

THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

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Victor Hugo in his classic novel *Les Misérables* masterfully reveals the workings of the soul as he dissects his character Jean Valjean at a most crucial point in his life. Jean Valjean, a galley slave, released after nineteen years has become embittered by the injustice committed against him through the excessive sentencing of the court. Five years he received for breaking a window and then stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister and her starving children. Five years that were expanded into nineteen because of his failed escape attempts.

During the course of these nineteen years, collared and chained, Valjean recognized that he was not an innocent man since he had stolen the loaf of bread, but he was unjustly punished. He questioned whether society should have the right to crush its members so mercilessly. As he evaluated his situation he condemned the notion that he a workman should have no work, that a productive person should suffer a lack of bread and that a penalty exacted against him should be so pitiless; that it should keep a poor man for ever between a lack and an excess, a lack of work, an excess of punishment.¹

Jean Valjean grew in hatred. He became outraged. And because human society had done nothing but injure him, since no one since his mother, since his sister, had greeted him with friendly word or kindly gesture and since he had nothing but suffering on suffering he little by little came to the conviction that life was a war, and

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Charles E. Wilbour, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1909), 95.

that in that war he was the vanquished. With no weapon but hate at his disposal, he resolved to sharpen it, and for nineteen years in the galleys he forged his weapon, preparing himself for his release.

Upon his release, he was a convict, unaccepted wherever he went. Eventually he stumbles upon a kindly bishop, who invites him into his house, feeds him and shelters him. In the middle of the night, Valjean awakens and steals from the bishop six silver plates. Later during the day he is arrested, searched, and the silver items are found and presumed stolen; he is brought back to the good bishop's house to confirm his story that they were given to him. This bishop discerning that he was arrested on suspicion of his having stolen the plates, rushes to give to him two silver candlesticks as well remarking that these too he had given to Valjean. The gendarmes retreat believing they have made a mistake. The bishop then confronts Jean Valjean with the words:

Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man... Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!²

² Ibid, 112.

Jean Valjean departs from the bishop's house fleeing as fast as he can. On the road he meets a young child, Petit Gervais, of about thirteen and robs the child of a small silver coin worth forty sous, but he did not do this deliberately, he did it instinctively and when he realized what he had done, he fell into anguish.

In this state of anguish, Hugo draws out a vivid picture, like a surgeon dissecting a cadaver, opening it up and revealing all the various sinews, veins and nerves, tracing them to their sources he investigates the inner struggle of this hardened man, Jean Valjean.

His confrontation with the bishop had created a decisive moment. The bishop's kindness had shocked him so completely that he had no idea any longer what was going on, but he knew that he was at a decisive moment. A moment which would forever determine who he would be, a moment which offered no middle course. He was either to remain an evil monster, a personal embodiment of all the wickedness of man, or he must be the best of men, an angel of the highest order.

It was while he was tormented with this unforeseen moment of decision that he fell upon the young child Petit Gervais and did what he could not longer do: he robbed the child. He was in a state of confusion, he was blinded by the brightness of the bishop's goodness, his full noonday radiance as he stumbled out of the darkness of his hatred cultivated in the galleys.

Hugo then continues:

In this frame of mind, he had met Petit Gervais, and stolen his forty sous. Why? He could not have explained it, surely; was it the final effort of the evil thoughts he had brought from the galleys, a remnant of impulse, a result of what is called in physics *acquired force*? It was that, and it was also perhaps even less than that. We will say plainly, it was not he who had stolen, it was not the man, it was the beast which, from habit and instinct, had stupidly set its foot upon that money, while the intellect was struggling in the midst of so many new and unknown influences. When the intellect awoke and saw this act of the brute, Jean Valjean recoiled in anguish and uttered a cry of horror.³

So much does this passage sound like the apostle Paul's struggle with sin in Romans seven. The conflict of flesh and Spirit which wage a relentless tug of war struggle with the desires of the apostle set in motion a very similar set of circumstances: sin taking advantage of the occasion raised by the introduction of a holy and just and good law. His actions Paul does not understand as he finds

³ Ibid, 117-118.

himself doing the things he does not wish and not doing the good he knows he ought to be doing. But as Hugo contends is true of Valjean, that it was not Valjean who had stolen the forty sous piece, but the beast within, so Paul contends that it is not he himself who does these things, but sin which dwells in him.

