

"Dr. Mengele, the medical 'selector', made a sign. They lined up again in two groups. The left-hand column included the aged, the crippled, the feeble, and women with children under fourteen. The right-hand column consisted entirely of able-bodied men and women: those able to work. In this latter group I noted my wife and fourteen-year old daughter. We no longer had any way of speaking to each other; all we could do was make signs."

-AUSCHWITZ - A Doctor's Eyewitness account
(NYIZSLI 1960:23)

"If a million children were dying of the plague in India, you may be sure that the weekly editorial described the miraculous escape from fire of a Methodist family in Kent."

-A MURDER OF QUALITY
(le Carre 1962:11)

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INTRODUCTION:

Among the more significant doctrinal problems within SMD, one of the most prominent is its apparent failure or inability or unwillingness, or all three, to confront the issue of the meaning of suffering. Yet during the struggle to understand something of the meaning of the omnipresent, unmitigated suffering of mankind, an individual can derive some of the deepest insights possible into the operation of the POS on this ol' mudball, and the relationship of all mankind thereto^{1}.

Instead of addressing the global problem of suffering in the world and its relationship to the POS, SMD -in a very practical and perhaps even commendable manner- focuses its members on their own trials and tribulations, exhorting them to keep their eyes on the prize, to sacrifice and labor on each other's behalf, to join together frequently in the commune, reinforcing a shared purpose and 'meaning'. But only rarely, and then for only a brief time, as in the fund drive during the late 80's for dollars for the famine in Africa, does the leadership crack the door on the issue of the suffering of Mankind.^{2}

Why is this? One suspects that the leadership is either afraid of the specter of such massive suffering, or that they don't comprehend it themselves, neither of which is a particularly complimentary thing to say about them. I can hear them offer a third explanation: such considerations distract us from working out our salvation, paying our tithing, sending our young men on missions and generally 'doing good' in our own communities. I suppose one might also conclude that they don't

¹ Charlesworth summarizes a comparable concern in his introduction to THE OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHIA:

"Evil is a dominant force in the world, despite God's will and actions. The righteous suffer primarily because of the power evil has obtained on the earth. The land of Israel has been engulfed by nations either sent by God to punish his sinful people or by foreigners ruled by evil forces or angels' hence God can both sent evil and allow it to continue. God's people suffer, and he tends to remove himself from a special portion of his creation." (1985:xxx)

These texts tend to relegate God to the status summarized in his last sentence: he removes himself from his people who are suffering. That is the perspective we adopt here. He is not actively involved in our lives, even though He can be and even occasionally may interfere in how things are going. The evil and the suffering are the result of our own doings, not His, and we experience these two things as part of our test, not as an irrelevant tangential aspect of the experience. He knew it would be this way. He intended it to be this way.

² Years later -in 1992- there is some evidence that the SLC oligarchy may be turning its attention to this issue of the condition of its neighbors. The massive missionary corps is being exhorted, in some quarters at least, to spend several hours a week in works to benefit neighbors and investigators. Allegedly, these hours are to be specifically reported in the weekly reports to the president who will report them to SLC. A local "stake missionary" even said that THIS type of service is becoming MORE important the proselyting!

But there is a distasteful quality to this movement which appears, on the surface, to be truly altruistic. It seems, on deeper analysis, that it may be just another way to get at people to offer them a trip to the font. And that rankles. How can we allow ulterior motives to pollute our good works? Such activities are probably only efficacious -or only maximally efficacious- when they are done without view to any gain whatsoever. So this may be just another gimmick like the two golden questions, etc. which have beset the missionary effort for the last 40 years.

However, this movement, if it is really, seems to be at least aimed in a better direction than previous movements because peoples' painful temporal lives just may be bettered by such service.

care, but we will ignore that possibility here. But this issue is a stupendous one that will not go away simply because it is ignored. It really sits squarely in the heart of the POS in spite of SMD ignorance of it. So I will touch on it briefly - briefly due, first, to space restriction, and second, due my OWN lack of comprehension.^{3}

We LDS are grossly ignorant of the issue. Indeed, most LDS probably will not even comprehend that the "meaning of suffering" is an issue. If asked about it, one suspects that most relief society presidents (who are the MOST in-tune with this problem of ALL church leaders, at least at the local level) will respond, "So what? I've got all I can do right here with my own family!" Or, "We'd like to help but we use all of the fast offerings right here in the stake,." etc.

