

The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Justice in God and the Problem of Evil Apologetics Note # 6

An earlier Apologetics Note on the problem of evil and suffering included discussion of a formulation of the problem given by philosopher William Rowe. There I said that Rowe's formulation presumes a strongly utilitarian outlook and suggested that taking seriously justice in the character of God might provide a significant clue as to why God allows as much evil and suffering as he does. This essay is an elaboration of that thesis.

William Rowe's Argument

William Rowe's formulation of the Argument from Evil is:

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.¹

This formulation focuses on a particular facet of the problem—the problem of suffering and evil is broader than this—, but it is a strong argument for both premises seem, at least at first examination, to be quite plausible and the conclusion is logically entailed by the premises.

Utilitarian Ethics

As it stands this argument seems to presume a utilitarian view of ethics. Ethical utilitarianism views an act (thought or character trait) as being right or wrong in terms of the consequences to which it gives rise. For example, if telling a lie gives rise to better consequences than telling the truth (and the agent judges that this will be so), then, according to utilitarianism, telling a lie is the morally right thing to do.² It, however, is not important to elaborate further on this here.

Deontological Ethics

In contrast with utilitarian ethics there is what is called “deontological ethics.” The deontologist maintains that what makes an act right or wrong is not just the consequences that result from it. Consequences are often relevant to what is morally right or wrong, but, at root, right and wrong are intrinsic to the kinds of actions (and perhaps attitudes) in question. For example, telling a lie not only in general has negative consequences, it is itself wrong. This does not mean that consequences can never place a person in a moral dilemma. There may be situations where, a principle like *telling a lie is wrong* conflicts with another moral principle, e.g., *saving another's life if one can*. In such cases it may be hard to know which action is the right one to take, and in such cases an assessment of probable consequences may be a relevant factor, but the claim made by the deontologist is that consequences by themselves do not themselves determine right and wrong. The statement, “The end does not justify the means,” reflects a deontological posture towards ethics.³

¹Rowe, 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.

²Utilitarianism used to be much more popular amongst secular ethicists than it is today. One of the principal reasons for its decline in popularity is that it is not hard to imagine situations where a calculation of overall happiness (or overall human fulfillment) goes against quite strong moral intuitions.

For instance, one can imagine a very wealthy man in his late 80s and yet in good health who has willed his estate to a college that is financially in dire straits. The man has given to the college before but has made it clear that apart from relatively small contributions, the rest of his inheritance will come to the college only upon his passing. If one is a utilitarian, ought one to poison the old man so that the college gets the money that it so desperately needs. Rule utilitarians (see below) would point out the doing such a thing might have the unforeseen consequence of undermining the rule that one ought not to commit murder, but the self-sacrificing utilitarian might commit the murder and immediately confess to his deed and take the consequent prison sentence. In this way the general rule of not committing murder would not be significantly undermined. Alternatively he could protect against this consequence by not divulging to anyone his true motive, by stealing from the man a sizeable amount of money, and by fleeing the country with the money.

³A variant on utilitarian position called “rule utilitarianism” contends that overall good cannot be judged just by the calculated consequences of individual actions. So doing could have the long-term consequence of undermining principles that are important to preserve. For example if one lets telling a lie be viewed as morally acceptable when it is deemed to advance the overall good, this undercuts the rule “Do not lie,” and undercuts the confidence that one can have that one is being told the truth. The rule utilitarian, like the deontologist believes that, at least in most circumstances, the end ought not to be permitted to justify unethical means. But the reason for following the rules is still strictly utilitarian; what is right is still governed by seeking to achieve the most desirable consequences.

Rowe on Utilitarian vs. Deontological

Rowe's argument appears to be thoroughly utilitarian. Any instance of intense suffering that a wholly good being permits, and which he could have prevented, must have been permitted in order to bring about a greater good (or avoid a greater evil).⁴

In personal conversation with William Rowe I had the opportunity to ask him if his argument presumed a utilitarian approach to ethics. His reply was that it did not. Some actions might be viewed as intrinsically right or wrong, and this independently of the consequences. However, he went on to add that if the consequences are great enough (sufficiently bad or sufficiently good), the intrinsic rightness or wrongness can and should be outweighed by the consequences. In short, his reply was that one can be deontological in granting some intrinsic merit or demerit to given kinds of actions (thoughts, etc.) but that the deontological outlook must ultimately give way to a utilitarian calculation.