As Valjean came to the distinct realization that the battle raging within was absolute, the hideousness of the act of theft overwhelmed him completely and he fell into anguish. Paul also recognizes his captivity to the law of sin that dwells in his members and cries out with anguish, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).

Gregory A. Boyd speaks in his book *Satan and the Problem of Evil*⁴ of a process of character formation. This is one element in his comprehensive “Trinitarian Warfare Theology” and appears to be occasioned by an observation of C. S. Lewis that all people are ultimately in the process of becoming solidified either as a creature that is in harmony with God, other creatures, and with itself.⁵ From this observation arises the statement by Boyd that “self-determining freedom is about what morally responsible contingent beings choose to *do* on their way to deciding what they are going to permanently *be*.”⁶

⁴ (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 187-190.

⁵ *Ibid*, 188.

⁶ *Ibid*, 189, (*italics his*).

If Boyd's (and Lewis') assessments are correct, then it would stand to reason that we might see some correlation between what he proposes and the struggle that is illustrated in the life of the apostle Paul. Paul is without a doubt concerned with being in harmony with God, and it would seem that it is precisely the influence of God (Spirit) upon Paul that gives rise to the struggle of what he ought to do, and if the parallel with Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is legitimate, then ultimately what he will become.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis dreams about a mystical bus trip from the humdrum reality of the dim twilight shadows of this world into the bright and celestial realm of the heavens. In his vision the earth is presented as a place in which persons either grow into full personhood or shrink into themselves. The means of their movement, the increase or decrease, is brought about by their choices.

By eavesdropping on various conversations between those who are the heavenly celestial spirits and the empty shades, ghost-like images of the earthly (or hellish) ones, Lewis emphasizes how choice has brought some to pure joy and others to misery. Through the teaching of the "glorified" Scotsman, George MacDonald, he draws the distinction between being and becoming, that our choosing takes us through the process of becoming until finally we are what we have chosen to be. He teaches:

'But how can there be a grumble without a grumbler?'

'The whole difficulty of understanding Hell is that the thing to be understood is so nearly Nothing. But ye'll have had experiences ... it begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticising it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. Ye can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no *you* left to criticise the mood, nor to even enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine.⁷

The matter of becoming what you choose is reflected in Paul's diatribe on God's confirming people in their sinful ways by His giving them up to their sin. Romans 1:21-32 outlines a process which begins with the suppression of the truth and a refusal to honour and give thanks to God resulting in their mind becoming fixed in a particular way of thinking, namely an empty headed and darkened senselessness which leads to further acts of idolatry. The initial act of suppression and the resultant perversion of their being are attributed to nothing other than themselves.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 77-78.

The explanation Paul gives for how all have become ensnared in the trap of sin does not really answer the details in the way that a systematic or philosophical theology might like. He simply reports on a process. Because the rhetorical function of this pericope in Paul's letter is not designed to answer the question why, it does not figure in the answer. Paul emphatically declares that it has happened: human wills have deliberately suppressed the truth, or in less positive terms, have neglected to give attention to it as it ought to have been attended to, and consequently the cement of their human character has congealed and they become what they do. Paul concludes his alarm sounding passage with the summary that after having gratified the various base desires of idolatry, sensuality and perverted sexuality and being filled with every kind of wickedness and evil that these ones *are* gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless and ruthless (1:29-31).

The change from listing various behaviour traits (murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, etc.) to that of defining character (gossips, slanderers, etc.) is subtle but illuminating. Those who do these things become so characterized by the things they do, the choices they make, that they become what they do and choose. Those who murder are murderers, those who slander are slanderers, those who hate God are God-haters, etc.

But what of Lewis' grumbler who ceases being one who grumbles and becomes nothing more than a grumble.⁸ The sweetness of this example is that the grumble, a sound made by the grumbler, is easily compared with the ongoing rumble of a factory machine that never stops and possesses no personality. Much like the schoolteacher in Charles Schultz's Charlie Brown animated television programs who is identified purely by the sound "whah whah whah" in order to demonstrate that to the mind of a child forced to endure the prattling of a teacher there is no personality attached and no meaning to the sounds. They hear the noise but they do not engage it. The grumbler who has become a grumble is presumably likewise impersonal and unengageable. But try to picture a "slander" as a depersonalized "ghost" and it becomes a little more difficult to imagine. Slander as defaming utterance is comprehensible, but a person who becomes a defaming utterance metaphysically makes no sense.