But the bulk of mankind who have lived on, or do live on, or will live on the earth will have finally experienced an impecunious, painful scrabble during a short lifetime.^{4} No luxuries for them, no electricity, running water, soft beds and refrigeration. No silky nightwear, plush carpets and elegant lamp shades. No paved streets, window glass and fancy doorknobs. Much less an automobile or fine boat, motor home and jet ski. Only a few pieces of tattered clothing, matched by a constant concern for staving off starvation from themselves and their struggling families will occupy the attention of most people most of the time. Epidemic endemic diseases unique to each biosphere shorten life spans and increase the morbidity during the same. Altogether a sad situation.

LDS don't seem to understand -or worse, don't seem to care- that these facts MUST be accounted for in the Plan of Salvation. The Lord knew it would be this way. He even designed in this way. And He formulated the POS in such a way that all people somehow have an equal chance with the horrifically small number of baptized LDS for exaltation, not just salvation.

So how does He fit it in? What is the meaning to the 31 year old man, who appears 65 at his untimely death from malaria in central Africa, after grubbing in an encroaching desert for scraps and bits of food, of his struggle? Will he "go to heaven" without anything to recommend him for advancement? Will his struggle have been for naught, even for himself? Will his pain

³ I hasten to add here that I am totally unqualified by training to deal with this issue. I don't even understand the full range of sub-issue entailed by the problem of the meaning of suffering. Eminent philosophers and theologians have thoroughly investigated this problem and their works can be sought out for the full range of issues. I will simply address the problem as I understand it, and couch it within this framework because it is by belief that this model does offer a consoling explanation of this problem.

⁴ The essence of the Buddhist perception of the role of suffering during mortality is this:

"According to Buddhist scriptures, suffering is an intrinsic aspect of biological existence. Its deepest cause is the force that is responsible for the life process itself. The goal of the spiritual path is to extinguish the fire of life and leave the wheel of death and rebirth."
(Grof 1977:4)

Suffering is a biological fact that arises from life itself. That sounds like another way to describe the fact that the Lord intended this life to be a testing experience. The dark forces are unleashed here and together with our own stupidity, result in suffering.

and misery be meaningless to the Lord who loves His children and is filled with compassion and mercy for them? I doubt it. I seriously doubt it. His life will have been heroic after all. His pain will mean something when his heart is weighed and his works measured.^{5}

MEANING OF SUFFERING:

There is meaning to suffering.^{6} And there is a necessity to understand why the Lord allows such horrible things as starvation, anxiety, mental illness, bodily pain, sexual depravity, and suffering of all kinds to fill most of our lives. And there is a need, recognized in only a dim way by the non-existent 'average' LDS, but deeply needed by them, to understand why the Just suffer when the unJust don't, why death comes when it does, etc. On the simplest level, then, we must accommodate the concept of suffering into this model. This perception of suffering may be incorrect, but it is one perspective about suffering, which perspective is simply absent in SMD.

⁵ My belief is readily apparent here. I believe that ANY mortal who suffers through this experiment in ANY conditions deserves a huge reward. So much of this experience is bitter and painful that simply putting up with it until the cup is withdrawn merits an extraordinary reward - which is precisely what SMD suggests the two lower kingdoms will be: glorious beyond comprehension. One of the factors that contributes to this conclusion is the fact that we, at all times, have our fingers on the destruct button, but choose to not exercise that option. By this I refer to the option of suicide. We do not choose suicide as a means of stopping the pain we feel. (True, we may be too fearful, but that still counts I think.) Indeed, only a minuscule number of us even consider it to be an option. I believe, therefore, that we are knowingly, and intentionally, choose to subject ourselves to this pain, during which we try our best to deal with what is put on our plate.