At this point it should be noted that the question of under what circumstances, if at all, one can be morally justified in overriding a clear moral principle or injunction is a difficult one. The deontologist might appeal to a more fundamental principle (also intrinsically right), but unless the deontologist embraces as her most fundamental principle a principle that at some point permits utility to trump all other considerations, there probably will be situations where even the deontological can feel sorely tempted to compromise the deontological outlook. There are difficult and important questions which arise here, and I will later return to Rowe's concession to the deontological perspective, but, for now, the point to underscore is that if one grants there are certain kinds of behavior that by their very character ought to be observed or avoided, then the rightness or wrongness of those actions is no longer a matter of simply asking about greater goods (or greater evils) that may be gained (or avoided).

This leads to the key suggestion in what follows.

The reason God allows so much evil and suffering may not be because allowing it achieves a greater good (or avoids a greater evil), but instead it may be because it is right to allow it, i.e. it would be unjust not to prevent it.

Rowe supposes that it could not possibly be right for God to allow the extent of evil and suffering that actually exists, but it is that supposition that will be challenged in what follows.

A Response Based on the Character of God

In my earlier Apologetics Note the contention was made that God cannot act contrary to his character. Whether or not one thinks it logically possible that God could do so, there is no possible way in which God would in fact act contrary to his character. Beings act as they are motivated to act, and if their motivations line up fully behind one course of action and fully against a contrary course of action, then the only way in which the being could take the contrary course of action would be for it to do so accidentally, or in a state of confusion, through being tricked or manipulated into doing so, or in some other way did so involuntarily. But none of these possibilities can arise for God, at least not the God that the Bible describes. Hence there is no possible way or circumstance where God would act contrary to his character.

In the earlier essay, I suggested that not only is it the case that God cannot do anything that is evil he also cannot do what anything that is unjust.⁵

The example given in the last footnote presents a problem for even the rule utilitarian, for if the one killing the old man accepts responsibility and takes the punishment normally given to murders, then the action is unlikely to undercut significantly the rule that a human being ought not to take the life of another human being. If the rule utilitarian were to view such rules as being intrinsically right, e.g., that taking the life of another person is intrinsically wrong, then she would have, in fact, abandoned the fundamental utilitarian principle that right and wrong is determined by overall outcomes. Whether some combination of utilitarian and deontological perspectives is yet possible is an interesting and important question. It is a question that will be broached in this essay but not pursued except insofar as it pertains to God.

⁴ Indeed, Rowe's argument, as stated, comes close to implying that if an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing God exists, then what we have in the world must be an optimal amount and distribution of suffering. Thus, if any diminishment of suffering would result in a better overall outcome, and if an all-good and all-powerful being would have known this in advance, then by Rowe's stipulation of what being "all-good" implies, such a being would have seen to it that this diminished amount of suffering would have been what was in fact actualized. Rowe's argument does not explicitly address whether an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing being would likewise bring about any increased suffering if it resulted in a greater good, but, with this slight change in the argument, the argument would imply that an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing being would see to it that the exact amount and distribution of suffering would be optimal. Put another way, the implication of such a being existing would be that this world of ours must be the best of all possible worlds.

⁵ What is just and unjust for God is not necessarily identical to what is just and unjust for us, but the present contention is that there is an order of justice in the very character of God and he will not act contrary to it. In other words, God may allow something that seems to us to be unjust, but if it were truly contrary to justice as it pertains to God, God could not, or at least would not, do it. The suggestion here is not that there is an order of justice independent of God and to which even God must submit, but rather that the order of justice is

That God will never do what is unjust rarely gets considered in discussions of the problem of evil, but the thesis of this essay is that it provides a possible direction in which the explanation may lie as to why God allows so much evil and suffering, an explanation that does not require there to be greater goods (or the avoidance of greater evils).⁶

Part of the reason why justice in the character of God is often ignored is that contemporary preaching often portrays God as motivated only by love. It becomes the governing principle in God, and everything gets interpreted as an expression of his love. Thus when God allows (or directly brings about) suffering as punishment, the punishment gets interpreted as the discipline of a loving parent and all punishment is interpreted as redemptive in intent.

It is, of course, true that the Bible speaks of God disciplining those he loves (Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6, 10), and the Bible speaks of God "not wanting anyone to perish..." (2 Peter 3:9). It is also true biblically that suffering (either inflicted or allowed) can be an expression of mercy. Thus, God's allowing suffering can be for the purpose of helping us see our need for God and turn to him (Psalm 107). Also the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), but this does not mean that God is only love, nor that God's perfect goodness consists only of love. If all that God does or permits is an expression of God's love, then one is left with the difficulty of explaining how the doctrine of hell can fit with this. God irrevocably consigning the unrepentant to eternal separation from himself hardly seems like an expression of love.⁷ There is also the problem that many of the passages that speak of the wrath of God and of God's judgment do not seem exclusively redemptive in intent. Even with Israel, although the judgment of God against Israel's wickedness does succeed in turning many back to God, for those who do not repent the outcome is their destruction.