Perhaps the problem is that we take Lewis too seriously. After all, it's not so much that a person might become reduced to a particular element of character, but that the character itself will become shaped and ultimately congeals into someone/thing that is either good or someone/thing that is bad. Boyd with his concern situated upon the sacred inviolability of self-determining freedom focuses upon the aspect of power or ability in choice. He starts with a self-determining freedom that appears to be almost divine and all-powerful. The initial choices are directed by a will that

⁸ *Divorce*, 77.

posses the power to choose either the good or the bad, but over time the choices diminish the capacity of the will to be able to choose one or the other, as the character becomes solidified as one thing or the other. He says:

So long as we possess self-determining freedom we possess the power to do otherwise. But this power is provisional. It diminishes over time until our *doing* has determined our *being*. It is at this point no longer true that we *could be* other than we are. The only thing can be said about us at this point is that we *could have been otherwise*.⁹

This seems to be somewhat substantiated by Jesus statement that “out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Mat. 15:19). That a good heart cannot produce evil deeds and a bad heart good deeds is the substance of his reflections in Matthew 7:17-18 in which he is reported to have taught that “In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” He then continues by stressing that the nature of a tree is determined by its fruit. Jesus, however, does not first deal with the question of how the heart became good or evil in the first place, giving rise to the good or evil actions (choices) that

⁹ Boyd, *Satan*, 189. Italics his.

flow from it.

The matter of freedom is a key element though. Freedom to choose to do the good or the bad actions that result in one being characterized as either good or bad. In the present, we desire to instruct the young people of society in how to make good choices — choices that will affect their future. All too often it would seem that the choices that we focus upon are rather superficial, choices that have less to do with character formation than with economic advantage. In part because we fail to appreciate that happiness is in part tied to whether or not we are in harmony with the divine. Even economic success is no guarantee of happiness, which inevitably is psychological and spiritual.

To form character, however, choices need to be made. Choices which at times are going to appear to be very basic and simple. And more often than not, will begin at a very early age in a child's development. The proverb instructs us that we are to "train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Prov. 22:6). This is often treated by some as if it were some kind of promise, however it is really just a basic principle. Children who are early taught how to choose what is good grow into adults who are good.

Lewis in the great divorce spends very little time on Divine activity in the role of conversion. All the work of God appears to be very external, which has the effect of

elevating the human will to a higher level of supremacy than may be warranted. Revelation is the first key element of God's intervention. It is here that Paul begins his reasoning in Romans. The preaching of the gospel constitutes a special intervention that has as its goal the bringing about of the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5). The revelation of the invisible attributes of God is clear also in the created cosmos (Rom. 1:20). This revelation, like the special revelation of the gospel, is given for the purpose of eliciting choices. The wrong choices result in idolatry and ultimately destruction, but good choices will result in the reward of eternal life.

As Paul continues, he points out that even those who have received special revelation (ethnic Israel with her revealed Torah) are like those who have only general revelation. Each is a sinner because each has disobeyed the law, whether of a special nature, or simply of conscience (Rom. 2:12-16). Implied in this is that it is choices to move against a known standard or recognized good has resulted in their becoming a sinner.

In Romans 5 Paul comments upon the two federal heads, Adam and Christ. This chapter is drawn upon heavily by some to establish a doctrine of original sin, which implies that the reason why we sin is because we are sinners rather than our being classified as sinners because of our sin. The passage however does not seem to justify this kind of thinking. In the unfolding of Paul's argument, he summarizes that death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam (Rom. 5:14). What this summary statement does in the

context of the entrance of sin into the world is underscore that while the sin of those who lived in the period prior to the giving of the Law is in some way tied to the sin of Adam, they have their own sin to answer for.