Another thing seems apparent here (and elsewhere I suppose): I sound like a bitter cynic without hope or faith or joy. That is not true, however. I am not without hope, faith or joy. I have great faith, but ONLY faith (none of this "I know beyond..." cant for me please), and I have great hope. And I have great joy. Enormous joy which gives me physic pain in its magnitude. I love this life and all that I experience in it, even some of the pain. The creator gave us a stupendous laboratory to live in. Who can fail to be thankful for a seaful of blue oxygen that is graced with puffs of water vapor which incandesce in sunsets? He did that on purpose, I believe, and I thank Him for that. A myriad books would be inadequate to encompass all the things that are beautiful in this world. And another myriad would be inadequate to capture the things that are beautiful and wonderful about our relationships with people.

I do have faith, hope and joy. And I have something else that makes it possible for me to unabashedly acknowledge the remarkable amount of pain and grief that fills all of our lives. I have hope for an afterlife that will be a marvelous thing under any circumstances. And consequently I am not afraid to die. For these reasons I can squarely face and acknowledge the bitter cup we all deal with. In contrast, those who don't have that confidence in the next world, nor understanding of it, are probably hesitant to admit just how much pain there is during mortality. To acknowledge it, without true hope or understanding, would be to open one's soul to doubt, true cynicism and frustrated anger.

Anyway, I love this life. And I believe that anyone that forbears from self destruction deserves a huge reward. That's the way the Father set it up.

⁶ Though to the world, there doesn't appear to be much meaning. Clancy captures this fact nicely in WITHOUT REMORSE:

"Was that good or bad?

And if all that were true, then what *did* matter? Was *everything* a random accident? The problem was that you couldn't tell. Maybe if he were God looking down on everything from above, maybe then it would fit some pattern, but from the inside it merely was, Kelly thought, and you did the best you could, and tried to learn from your mistakes for when the next random event happened to you. But did that make sense? Hell, did anything really make sense?"

(1993:163)

Have you ever felt that way? Seeking for meaning for all of mortality is to seek for something not discoverable. True, there is a generic theological meaning, i.e. to provide a testing opportunity, but beyond that, there is no meaning as far as we can discern.

LIMITS?

One of the pertinent questions to ask here is this: Does the Lord allow any type of suffering to exist in any amount, or does He impose some sort of limit that He thinks is necessary? There are few explicit canonical citations that state that the Lord has pre-defined limits beyond which He will not allow mankind to pass. But there are several classic examples from the OT that demonstrate that He does have some limits.

The Flood Story where Noah and company built a boat and avoided getting wet is the first. The stated reason for the flood was the wickedness of mankind. The Lord had determined that wickedness was becoming excessive, that it promised to get worse, so he chose to terminate those peoples' mortality prematurely. He told Noah to do what he did, and the He 'cleansed' the earth.^{7} There was a limit then.

And in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, there was also a limit reached by people. The Lord decided to clean things up a bit, so he removed a bunch of people, who as a group, exceeded some limit that He either knew existed or even established.

So there is in fact at least one type of limit that governs human behavior on earth. It appears to relate to the average degree of sinfulness of a group. Individual behaviors do not seem to count. They can even exceed the average degree of sinfulness, but still not trigger retribution. Why there are aggregate limits for groups, but not for individuals is a mystery. Is it because the group might create a critical mass that begins to accelerate into an incredibly bad degree of badness that is not even achieved by individuals?

Another question that refers to a subset of the suffering rubric is: why do bad things happen to good people? SMD sort of makes one think -or perhaps hope- that only good things will happen to good people. But that is so often contradicted by life that we get a sneaking suspicion that it really isn't true. So the question remains: why does a good man who has a family, has never done anything seriously wrong get cancer at 55 and die, leaving behind a family without adequate resources, an untrained wife, and much heartache? Is that something that you want to believe your Lord intentionally willed upon that family?

