

The Harm of Nature and the Light of Man: Philosophical and Theological Reflections on Gratitude and Growth from Disaster

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Abstract:

This article explores in depth the multiple implications of natural disasters, especially in the context of scientific progress, human solidarity, and theology. Firstly, this paper reviews the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and discusses the multi-dimensional effect of natural disasters on human society and its profound philosophical and theological significance. Despite the devastation and suffering caused by the disaster, Americans have shown a strong sense of gratitude. Then, from the dialectical point of view, the author analyzes the cosmological view of the coexistence of good and evil and emphasizes the positive role of natural disasters in promoting scientific and technological progress, promoting human unity, stimulating learning motivation, and demonstrating free will.

Further, from the perspective of philosophy and theology, the paper expounds on the intrinsic value of pursuing knowledge and exercising natural disasters on free will. The learning process of natural laws deepens human understanding of the world. It strengthens human free will, making people more autonomous and independent in the face of good and evil choices.

At the same time, from the theology perspective, this paper compares the different understandings of natural disasters and human suffering between atheism and theism. It reveals the respect for human autonomy and the essence of faith behind God's non-intervention. In the end, the article concludes that natural disasters, while a source of suffering, are also catalysts for human growth and gratitude, encouraging us to look at disasters from a broader perspective and draw strength and wisdom from them.

Keywords: Natural disasters; Scientific progress; Human solidarity; Free will; Theological perspectives.

1. Introduction

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina, the most costly natural disaster in the history of the United States, occurred. It claimed over 1,800 lives and left countless others displaced.¹ Amidst the devastation, a thought-provoking scene emerges: survivors gathered in a damaged church, their voices soaring in thanksgiving. "Thank God we survived," they cried out. "I appreciate your saving grace." Americans indeed like to show gratitude. A new Pew Center poll found that most Americans (78%) feel a strong sense of appreciation or thankfulness every week.² Nonetheless, such an attitude is challenging to comprehend from a religious perspective, especially Christianity. Christianity frequently views God as an omniscient and omnipotent guardian. Why, then, would He allow such a disaster to happen? Even if God is perceived as the ultimate cause of the harm, is it reasonable to thank Him for protecting people from natural calamities?

Despite these doubts, the answer is yes. To validate this, I will examine the discussion in this essay about the rela-

tionship between the dialectical unity between good and evil, the importance of free will, and the cognitive difference between humans and God.

2. The symbiosis of disaster and progress

2.1 Catalyst for scientific and technological progress

One of the most profound aspects of natural harm is its role in promoting secondary goods such as scientific and technological progress. In response to natural evil, people have developed methods to avert or lessen the consequences of future calamities, and this knowledge has spread over the globe. The COVID-19 vaccine, which has prevented millions of deaths during pandemics, perhaps best represents this point. With previous experiences and suffering from viruses, humans gained insights about viruses, their mechanisms, treatment, and vaccination. Similarly, diseases such as smallpox and polio are virtually nonexistent now, benefiting from humanity's previous

experiences with them. These medical advances continue to build upon as people encounter other natural harms and search for solutions. Without natural evil and its short-term sufferings, humankind would not possess the progress and advancements that are taken for granted nowadays.

2.2 The bond of human unity

Not only do natural disasters facilitate technological and scientific advancements, but they also fuel a sense of human unity. Natural harm has a unique way of breaking down barriers between individuals. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, research institutions exchanged information, data, and study results, defending humanity collaboratively. Similarly, extensive humanitarian efforts and preventive infrastructure projects (e.g., artificial coastal banks, stilted housing, and safer transportation routes) followed immediately after Hurricane Harvey, a hurricane that devastated the Texas coast. In this way, natural disasters motivate progress and facilitate efficient communication and collaboration among individuals, institutions, and even nations, contributing to human unity and connectedness.

2.3 The intrinsic value of knowledge pursuit

The argument appears circular since it values knowledge and advancements that only provide utility when natural harm exists. For example, consider the development of earthquake-resistant building technologies. People highly value these advancements because they mitigate the damage and loss of life caused by earthquakes, a natural hazard. If earthquakes did not exist, the specialized knowledge and technology developed to counteract their effects would lack practical utility, thus raising the question of their inherent value apart from the context of natural harm. However, the process of gaining knowledge itself holds intrinsic value. Philosophers such as Aristotle have argued that pursuing knowledge is essential to human flourishing, or “eudaimonia,” which is a state of being that one achieves by living by reason and virtue. Theologically, Thomas Aquinas posited that the quest for understanding brings humans closer to God, reflecting the divine intellect. Aquinas’ view is rooted in the belief that God is the ultimate source of all truth and knowledge. According to him, human beings, created in the image of God, possess an innate desire to seek truth and knowledge, which ultimately leads them to a deeper understanding of the divine. Beyond that, research has shown that individuals who regularly engaged in learning activities reported higher levels of satisfaction, self-efficacy, and ability to cope with changes. ³ Thus, natural harm could be seen as a motivator for learning, which is integral to an

individual’s spiritual life and mental health.

2.4 The expression of free will

Beyond merely fostering progress, fostering unity, and nurturing individual growth and refinement, as testament-ed by humanity’s collective experience with the vagaries of nature, the insights they unravel empower the unfettered exercise of human free will, allowing for its fullest potential to be realized.