Since Adam is presented as a type of Christ in this section, it would seem that what is implied is that they agree with Adam and his sin by their own recapitulation of it. Adam bears responsibility as the first man and as the corporate head of humanity for the introduction of sin, but each agrees with his sin and align themselves with him by their own acts of unrighteousness. By their disobedience they become joined to Adam and become subject to death. Christ on the other hand brings about righteousness. And in the same way that his obedience establishes righteousness, those who are likewise obedient are joined to him and share that righteousness.

Adam is representative man, which is implied both by his name which means “man” in the sense of mankind or humanity and by his representative function as the head of humanity. What is true of him is true of us all. It is in this capacity as representative man that he stands as a type of Christ who is the last Adam. As the last Adam, Christ Jesus becomes the representative of a new humanity, and entrance into this new humanity is a matter of choice. Choice which is summarized by the rubric of faith or belief.

The choice is made possible by the revelation of Jesus Christ. A revelation which is not simply the objective display of an historic reality, but an existentially presented

reality brought about by the moving and working of the Spirit in the life of each hearer. As each is brought into contact with the revelation of Christ and the summons of the gospel is made, a moment of decision is created. In this moment of decision, the individual chooses to either accept or reject the revelation. Each decision has a tentative nature to it, but with each subsequent decision, the earlier choices become more and more greatly fixed.

Boyd's point, based upon Lewis' presentation, that we irreversibly become the decisions we make,¹⁰ so long as it is applied to the eternal outcome of these decisions this is certainly true. Yet Boyd suggests that this is true also in the here and now. Paul's conversion experience seems to suggest that this is not the case, at least not to the degree implied by Boyd. Lewis offers little help here in his *The Great Divorce*, since he is dealing with the eternal state, though he does imply by his story that those in the eternal state may yet chose otherwise, giving even greater emphasis to the ultimacy of human choice than Boyd.

The whole notion of conversion is that a change takes place that is rather radical, a change that is born out of a choice to be sure, but that choice is one that would appear to have been an impossible choice. Paul who was the zealous defender of Judaism and advanced beyond most of his contemporaries in that zealousness converts to the exact opposite perspective. He moves from persecutor to

¹⁰ Ibid., 189.

persecuted. The conversion is brought about by a radical intervention on the part of God that in one sense forces the decision. Paul is coerced into becoming a Christian against his will, which it would seem is bent to make a decision contrary to its volitional history.

This first choice by Paul, to accept the demands of God upon him, imposed through the Damascus road experience is decisive. By this decision a conversion takes place which wrenches Paul from one sphere of existence into another. By this single decision he moves from being a sinner into a Christian. He certainly does become what he chooses, but the choice is so much more decisive than Boyd and Lewis suggest.

Once Paul embarks upon the road to Jerusalem, he begins a new volitional history. It is this volitional history that he faces in Romans chapter seven, which it would seem is much like the volitional history Jean Valjean in Hugo's story embarks upon after he has suffered his decisive moment of decision. Having made the first decision, each subsequent decision confirms the first and begins the process of cementing the character into the shape of a Christian.

From my own experience, I would suggest that this formation relates not only to character, but to other areas of human experience as well. It would seem that all aspects of human development that become patterned are affected, including philosophical and theological categories. Choices to accept certain paradigms for

doing theological inquiry become either more rigid or more flexible depending upon the choices one makes. Each choice of agreement with a prevailing orthodoxy makes the possibility of accepting, and in some cases expressing compassion to those who adhere to other positions, less possible. A liberal education in theology or otherwise will supposedly expose one to a greater variety of paradigms and so prevent a premature congealing into a rigid and unforgiving form. But this is not always the case, since even a liberal education is structured by some kind of practical paradigm that establishes its own particular prejudices and accepted methodological and dogmatic patterns.

In Paul's treatment in Romans seven, however, it would appear that what is at stake is the formation of a Christian character and not just any kind of character. The choices made are not always easily made, and very often the wrong choices are made even though a radical conversion has taken place. This conversion is one which changes the foundations of what is the right choice and what is not. Paul is able to speak about his "inner being" agreeing or delighting in the Law of God (Rom. 7:22, NIV) which underscores an accepted standard or absolute against which an evaluation of right and wrong can be made. Paul can speak of himself as having some recognition of the code of conduct that he must make individual decisions to either do or not do as the case may be. It in these choices, like Jean Valjean in Hugo's story, that Paul will begin to forge the habits and philosophical frame of mind to understand what is good and what is bad. Choices to do good in the early stages will stand in diametric opposition to the volitional history up to that

point creating the kind of ordeal suffered by Jean Valjean and by the Apostle Paul. Conversion at the end of the day would appear to be something that takes place in the consciousness. The consciousness being awakened to a new object begins to make choices which direct it towards this new object and ultimately character is formed in these choices.

