

The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Gaining Perspective

Apologetics Note # 4

This is the first of several apologetics notes on the problem of evil and suffering¹ and will serve as an introduction to the problem. It is a difficult and important topic: difficult because it is a problem for which the Bible provides no neat and tidy answer, important because it touches the fabric of our trust in God. It is also, for many, a significant obstacle to faith. Whether the evil or suffering concerns a single individual or is on the scale of the holocaust, one is quite naturally led to ask, "If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, how could he have allowed such suffering to take place?"

One response is the one suggested by Rabbi Kushner in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. According to Kushner, God is good but far from omnipotent. Whether it be in the course of natural events or due to human evil, bad things do happen. God does care and would like to help but cannot. In effect, Kushner's solution is to drop the affirmation of divine omnipotence. Alternatively, others have suggested that God lacks the requisite knowledge or that God is not all-good. But none of these solutions is faithful to what the Bible tells us about God.²

What then is the answer? If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, why is it that he allows so much evil and suffering? Is this a question to which there is an answer? Are believers simply called to trust God? The aim of this first note on the topic is not to set forth an answer but to give an overview of the problem.

The Nature of the Problem

The problem being addressed here is a philosophical and theological problem. Everyone struggles with the effects of human evil and everyone struggles with suffering in one way or another, but the problem at hand is one which arises out of the specific faith commitments of both traditional Christians and Jews. It arises out of the belief that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good.³ The problem is one of consistency or coherence between this belief and an acknowledgment of the evil and suffering which we in fact observe. It is a problem, one might say, of internal consistency.

Now, if the problem is one of internal consistency, it is not inappropriate for the theist to draw upon the resources of biblical revelation to respond to the charge. It is, after all, a commitment to the teaching of Scripture, namely that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, which gave rise to the problem in the first place. The believer may want to provide explanations for evil and suffering

¹For brevity I will occasionally shorten "the problem of evil and suffering" to the more traditional expression, "the problem of evil."

²To reject the teaching of the Bible on such matters has significant consequences. For instance, if one thinks that God was unable to help most of the Jews in Germany during the holocaust, does God have the power to guide, protect, or save anyone? Furthermore, if one is unable to affirm, say, that God is almighty—something which is affirmed a great many times in the Bible—what confidence can one have in any teaching of the Bible? And if biblical teaching is in general unreliable, then one is either left to fabricate one's own view of God or left with what one's own reason and experience is able to warrant. Unfortunately, apart from special revelation (God's revelation of himself through the inspiration of Scripture) little can be confidently known of God, including his basic goodness.

³For brevity in what follows, when I speak of "God," that can be understood as implying God as affirmed in the Bible, namely a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good. Likewise by "theist" I shall be referring to a traditional Jewish or Christian theist, one who holds to these beliefs.

which the non-believer would find compelling—and there are indeed some explanations which can make sense to the non-believer—but since the problem concerns the internal consistency, or lack thereof, of what the theist believes, it is perfectly appropriate to appeal to biblical teaching.

In the past the charge of internal inconsistency has been presented as the claim that traditional theism is logically inconsistent,⁴ namely that it is logically impossible for it to be true both that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good and that there exists the evil and suffering which is observed. Today, however, most atheists are willing to grant the possibility that, although evil and suffering are in themselves bad, they may give rise to some good which cannot be achieved without at least some evil or suffering. And if this good is of sufficient value, then the explanation for the existence of that evil or suffering is that it makes possible the greater good.⁵ Possible candidates for such “greater goods” include freedom of the will and various virtues that are not possible in the absence of suffering such as courage, compassion, perseverance, and forgiveness. The logical-inconsistency claim is rarely advanced today because one cannot eliminate the possibility that there may be “greater goods”—perhaps totally unbeknownst to us—which would suffice to explain all instances of evil and suffering.

As a consequence, more recent formulations of the problem-of-evil argument against belief in God make a weaker claim. The charge is that the evil and suffering which we observe constitutes strong evidence against, rather than logical incompatibility with, belief in the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God. One may want to believe that such a God exists and that he has good reason for allowing the evil and suffering, but that belief, so it is argued, is highly unreasonable.