First of all, the free will defense suggests that the existence of moral evil is a necessary consequence of God granting humans freedom of choice. This divine endowment necessitates understanding both the world’s evil and the good. While this defense primarily focuses on justifying moral evil, the existence of natural evil is essential for moral evil. ⁴ One understands it more deeply by imitating natural evil or applying knowledge inferred from natural rules when encountering natural catastrophes. For example, humans learn that wildfires can cause fatal burns or that cyanide is poisonous through past accidents. People can learn these natural laws through exposure to natural evil and then choose whether or not to follow them. They can apply this knowledge for beneficial purposes, such as research on prevention and control measures and scientific experience. Conversely, someone could use this information to harm others intentionally. This dual application of natural laws exposed during natural disasters or accidents signifies the freedom granted by God for humans to decide independently after exploring all possibilities. Through the non-interfering experiences of natural harm and this inductive learning process, humans explore and understand the world’s evils, reaffirming the significance of free will.

3. The understanding of disaster from a theological perspective

However, some might argue that this free will for natural harm is only possible if inductive learning is the sole way for humans to gain knowledge. Why does not God tell us the truth, such as by informing someone that falling off a cliff is dangerous? If inductive learning were the exclusive method of human learning, natural evils would have no reason to exist. Yet, this argument must recognize the fundamental impact of observable divine intervention on human autonomy. The overtly visible existence of God would compromise humans’ free will, as individuals would constantly be aware of an omniscient deity monitoring their actions. Moreover, if humans only learned from divine declarations, their actions would still be indirectly controlled by God, who would determine which truths to reveal. This would undermine the authenticity of human free will.

Furthermore, the essence of faith, as argued by philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, lies in the subjective decision of passion, or the “subjective truth.”⁵ If God’s existence were a provable fact, akin to mathematical truths such as $1+1=2$, the subjective nature of faith would be lost, reducing it to mere acceptance of an objective reality. The passion that characterizes genuine faith would diminish, as belief would no longer involve a personal, voluntary leap. In this context, God’s non-interference with human experiences of natural harm and learning underscores His profound respect for human autonomy and the essence of faith.

In previous claims, the discussion and justification are based on the human perspective of natural evil, which is any natural event or phenomenon that causes suffering or harm. The rest of the essay will approach the argument from a theist perspective.

A common atheist argument posits that an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God would save humanity from such natural harm. They argue that the absence of such divine intervention implies that God does not exist.⁶ However, this argument assumes that God’s definition of natural evil aligns with human understanding, overlooking the profound differences between divine and human perspectives. Psalm 139 offers insight into this disparity, where David writes, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night; even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day.” Another example appears in the Book of John 9:1-3: “As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” In this example, humans view sufferings such as blindness as evil, but Jesus responds that man was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him, which is good. This suggests that what humans perceive as darkness or evilness might not hold the same meaning for God. If God does not view certain events as “evil,” He has no obligation to eliminate them.

The difference between the atheist and theist perspectives on mortality further highlights the difference in the understanding of evilness. As an American theologian, John Piper says, “What is the essence of evil? [...] God gets insulted, and we get death.”⁷ From a human perspective, people often see death as the ultimate evil, characterizing it with negativity, sadness, and a sense of finality. This outlook is vividly illustrated in absurdist literature, such as Albert Camus’ “The Stranger.” In this novel, the protagonist, Meursault, views life as inherently meaningless because death nullifies all human endeavors. To Meursault, life’s choices appear interchangeable and pointless,

as death will eventually render everything void. This perspective underscores a common human sentiment that death signifies the ultimate end, evoking deep sorrow and a sense of despair.

However, many religious traditions offer a divine perspective on death that frames it as a transition rather than an end. In Christianity, people view death as a passage to an afterlife of eternal perfection. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers anticipate eternal life in heaven—a place of unending joy and communion with God. This belief transforms death from a source of despair into a hopeful transition to a more perfect state of existence. In Hinduism and Buddhism, adherents understand death within the framework of Samsara—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Unlike atheists, who perceive death as an end, these religions regard it as a part of an ongoing cycle. The Karma-shaped soul, or Atman, experiences numerous lifetimes to pursue spiritual growth⁸. The ultimate goal is to achieve Moksha (liberation) in Hinduism or Nirvana (cessation of suffering) in Buddhism, which signifies freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Death is necessary in the soul’s journey toward ultimate liberation and enlightenment. From these theological perspectives, mortality is not an ultimate evil but rather a phase or transition within a broader, meaningful journey, which is contrary to human’s view that death is the greatest and most fundamental natural evil. Therefore, God also views other lesser evils differently. In this light, evils and suffering are not sinister but necessary for people to achieve incredible spiritual growth or ultimate fulfillment.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate interplay between natural harm, human progress, and theological perspectives reveals a multifaceted understanding of suffering and adversity. From an atheist standpoint, natural disasters spur scientific advancements and foster global unity, enabling societies to grow stronger and more resilient. Pursuing knowledge, driven by these adversities, contributes to human flourishing and personal growth, reflecting philosophical ideals and theological principles. The free will defense further illustrates how natural evils empower human autonomy, allowing individuals to make moral choices and exercise their freedom authentically. From a theistic viewpoint, the divine perspective on natural harm and mortality diverges significantly from human interpretations, suggesting that what we perceive as evil may be integral to a larger, divine plan for spiritual growth and fulfillment. Ultimately, recognizing the potential development, unity, and spiritual insight gained through experiencing and overcoming natural harm encourages humanity

to find gratitude in God's non-intervention as a profound means of fostering advancement and enlightenment.

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