Some people from their earliest years have made relatively few choices that conflict with the general thrust of the Judeo-Christian ethic or an essentially Christian way of life and so their conversion is less dramatic and the following adjustments to their character may be less pronounced. In these instances spiritual development become more a matter of fine tuning and more specifically directed to the attitudes and choices of the inner life rather than the obvious matters surrounding external behaviour. Many of the attitudes and conditions may go unnoticed a lot longer or may create a greater sense of personal frustration since often times dramatic shifts which are more easily discerned in overt behaviour are more easily made than are fine ones that can seem to very private and personal. Yet it is in these more restricted and internal choices for a Christian way of thinking and doing things that one comes to be a Christian. It is through these finer choices affecting specifically the heart that true Christian character is formed, and this is why Jesus in his series of "But I say to you statements" in the Sermon on the Mount redirects the focus to the very inner workings of the heart and does not simply leave things at the superficial level of the performance of right things.

We are right in our evangelism to emphasize belief, but following upon belief comes moral and behavioural alignment with these beliefs. In Galatians Paul recounts a confrontation with the Apostle Peter about his unchristian conduct — his refusal to eat with the Gentiles. This refusal to eat with the Gentiles was construed as compelling of the Gentiles to become Jews negating the whole premise of Peter's own admission that a person is saved by the hearing of faith resulting in he, a Jew, coming to adopt what would be considered by the circumcision party as a Gentile way of life.

Behaviour thus reveals belief. Saint Peter can speak of Baptism being the pledge of a good conscience before God and conclude with an emphatic statement that baptism saves (1 Peter 1:21) precisely because it is in these choices and activities that belief comes to expression in conduct, and conduct being the existential outworking of the conscious choices we make reveals our true character. The Christian is the one who does not do the things of the flesh but rather produces the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul's condition in Romans seven represents the normal Christian life. What gives rise to this condition however is sin's work and what ensues is a battle in the inner being of the Spirit against sin. Sin is personalized and pitted against the Spirit, who embodies Christ and all that being a Christian means. Sin is something that is able to make Paul do one thing or the other, though it does not combat the Spirit

directly, rather it pulls at Paul in one direction while the Spirit pulls at him in another (Gal. 5:17). Their purpose in opposing each other is “to keep you from doing what you want”, which in Romans seven is to do what is good. The works of the flesh, paralleling sin in Romans seven is revealed in Galatians 5:19-21 by fifteen different representative behavioural characteristics which are paralleled in Romans one by a list of sins committed by those whose choices have resulted in their being entirely given over to their sin.

That God gives them over to these things implies that there is no longer any divine intervention to release them from this self-abasing circle of choices, but rather that each choice confirms the previous and makes the next one which follows it legitimate or internally consistent with the pattern of choices being made.¹¹ What this amounts to is a way of living that is nothing short of irreligious and results in those so entrapped promoting their own irreligious behaviour among others (Romans 1:32). This promotion of their godless way of life demonstrates that more is going on than that they have become trapped in a circle of sin, but that this is their conscious and determined way of living. They are so in agreement with it

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, (London, Penguin, 1989), 138, remarks on the continuation of sin that because of the way that sin becomes absorbed into the way life and living, it is not the state of sin that we notice, but only those particular sins that have a supercharging effect in pushing on further into sin. Sin becomes normative, not righteousness. He writes: “The sinner, on the other hand, is so much in the grip of sin that he has no conception of its totality and has strayed on the road to destruction. He registers only every particular new sin, which gives him as it were some extra momentum along that road to destruction, just as though he had not been proceeding in that direction the moment before and with all the momentum of his previous sins. So natural has sin become for him, or so much his second nature, that he finds the everyday quite in order and is given pause only for a moment, each time a new sin as it were adds to his momentum. In his destruction he is blind to the fact that instead of his life having the essential continuity of the