If, however, one views God's judgment as a manifestation of his justice, and if one views the carrying out of justice by God as good, even when there is little or no chance of its being redemptive, then it is much easier to understand God's actions throughout the Bible as consistently good.

I will not argue the case further here, but the biblical perspective seems to be that God's perfect goodness (or one might say his righteousness or holiness) is the central characteristic of God. This goodness manifests itself in justice (in God's role as the perfect judge) and it manifests itself in love and mercy. God's goodness includes his love, but God's goodness is more than just love. God is both the loving father and the judge of all the earth.

A human illustration may help here. Suppose that a mother has a 20-year-old son who is charged with murder. Suppose that he is guilty and the evidence clearly indicates this. Next, suppose that the mother is also a court judge, and suppose that there are no conflict-of-interest rules that prevent her son from being tried in her court. Finally, suppose that she is obliged to preside in the murder trial. Being both mother and judge, she is not free simply to ask, "What would a loving mother do?" She must fulfill her role as the judge and uphold justice. One can think of the carrying out of justice, the ordering of a just sentence, as being a good thing, and it is, but the sentence is not made right because of greater goods that may or may not arise from it (e.g., reformation of the son, protection for society, or the deterring of others from committing murder). It is right because it is what the son justly deserves.⁸ Often when the problem of suffering and evil is

part of the very character of God.

⁶ It is worth noting here that if carrying out justice is a part of God's goodness, then one might argue that this carrying out of justice is the greater good that explains why God would allow the suffering and evil that he allows. If one were to take this tack then the thesis of this essay could rightly be understood as an attack on premise #1 in Rowe's argument. The rebuttal to Rose would then be that the plausibility of premise #1 rests in thinking that the greater goods achieved [or greater evils avoided] are utilitarian in character. But I am opting *not* to treat the carrying out of justice as a greater good, and this for two reasons. First, almost always, when people talk of greater goods (or avoidance of greater evils), what they have in mind are possible outcomes. Second, discussion about greater goods (or avoidance of greater evils) almost always presumes a comparative weighing of the positive vs. the negative, and hence the appeal to a greater good is made with the presumption that it *outweighs* the negative. But it will become apparent as this essay unfolds that, if the argument succeeds, it does so precisely because it challenges that idea of such a scale. To say that doing what is just can outweigh the suffering endured makes it sound as if the scale could tip the other way were the outcomes sufficiently undesirable. As noted earlier, Rowe contends that what is intrinsically right or wrong may be outweighed by outcomes, and more will be said about this later in the essay.

⁷ Of course, there are Christians who deny that anyone will be consigned to eternal separation from God, but such a position flies in the face of the abundant evidence that Jesus believed in the reality of hell and that many people would end up there. And of the relevant passages many survive the scalpel of even those who are hyper-skeptical with regard to what Jesus actually taught. If one thinks that Jesus was wrong on this, it is hard to see how one can have confidence in anything that he taught (other than by already believing it independently of Jesus' teaching). If Jesus was wrong about hell, why think he was right in speaking of eternal life for those who believe?

⁸ C.S. Lewis in an essay entitled "The Humanitarian Theory of Justice," argues against the "humanitarian theory" of punishment and for a retributive theory of punishment. Retributive punishment is punishing a person because he deserves it. The "humanitarian theory" maintains that punishing a person is justifiable only if some good comes from it. If you put a person in prison it needs to be for one of

raised, appeal is made to what a loving parent would do (an appeal made by both theists and atheists). But God is not just a loving parent; he both “embodies” (so to speak) the order of justice and is the one who rightly will judge all people. His character is the ground of justice as well as the source of love.

What difference does this make with regard to Rowe’s argument? If the right thing to do can easily be overridden, or ought to be overridden, whenever the consequences of not doing so become particularly bad, then appeal to intrinsic right and wrong or to the upholding of justice will not help much. Again, this is something that needs to be addressed, but first let’s consider what evidence there is biblically that what might be called justice in the very character of God does play a significant role in explaining why God does what he does, or why he allows what he allows.

