverence of God.

However, we can again contend that there would have been a subset, G_e , of people who lived good lives but who would have been evil if exposed to Christianity. Is God to deny those in G_e His 'incommensurate good' based on the fact that they could have gone wrong? This solution still does not seem fair for a God that is supposedly all good. God in this case would be forced to make a double standard to deal with the people in E_g and G_e .

Upon examining Adams' solution in the context of the non Judeo-Christian world we see that it is far from perfect. In both of the cases we examined, it seems as if God is forced to reveal Himself to those who are unworthy or deny Himself to those who are. We see that the 'incommensurate good' solution cannot be extrapolated to justify the evils suffered by those throughout the world.