⁷ As a child I believed literally that there had been a flood that encompassed the entire world. That is just what the OT story seems to imply, and is what Sunday school teachers encouraged us to believe. However, as I aged and read a bit about geology, and traveled around the globe a bit and saw the enormity of it all, the simple doctrine crumbled. It is totally unbelievable that the Lord did create a 40 day flood that covered EVERY BIT OF LAND on this globe. I don't doubt that he could do it, but there were pockets of people all over the place who were innocent of the degree of sin of those people, who didn't deserve punishment that way.

So: I believe there was a flood of sorts, but it had to have been confined to a fairly small segment of the globe, like 10-15% of its surface. This makes the Mount Ararat ark sites sort of hard to believe.

The other item of the flood story that unfortunately disintegrates as we grow up is the rainbow. What a lovely story for children, and what a lovely symbol of His mercy. But what a disservice to tell kids that the first rainbow appeared after the flood. Rainbows are created by the interactions of the physical characteristics of water drops and light from the sun. And that interaction has remained the same from before the time of the creation of the world. What should be told kids is that the Lord chose to tell people to look at rainbows and be reminded by them of His love.

Or what about the 1 year old infant who toddles into a swimming pool and dies? Is that something that the Lord caused? In LDS testimony meetings we hear people talk about such things as tragedies, and they occasionally attribute it to the Lord and explain that He had intended it as a learning experience for them. That's where I lose my lunch. I suppose that it's OK for them if they wish to believe that they have such a mean God, but my own God wouldn't do that to us. He is filled with compassion for us and sympathy and concern.

Return to LDS testimony meetings. This peculiar doctrine is often cited as the 'reason' for bad experiences people undergo, but it is a pernicious doctrine. This is better shown by a case where a teenage driver has a head-on collision one evening with a drunk driver, after which the teenager becomes a quadriplegic. In the next testimony meeting, a parent or friend may say that the Lord chose to have this happen so that the rest of the family would learn tolerance, compassion, patience, etc. Superficially that sounds reasonable, but if you just crack it open a bit, you are surprised at the implications of the doctrine. It implies first, that the Lord DOES wish to hurt people and make them suffer, which I have trouble with. Second, it implies that the Lord will intervene in a very dramatic manner to cause someone's vehicle to actually swerve into the path of another car, a remarkably direct intervention that is highly unlikely, though possible. And third, it means that the Lord chooses someone to be a bad person, and intervenes directly with them to make them do something awful that they will have to live with and regret the rest of their life. And if they didn't deserve that suffering, it hardly seems fair and reasonable for the Lord to do that to someone.^{8}

I suppose this doctrine results from a penchant we all have to explain what happens, to put our experiences into a framework that makes some sort of sense. That is understandable, but we best beware lest we impute unreasonable things to the Lord.

BYU SENIOR ENGLISH SEMINAR:

In a senior English seminar at BYU, I heard probably the

⁸ Grof's patients underwent experiences that enabled them to understand the meaning of suffering, namely that there really is nothing tragic after all:

"The universe is seen as an ever-unfolding drama of endless adventures in consciousness, very much in the sense of the Hindu *lila*, or divine play. Against the background of this infinitely complex and eternal cosmic drama, the fact of impending individual destruction seems to lose its tragic significance." (1977:58)

This opinion basically matches our conception. There really is no meaning to the experiences of mortality that fit under the mortal rubric of "suffering". The term really ought, within the context of the POS, to be substituted for something that puts those experiences in another context or perspective. We cannot offer an alternative, however.

Note that even his term "destruction" carries unnecessary semantic markers. Human language, built by mortals, without insight into eternal things, do not take the right perspective. Death is fearsome, and pain is bad. In mortality they are, which is why they are meaningful experiences for us, but ultimately, they are the best things that happen to us down here. The Paradox Postulate again. Were our life to be one of ease and tranquility, it would be worthless in the final analysis. No pain, no gain.

only significant question of my undergraduate time there:

Are LDS capable of really feeling or understanding tragedy in the sense of a Sophoclean tragedy?

