

Gall-bladder, tonsils, thymus, pineal gland. No, not something on the menu at McDonalds. Though MSG and it might be a Big Mac. No - gall-bladder, tonsils, thymus, pineal gland- these are organs that at various points in time medical science has looked at, scratched its head and said: can't see the point of that. The fact that quite often these are bits of your body that can be removed without killing you seem to have only encouraged the view that they may be pink and wobbly but they are in the end useless. To neither the scientific nor indeed the religious brain would our bodies have bits that have absolutely no point: nature / God (delete as applicable) just isn't like that. For the biological sciences for some time such extra bits that we have that we really can't explain have been explained away as a throwback to some evolutionary ancestor, a little corner of the carnal carpet that was inadvertently left unhoovered by evolution's great improving sweep, a forgotten hand-me-down from distant reptile relatives. Indeed at various points in the development of science, the presence of such appendages has been held up as nothing less than the smoking gun of natural selection, proof positive that grandad was a monkey, great great grandad was a frog and his great grandad primordial slime.

As time has marched on and science had more time to think about it, it has become clear that for many of these viscera, though their purpose may not be obvious, they do have one, and they're not just a hangover from when we scaly and had fins. So the gall-bladder concentrates the bile (which is why it tends to cause problems in middle age), the tonsils and thymus parts of our immune system; the pineal gland the origin of melatonin which regulates our diurnal rhythms and messes everything up when we've been on a long haul flight across time zones.

As we slowly discover the purpose of what was thought to be Great Aunt Fishface's heirloom, inevitably Christian Creationists have cranked up the cry 'Ha! Darwin was wrong. The world was made in six days'. which says a *lot* about the academic credentials of Creationists but not really very much about evolutionary science. That such organs have a purpose proves that scientists were wrong about them, not that they were wrong about evolution.

Anyway, the latest organ to find itself promoted from the reserves bench to the pitch is what was always the poster boy of the purposeless anatomy brigade, the Vermiform Appendix. For centuries it has been considered a defunct, pointless and vestigial entity, but, no, apparently it is not. So there's hope for the Church of England yet.

Recently published research has discovered that the purpose of the appendix is not to sit there grumbling at the bottom of the colon until it can burst into appendicitis: it is there to act as a reservoir for beneficial gut bacteria. Your microbiome. You can't get more 2021 than that. I suppose we had to realise first that bacteria can be beneficial to allow before we could see that that is what the little worm at the base of the ascending colon is for, and with a wave of the wand the corporeal Cinderella finally goes to the ball.

We can also presume that the other vestigial organs that don't seem to have any rhyme, reason or purpose other than to cause trouble will follow the same path as the appendix. In years to come we can look forward to medical science working out what the point is of: wisdom teeth, male nipples (I'd love to know how creationists currently explain them away), the muscles that move the ear, body hair, the coccyx, and of course that most pointless organ of them all, Donald Trump's brain. And perhaps, eventually, medical science will move on from anatomy and give us reasons for apparently pointless physiological processes as well. The one I would particularly be interested in knowing is 'what is the point of pain?'

Now you're probably thinking: 'Doh! Didn't they teach them anything at school in Yorkshire? Didn't you read the Ladybird book with that diagram of a boy picking up a burning stick? Or was that the Ladybird book of arson?'

Well yes. Clearly the sort of pain that makes you pull your hand away from a hot flame has an obvious purpose: to get you to remove yourself from immediate harm. That much about pain is obvious. But what is the point of pain that is there all the time not in response to some immediate danger. What about the pain of arthritis say or an old wound or the unbearable ache of bereavement. There is nothing to pull away from there and however smart evolutionary processes may be, surely that pain hasn't evolved to make us seek medical help. If you take a mechanical view of the human body the existence of such pain is, at the very least, a major design fault. So, what is the point of pain when it alerts you to a problem you simply cannot solve? It's an important question. Medical science may one day propose answers. Religion of course, already has.

The really unpalatable answer comes with the almost euphemistic descriptor 'Deuteronomistic': which is a merely tongue twisting way of saying 'you're suffering because God is punishing you because you've done something wrong'. It's crude but common: not only could you summarise half of the Old Testament using the concept,

it's an amazingly widespread way of thinking: every time you hear someone say 'What have I done to deserve this?' you hear Deuteronomistic theology being proposed.

The slightly more pleasant suggestion that faith has offered is written all over the New Testament such as in the letter of Peter:

*“for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”*

What is the point of pain? What is the point of suffering? Well, according to this way of thinking, God is tormenting us to make us better. He's like some malevolent games teacher (is there any other kind?) on a cosmic scale, booming down from the clouds of heaven 'no pain, no gain.'

Both 'God is punishing us' and 'God is purifying us' have impeccable Biblical pedigrees. Whether that makes them helpful, or indeed, correct, is, of course, open to debate. Things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so. I'm not sure anyone has even been helped in their suffering to be told, like Job, that it's their own fault, they're being punished for past sins. I wouldn't have thought that there are many times chronic pain has been eased by the thought that this is God's way of improving us.

And unless you've got the perverted, very strange idea of what constitutes love that sometimes afflicts the fruitcake fringes of Christianity, if we believe in a God who as St John says is love then we are clearly contradicting ourselves to say he is deliberately making us suffer.

It would seem that, though we wouldn't want to admit they were wholly wrong, religion's answers here are unsatisfactory to say the least. And they always have been, and we've always known that to be the case.

Perhaps the function or origin of suffering and pain is better sought in the realm of science and biology than in the pages of scripture.

Before we completely write off faith as a vestige of less enlightened times, there is a unique rôle for religion in our understanding of and relationship to suffering and pain, and that is in how we make sense of this most pointless of experiences.

God is him in whom we live and breathe and have our being. And so all of our life experiences can be part of the process of growing more aware of the God that is closer to us than the air we breathe, but always apparently frustratingly too close for us to focus. It is easiest to see God when those experiences are positive, enjoyable, fulfilling, though of course those very same circumstances are the ones when we are least likely to want to look for Him. But ours is not a fair weather faith: it is crucial for us to be able to see that God is also there when the experiences are negative, painful, insufferable. Not there to wave a magic wand and make it all go away- I wish. But there alongside us, with us for every rasping breath, every sharp twinge, every cry of despair; the divine compassion, crucified arms outstretched to embrace us.

So when pain comes, no, God is not tormenting us. God is not making us suffer. It's not for our own good. It would without doubt be better if it was not there. But while it is there, if we can see God even there, in the worst of human experience, there may, just may, be some good we can make of it.