Aspects of the Problem

There are a variety of facets to the problem of evil and suffering. The following is a list of some significant distinctions and issues relevant to the topic. Their significance lies in the fact that when one thinks of various reasons which God might have for allowing evil and suffering, one finds that explanations relevant to one type of suffering or situation may not be relevant to others.

- (a) One common way of breaking down the issues is to distinguish human evil and the suffering it produces and “natural evil,” the suffering brought about by natural events. What is important here is the difference in the cause of the suffering.
- (b) Another significant distinction is between human suffering and animal suffering. Presumably animals, at least the higher forms, are capable of feeling pain.
- (c) There is also the distinction between physical pain and psychological suffering. Arguably, animals experience some degree of psychological suffering (e.g. distress when offspring are threatened or fears associated with situations in which in the past there was pain), but such suffering is of enormous import for humans. Our capacities to anticipate possible future states of affairs, to fear illness, to struggle with personal image, hold grudges, or suffer chronic anxieties are so important that for most human beings it is psychological suffering, rather than physical pain, which is the primary source of unhappiness.

⁴See, for instance, J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” first published in *Mind* 64 (1955). It is reprinted in a number of anthologies.

⁵One ought also to note that there may be situations in which the removal of some instance of evil or suffering could result in a greater evil or greater suffering. An example of this on a human level is a painful medical treatment given to save a person's life. Examples which might apply to God are harder to find, but one cannot preclude the possibility.

- (d) Next, there is the problem of death, both human death and animal death. A theological issue here is whether there was animal suffering and death prior to the Fall. Put another way, was the death that entered into the world through the sin of Adam and Eve simply human death?
- (e) Then, there is the matter of separation from God and the doctrine of hell, eternal separation from God.
- (f) A final issue concerns the distinction between suffering which God allows and suffering which God actively brings about. The latter includes acts of divine judgment, and such judgment can be either in this life (on individuals or on entire communities) or in the life to come.

The Core of the Problem

Whatever the particular facet of the problem, there is a common thread. All the distinctions or issues relate to whether God can be believed to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. The core of the problem, the really difficult part, is not that there is some suffering and evil. As noted, there are greater-goods explanations which account for why there is some evil and suffering. The core of the problem concerns those instances of evil and suffering which, as far as we can see, seem utterly pointless, or which are on such a scale that it is hard to believe that any good which may accompany them would be great enough to justify God allowing them to occur.

Think, for example about the holocaust. Could one believe that the good of moral freedom warranted the genocide which Hitler mandated? God, it seems, would not have needed to revoke moral freedom completely to have prevented the holocaust. Alternatively, couldn't God have prevented the holocaust by, say, having Hitler die at birth? Could one believe that the lesson to be learned about human moral depravity warranted allowing the atrocity? Could the reduction in anti-Semitism after the war be thought to warrant it? Could the courage demonstrated by Schindler and others warrant it? Could it be warranted by all such goods taken collectively? Finally, whatever goods did arise out of the holocaust, couldn't those goods have been achieved with a far smaller loss of life? From our perspective it seems obvious that the world would have been better without the holocaust than with it. The good which may have arisen as a result of it, at least any good pertaining to human welfare, seems woefully inadequate to warrant God having allowed it to occur. Finally, it seems to us that God could have prevented the holocaust, but he did not. Why?

William Rowe's Formulation of the Problem

Atheist, William Rowe, formulates the argument around the problem of intense suffering. This is obviously but one part of the problem; however, by focusing on intense suffering, Rowe captures the core difficulty with particular clarity.

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Conclusion: There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.⁶

⁶Rowe, William, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 1-11.

How does one respond to an argument such as this? A first thing to note is that the argument is deductively valid, that is to say, the conclusion is logically entailed by the premises. Hence, if one accepts both premise #1 and premise #2, then one is forced to grant the truth of the conclusion. If one thinks that the conclusion is false, then at least one of the premises must be false.