that they “evangelize” those around them into the same pattern of living and thinking. Choices lead to a complete commitment of the self to one way of living or another and ultimately shape the person that we become. This is the meaning behind such proverbial statements as “you made your own bed and now you must lie in it” and is even admitted in our popular culture. The Green Goblin in the recent Spiderman movie confronts Spiderman with an opportunity to partner with him in his rule of terror. Spiderman responds by explaining his reasons for doing good is that it is the right thing to do. The Green Goblin in an attempt to crush him announces quite matter of factly, “We are what we choose to be.” What we choose to be, not often in the big decisions, but in the little ones that confront us each day of our lives and give shape and normalcy to our decisions and make even the larger ones simply a matter of routine. The conflict inside about doing the right thing and doing evil is in the Christian is the battle of sin and flesh against the Spirit.

This whole process of sin’s entrenched warfare against the spirit is in many respects a microcosmic example of a war which has its metanarrative in the whole of the created cosmos and begins in the realm of the Divine persons themselves. In the writings of the Ancient Near Eastern civilization, and that of Ancient Israel no less so, ancient theogonic and cosmogonic myths are used to convey the kind of truth that is necessary to explain origins and the development of the current state of affairs. The gods are at war with each other and the world is the battle field on

eternal, by being before God in faith, it has the continuity of sin.”

which they fight their battles. Humans become trapped in this war since each national entity is under the direction of a particular deity whose concern to overthrow another is enacted through the wars waged on earth along with various natural disasters and other such phenomena.

El, the supreme God of the pantheon, in the Israelite religion is also united with the local deity of the Hebrew people enabling them to make the claim that they are the people of the One supreme God. In their understanding, El (Yahweh) parceled out the nations and set them under the control of each particular lesser deity or son of God but had reserved Israel for himself. Consequently, through rebellion in the heavens, a number of these sons allied with Lucifer (AKA, Satan), the devil figure of the scriptures, against El and his chosen people. The result is the ensuing warfare which has its particular earthly focus upon the nation of Israel and the Church.

Choice, right from the beginning, is a central element to the whole construct. As Adam and Eve in the garden paradise were tempted by the Devil to disobey God, the responsibility to choose wisely has always been a paramount issue. Abraham is praised because he chose to obey God. Israel was regularly called upon to choose whom they would serve. The temptation to serve other gods and to worship idols was always been before them, seeking to entice them away from the Law which was to be a tree of life for them. And yet behind this is the previous choice of Satan himself to reject God's overarching sovereignty.

These choices are presented all along as the things that determine what the essence of a person is. Lucifer becomes Satan through his opposition to God and God's people- his role defined as the one who accuses the people of God and seeks to destroy them. In the story of Job he is given the freedom to torment Job and to try and break down Job's resistance to sin and so coerce him to choose the way of disobedience and unfaith over that of obedience and faith. One has to wonder whether Job's friends are really the benign philosophers they claim to be or whether they are in fact also part of Satan's attempt to upset Job. In the end, God intervenes and relieves Job from his distress. We are not told what happens to Job's friends, whether they break from the safety of their retributive interpretation of sin and suffering, we are not told. But Job, who never accepted such an answer is rewarded for his faithfulness in the face of God's apparent inconsistency. Job chose rightly.

The purpose of these struggles is not always immediately apparent, but it would seem if the story of Adam and Eve in the garden is to have paradigmatic relevance then the notion of the world as a vale of soul making is probably at least partially correct. This is not going to account for all the extreme evil we see, which is most certainly best explained as Boyd has suggested by recourse to a spiritual battle of cosmic proportions being waged in God's world by his free supernatural creatures. But the vale of soul making helps to explain how the world can function in such a

context on the individual and collective level for humanity. We are tried and tested within the confines of life on this world to determine who we are.

Adam and Eve in the pristine garden conditions of life not only demonstrate that choices seldom if ever completely controlled by environment. Even in the best possible situations wrong or ill conceived choices can be made. Disobedience among our children will take place even when they are absolutely and completely aware that Mom and Dad can see what their doing, and that the stated result of the disobedience will result in the loss of a cherished privilege. It is not just defiance that spurs this on but an opportunity to exercise and free choice, self determined and independent of the surrounding environment.