No conclusion was reached, but today I would answer "No." We are too self-centered, too myopic, too hopeful and too focused to even be able to comprehend the extent of an experience that constitutes true tragedy. We run through the sunshine of our hopes like Polyanna, oblivious to how badly battered our brothers and sisters are, here and abroad. I know that I am personally incapable of emotionally responding to it. If I am typical of LDS, then SMD does somehow limit our ability to comprehend the nature of suffering. We are too hopeful and enthusiastic to grasp it.

CONCLUSION:

I conclude, then, that there is actually no real meaning at all in a broad sense to the suffering we experience. Its meaning is manifested on the individual basis only. The stunning range and quality of the varied suffering mortals experience actually mean nothing in a broad sense within the context of the POS. What is significant about this broad range of types of experiences is how we individually fared, meaning how did we respond to our suffering. That response will be the topic discussed with us in our personal judgment. That is perhaps a startling assertion, but it is a logical consequence of this logical model being developed here. The focus, as should be abundantly clear by now, of the POS is on the INDIVIDUAL. There is nothing in it that somehow transcends the individual experience. True, there are mass effects of all sorts which give the appearance of cross-population, cross-civilization, etc. impact of the POS and its principles, and the effect of the black priesthood.

However, mortal experiences that constitute what we term suffering are going to be interpreted in the next world within the context of their impact on the spirit of the person experiencing them. Period. No more. No less. The starvation of a Mauritanian child in July 1992 is irrelevant when I am finally judged. Indeed, the starvation of the hundreds of millions on the African continent are irrelevant when I am judged.⁹

Go back to the first sentence of the last paragraph and note the assumption implicit in it. It is assumed that the eternal consequences of suffering experiences will only be interpreted or

⁹The only way they could have any consequence at all on my judgment is IF I find myself in a position during mortality where I could or should have acted in some manner to decrease that suffering.

determined during the judgment process at the resurrection. Is that an incorrect assumption? Within this model, it is not. But it is admitted that it is only an assumption. But granting that assumption, we then arrive at this conclusion that suffering in general is meaningless during eternity in any but the individual, personal context. This concept probably diverges greatly from the concept of most other people, but it seems reasonable in this model.

CONCLUSION:

Lest you conclude that this assumption is groundless, let me elaborate on the evidence that forces me in this direction. Simply stated, I cannot see any other justification or explanation for all of the suffering in the world. I cannot believe that the Lord who allegedly only does good, wishes or inflicts evil or pain of suffering on us. I conclude that suffering is a consequence of the conditions of mortality^{10} which means that they are not necessarily what the Lord chose to inflict on us. However, He knew this would happen, and He took it into account. But He does not cause it to happen. And ultimately, I believe, on this basis, that the only way the Lord will take it into account is by reviewing how we individually responded to what was put on our mortal plate. It will matter not one whit was done to us, He will only look at what we did IN RESPONSE to the things that were done to us.

There is additional meaning to the experiences which cause suffering. This meaning relates to the state of mind of the perpetrator of the suffering. It is evident that suffering derives from different sources. Some is simply the byproduct of one's experience and from the conditions of mortality, i.e. hurricanes. Some is intentionally caused through the agency of other humans. In the final analysis, people who have intentionally and willfully caused suffering will have to deal with their behavior.

¹⁰ Alan Watts discusses this issue in THE WAY OF ZEN. He quotes from the *Visuddhimagga*:

"Suffering alone exists, none who suffer."

This is a portion of the summary of the Buddha's doctrine. It means, in this context, that suffering exists independently of people, that it has its own existence in the world of *maya*. The point of zen -and Buddhism generally- is to attain a state of being in which there is no being of any sort or thing, including suffering. All ceases to exist at that point for the person who achieves that peculiar state of nirvana.

That is comparable to how I perceive suffering in this model: it is somehow a byproduct of the conditions of mortality (which is the analogue of *maya* of sangsara) and when this world, and those particular conditions which induce suffering, cease to exist, so will suffering cease. Brigham Young referred to powers and influences that surround us. Some of those are the 'things' the create the pain and suffering here.