Regarding premise #2, one might be inclined to object that suffering is not necessarily bad in itself. This objection seems plausible enough when one is thinking of mild pain, but what of intense pain? Although Rowe's argument is in terms of intense suffering, intense physical pain is certainly a part of this. The problem with rejecting premise #2 is that goodness, if it means anything, is concerned with the welfare of others. Now a good being may allow intense pain, or even cause someone intense pain, if that pain is for some greater good (or the avoidance of a greater evil), but if there be no greater purpose or good which it promotes, then how can permitting it, or causing it, be thought to accord with promoting the other's welfare, or promoting overall welfare? If permitting someone to suffer intense pain needlessly and purposelessly is not contrary to goodness, then what is?

Turning to premise #1, it is not hard to think of instances of intense suffering where it seems to us that either no good at all is promoted or the good promoted falls far short of justifying its occurrence. Thus, on the face of it, premise #1 seems to be true.

There is, however, one potential problem. There is the possibility that what *seems to us* to be the case may not actually be the case. The difficulty here is not just that we may lack some pertinent data. A judgment may be wrong for that reason but nonetheless be a reasonable judgment. One almost never has all the data, yet that does not prevent one from making a reasonable judgment given the data one has. The difficulty arises either when one does not have sufficient data to make an informed judgment or when one is lacking data which is potentially significant to that judgment. There are many situations in which something may *seem* to be true, but where one is not in a good position to make a firm judgment on the matter. Under such circumstances one's judgment should be tentative at most.

Reservations about accepting premise #1 might arise at two points. One concerns how we assess the balance of good and bad resulting from the instance of intense suffering. With regard to this, it must be acknowledged that we are not perfect judges as to what constitutes overall, or even our own, welfare (e.g. perhaps we tend to overrate comfort, popularity, etc. and underrate the value of character lessons). Accordingly, one might argue that if intense pain results in greater depth and maturity of character, then it is worth it, despite our great aversion to it. One might add to this that if such growth of character bears fruit in some way for eternity (in life after death), then surely even intense and protracted suffering can be for a greater good.

There are, however, a variety of problems with taking this to be a sufficient reason for rejecting premise #1. For one, intense and prolonged suffering is not the only way of developing character. For another, welfare consists of much more than just character. Wise parents, wanting to develop good character, allow their children to undergo some pain and suffering, but not prolonged suffering involving intense pain. Overall, they want their children to have good health and to enjoy life. Finally, if we really thought that all instances of intense pain were for a greater good, a good which would outweigh the negative value of the pain itself, then why would we ever try to alleviate such pain?

Having said this, one should pause and ask whether there might not be greater goods which are relevant to God but which are only indirectly relevant to us. In many discussions about the problem of

evil and suffering the analogy is made to the parent-child relationship (as I have just done). Significant points can be made by use of the analogy, and indeed both sides of the debate make use of it. However, there are important ways in which God's relationship to us is unlike the relationship of parent to child, or indeed the relationships of any two human beings. Are these differences such as to be relevant to the problem of evil? In the next essay I will argue that some of them are.

The second point at which reservations may arise regarding premise #1 concerns the matter of divine omnipotence and what God is free to do. It is often assumed in discussions about the problem of evil that omnipotence implies being able to do whatever is logically possible. This, however, need not be included within the concept of omnipotence. That all power belongs to some being, or that all power is derived from and overseen by some being, need not imply that that being has the power to do whatever is logically possible. And in the present context it is important to note that biblical teaching nowhere indicates that God can do whatever is logically possible. (Again, remember, the atheist's attack is on the internal consistency of the theist's beliefs; hence there is no reason for the theist to feel compelled to accept an extra-biblical definition of omnipotence.)