This is after all what a free choice really is. Collin McGinn summarizes:

A free decision involves a transition from a set of beliefs and desires to a particular choice; but this choice is not dictated by what precedes it—hence it seems like an unmediated leap. The choice, that is, cannot be accounted for simply in terms of beliefs and desires that form the input to it, just as conscious states cannot be accounted for in terms of the neural processes they emanate from. In both cases we seem to be presented

with something novel, issuing from nowhere, as if a new act of creation were necessary to bring it into being.¹²

It is this notion of novelty or creativity which I believe reflects something of the divine in us. We are able to make these choices and create a new personal history and consequently oftentimes corporate history by the freedom we have. But these choice, while not entirely dependent upon the environment of this world are in fact made and to some degree conditioned by it. The world is a vale in which our lives are lived and as such it impacts us and helps to shape the choices we might make even if we are not obliged absolutely to choose according to its dictates.

S. Paul Schilling critiques a “vale of soul making” perspective at several points. Many of these criticisms hinge upon the excessive nature of the evil that appears in the world. It becomes for him incomprehensible how or why so much and such intense pain and suffering are present, what eternal lessons are learned from them that could not otherwise be learned?¹³ Suffering is not distributed evenly and there appears to be a disproportion to the needs of many sufferers and their capacity to benefit from it.¹⁴ Gratuitous or superfluous suffering is not explained by such a perspective. In a comprehensive vale of soul making perspective, there should be no beneficial, or at the very least, no purposeless suffering. But our experiences seem to dictate otherwise, and the activities of those who hold to such a position

¹² Colin McGinn, *The Making of a Philosopher: My Journey Through Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 209.

¹³ S. Paul Schilling, *God and Human Anguish*, (Nashville: Abigdon, 1977), 169-170.

betrays their own convictions. Attempts to alleviate pain and suffering seem to be at odds with the view that ultimately it is a good thing.¹⁵

He further notices that evil seems to have as much instrumentality in the unmaking of souls as well as in making them. That as many if not more than are helped by evil and suffering to faith and good character are driven to unfaith and evil themselves. That many through the trials of life are not strengthened but destroyed and seek self destruction in suicide, drugs and other avenues of escape.¹⁶

Finally Schilling criticizes the notion of eschatological theodicy, suggesting that the extending of the value of suffering in the life to come or a future other worldly existence is beyond the experience of our present life and outside of our existential capacity to know and evaluate. Consequently it becomes a mute point in the argument making the whole structure weak and tentative at best. How can we at the end of the day expect that we are somehow better fitted for an afterlife if we cannot even comprehend that afterlife in terms that are structured after this world where the actual suffering and pain are experienced. It seems illogical.

What I feel Schilling fails to emphasize however is that the world after all is the place that we live. It is the sphere in which we experience pain, suffering, evil and it is in

¹⁴ Ibid, 170.

¹⁵ Ibid, 170-171.

¹⁶ Ibid, 171-172

the world that we face the struggle of making choices which are painful and hard. These choices are based not just upon expedience, but often have associated with them a notion of absolute value. Some things seem to have an eternal rightness about them others an eternal wrongness. It is better to suffer wrong than to choose it.

Because we live in the world, and because we believe that this world is at best probationary, it stands to reason that it would environmentally be a place in which we can be tested and our character fashioned and shaped by our interactions with it and with others who share the environment with us. Whether it answers all the problems, the vale of soul making perspective has the value of admitting we live in the world and that what happens here in the world has an impact for the life hereafter.

Lewis remarks in his *The Problem of Pain*, that “the whole system is, so to speak, calculated for the clash between good men and bad men, anf the good fruits of fortitude, patience, pity and forgiveness for which the cruel man is permitted to be cruel.”¹⁷ He believes that God can and does make complex good come out of simple evil, and such a notion implies that the world is a place in which God is making souls, forming character. Speaking directly to this he remarks that humanity “is something that God is making, and therefore something with which He

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (London: The Centenary Press, 1940, reprint 1946), 99.

will not be satisfied until it has a certain character.”¹⁸ A divine work of Art, a work in progress being completed through the various experiences that He brings into our lives.