This, of course, leads to the question, what might fit into the category of being logically possible, but not in fact possible, for God? One consideration, already mentioned, which might fit into this category relates to the topic of free will. Is it logically possible for God to create beings with free will while guaranteeing that they only make the choices he wants? The argument that it is logically possible hinges on two assumptions: that God knows all possible worlds, and that God is able to select whichever possible world he likes so that the free choices of creatures in that world are the choices God wants.⁷ Philosophers differ as to whether this argument succeeds, but supposing that it does, it still does not imply that God is actually able to do what the scenario suggests, for the Bible does not say that divine omniscience includes knowledge of all possible worlds nor that divine omnipotence implies the ability to select amongst them.⁸

A more compelling example concerns whether God can act contrary to his character, where "acting contrary to his character" does not mean just doing what is atypical. Consider the question, "Can God do evil?" There is a clear sense in which he cannot. If God is wholly good, then nothing in his character would ever motivate him to do what is evil. Furthermore if he is all-knowing, he cannot do it by accident; and he cannot be tricked or deceived into doing what is evil. One could simply say that he *will* not, as opposed to *cannot*, do what is evil, but, given his character, there is no way he could will this. One may rightly say, "God could will to do what is evil if he wanted to," but there is a clear sense in which he cannot want to do so. It may be logically possible for him to do so,⁹ but, given his actual character, it is not actually possible.

⁷The argument depends on the idea that selecting a possible world is different from actually making things happen as they do in that world. What causes things to happen in that world is a matter of the causal forces at work within it. If there are agents in that world with free will, then their free choices are self-determined by them. God's having selected the possible world in which particular choices are freely made does not make God a part of the causal fabric, one might say, of that world. God is not the one making the choices; they are freely determined by the agents in question. Hence those choices are indeed free even though God gets what he wants by selecting that possible world.

⁸There are difficulties with supposing that omniscience should include knowledge of all possible worlds, but I will not address that in this essay.

⁹If one defines "God" as necessarily being all-good, then it is logically impossible that such a being could do what is unmitigatedly evil (for no good reason), but it is also possible to view God's character, including his being all-good, as something that one discovers or comes to believe rather than insisting that this be true by definition.

Another biblical attribute of God is that he is wholly just. Thus, if the argument above is correct, it follows that God cannot act unjustly. Again, it may be logically possible for God to do what is unjust, but in a clear sense, he cannot do what is unjust. He cannot fail to fulfill what justice requires.

Such attributes may be thought of as being “internal constraints” on what God will do. Of course, if one uses the language of “constraints,” one needs to note that in this context it does not imply that God wants to do something and part of his character constrains him. “Constraints” in this context are parameters on what God wants. For God to act in accordance with his character is not a limitation on God, nor is it a denial of omnipotence.¹⁰

A further apologetic note will elaborate on the relevance of God's character to the problem of evil, and argue that William Rowe's formulation presumes a strongly utilitarian outlook which does not sufficiently take into account God's always acting in accordance with his character, particularly his being wholly just. I will suggest that accounting for his justice could help explain why God allows as much evil and suffering as he does.

The Crucial Question

The crucial question for the believer (or prospective believer) to ask with regard to the problem of evil and suffering is not, “Can I account for all of the evil and suffering in the world?;” the crucial question is, “Can I trust God, believing him to be all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, despite what I do not understand?” This is the crucial question. We are indeed led to believe from what Scripture says that we will not be able to understand why God allows all that he allows and does all that he does. Such lack of understanding, however, need not imply that such trust in God is unreasonable. If one has sufficient reason to trust God despite what one does not understand, then that trust is reasonable. This does not mean that it is unimportant to glean what understanding of the problem we can glean. If the problem were as huge as critics often make it appear, if this world were but an endless cycle of suffering, then one would have to have extremely good reasons to trust God in order for that trust to be reasonable. There is, however, much good in this world, and there are a variety of partial explanations which can help reduce the enormity of the problem. In a later apologetics note I will consider more carefully the matter of reasonable trust and will lay out what I consider to be components to an adequate response to the problem of evil and suffering.

¹⁰An important but difficult question which may be raised concerns how the various aspects of God's character interact. For instance, how do God's love and his justice combine? The best—indeed the only satisfactory way—of answering such questions is to seek to glean an answer from God's revelation of himself to us in the Bible. If God has not revealed himself to us, it is useless to think we could ever begin to plumb such matters. However such questions get answered, the central point above still holds: God cannot act contrary to his character.