This is a somewhat simple notion, one which does not explain the complexities of life with the same detail and clarity as perhaps Boyd’s Trinitarian Warfare Theology does, but it still presses home a point that I believe is hard to admit. We are creatures that are still in the process of becoming and the place where this is taking place is in the world. So long as God is concerned to see our growth and development into people of a type that pleases him, then this world functions as a vale in which our souls are fashioned. It is a vale of soul making.

Perhaps the notion that souls are undone is not inappropriate to a vale of soul making. Perhaps it is too narrow a notion to simply expect that all things have to contribute to our growth. Perhaps the weakness of the position for which many who argue for such a world where every event has eternal meaning in a positive sense is that it is too surreal or idealist. The vale is more of an arena where events take place that will ultimately result in the forging of a godly person or an ungodly one, a living and vital person or a dead and listless one, depending upon how each one responds in the world to both the crises that come as well as the serendipitous

¹⁸ Ibid, 30.

benefits. Not all souls are undone by evil, some are seemingly undone by too much good.

The essential point would seem to be the direction in which one is headed. Those who have made choices for evil will find that circumstances and situations that arise will bring about situations that demand further choices for evil. Those who choose for life and goodness, will find that they can always choose life. Mira showed up at my office one day and told her story. She was trapped, unemployed and caught in a cycle of poverty. I managed to arrange a room for Mira for a couple of days, during which she was to make application to the welfare office for immediate assistance and was to begin looking both for employment and for accommodation.

Mira has a perspective on things that is, shall we say, different. She lost a job as a teacher in the public school system. It is apparently under appeal with her union. This was several years ago, but she anticipates that she will be vindicated and will receive her back pay and her job back. Recently she lost a job as a grounds keeper at a local cultural center. This too she felt was unjust. Instead of following the agreed upon course of action, she would continually resort to going back to the cultural center and pleading for her job back.

When I confronted Mira with her failure to do the things that were necessary to break out of her current situation, she simply shrugged her shoulders and claimed she couldn't do anything else. Her past choices had shrunk her world to the point that

the only “reality” she knew was the one that she had constructed in her head. Convinced that her only problem was money (she was not addicted to any substance nor was she lazy). If she could just have \$400.00 to get into a room, she would soon be working.

Finally we had to evict Mira from the place where she was staying. It was hard because she literally had no where to go. She begged and pled, but we had to stand our ground. In our discussions we reinforced to her that there were solutions other than the ones she conceived in her mind. That she had to make drastic choices and since she was unable or unwilling to make the necessary choices, we could not house her indefinitely. I don’t know where Mira is, but I think and pray for her often.

Mira is a perfect picture of how each of us operates. Stuck in a particular paradigm of thinking and operating, each problem only presented certain solutions, certain choices. In most cases these choices furthered the course she was presently on. It is not that she was being sinful in the sense that her choices were evil, but they resulted in personal evil. They were life robbing. They were personally self-destructive.

If Mira was to change, a conversion was necessary. Not a conversion of faith, she was to the best of my knowledge already a believer and was in fact very concerned for personal holiness. She prayed, kept a spiritual life diary and did all kinds of

other very definitely positive spiritual things. But she needed a conversion in her thinking. She needed to make choices that would result in a break from the paradigm she was in and create a new world. She needed to break from her current volitional history and establish a new one.

Paul in Romans seven and Jean Valjean in the galleys of France each had their volitional histories. Paul's in Judaism with its nationally distinctive rituals and dogmas, Valjean with his hatred of society for the grave injustice he suffered. Each broke free. Each chose to create a new world. And for a time the new world overlapped and clashed with the old, until finally their character is formed into a new man. For Paul it was to be joined with Christ, for Valjean it was to a greater good.

The struggle is part of the creation of the soul. It is occasioned both by the environment in which we exist and by the volitional histories that we create. Heredity also plays a part, the fates, to use Aristotle's phrase, since so much of what presses against us is not simply universal environment or personal choices. We may be born into riches or poverty, with health or frailty. But all these things contribute by creating moments of decision. Who we are is not determined by the environment or the circumstances, but the choices we make. We are what we choose be.

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