Justice and the Cross

If God will judge everyone at the end of this life and will do so with justice, this is an obvious way in which justice in God impacts how he relates to us. However, God’s justice plays a crucial role at the heart of what Christians call “the gospel.” At the heart of the gospel is the death of Christ on the cross. Christians believe that it is through Christ’s death reconciliation with God is made possible (Col 1:21-22). Jesus “died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3), “gave his life a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45), is “our Passover lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7), “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24), became “a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13), was made by God “to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21), is “the atoning sacrifice (propitiation) for our sins” (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10; Rom. 3:25), came “to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26), is “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), “freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). Through Jesus’ death God “rescued us from the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13). Through the blood of Christ God will “purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9), “cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death” (Heb. 9:14). “By his wounds we have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24; Isaiah 53:5). The imagery used to describe what Christ accomplished for us on the cross is rich and varied and taps into a number of Old Testament themes.

But why was it necessary? Many presume that if God is omnipotent, then he can do anything that is logically possible; he can do anything that does not involve a logical contradiction. But there certainly seems to be no logical contradiction in God simply forgiving us. Couldn’t God have forgiveness and reconciled us to himself without all the suffering that Christ endured? The biblical answer is “no.” The suffering and death of Christ was required by the justice of God. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). To be forgiven and reconciled to God we must be pure and righteous, for God is a pure and holy God. The Bible describes God in his holiness and purity as “a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). Nothing that is not pure and holy can endure in the presence of a holy God. Not to be holy and to be in the full presence of God is to be destroyed. Furthermore, because God is the source of life, if our relationship with God is not restored, the just consequence for us will be death, first physical death, then spiritual death, and because God in his character is opposed to all that is evil, we justly deserve the wrath of God.

The problem is that relative goodness does not suffice to make us pure. The system of sacrifices in the Old Testament were designed to tell us that it is possible for our sin to be dealt by the death of another, but as the book of Hebrews asserts “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin” (Heb. 10:4) Instead they pointed to the one sacrifice that

the following reasons: to reform the individual, to prevent the person from doing further crimes (i.e. to protect society), or to deter others from committing a similar crime. If no such good comes from punishing the person, say, by incarcerating the person, then it is simply an act of revenge, a motivation unworthy of civilized people, or so the “humanitarian” theory maintains.

Lewis, first, argues that this approach to punishment does not imply that the criminal is treated any better. Indeed for the sake of reformation, protection and deterrence a person may be incarcerated for longer than what he deserves (on the old notion that a punishment is deserved). And on the retributive view of punishment the person committing a crime would at least know what kind of punishment to expect and it would be a punishment that is deemed by society as a fit punishment.

Second, and more importantly, he argues that to abandon the idea of retributive punishment is to lose the notion of *desert*, namely that any particular treatment is *deserved*. And if one loses the notion of desert, then one has lost any notion of justice. Justice is treating persons as they deserve to be treated. If punishment, or lack thereof, is disconnected from what the person deserves, then the concept of justice is lost. Further, if this notion of justice is lost with respect to negative treatment, it is also lost with regard to positive treatment. If how a person ought to be treated is disconnected from what the person deserves, then whether you reward a person, or treat a person positively, cannot be decided by asking what the person deserves; it must be answered in terms of the desirability of the anticipated outcomes of such a reward or positive treatment. Justice is something that nearly everyone believes is important, but if one does away with the notion of desert, then there is no justice.

For Christians justice and desert are not simply invented by human convention; they are rooted in the very character of God and in the order of his creation. Some ways of behaving are appropriate given how we have been created and certain ways of behaving are inappropriate. Of course, for many actions (and attitudes) one needs a stronger word than “appropriate,” but the idea is that certain ways of behaving and certain kinds of attitudes are right or fitting, and others are not, and that such standards are rooted in the character of God and, then, in the world God has created.

could take away our sin and that is Christ. We then justly deserved God's wrath, we deserved death, and nothing that we can do can give us the purity and holiness needed to be forgiven and restored into relationship with God.

The amazing claim of the gospel is that on the cross Christ took our sin upon himself, he bore the penalty of death which we deserved. If we by faith are united with Christ, not only does his death cleanse us from our sin (by taking it onto himself), he imparts into us his righteousness and gives us his life. Indeed he gives us the Spirit of God, which is also the Spirit of Christ, and thereby gives us the power to begin to live as God intends. We are not in ourselves righteous, but through union with Christ, we are viewed by God as righteous in Christ. As Paul says Christ is "our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). And, finally, it is through union with Christ that as Christ rose from the dead, so we shall rise from the dead, to live forever with God in the new heaven and new earth.

This, of course, raises a host of questions, amongst which are, how could the death of someone who is innocent justly deal with the guilt of another? And how can this make any sense? I will explore these questions in a further apologetics note, but for the purpose of this essay the point is that God may allow, indeed bring about suffering because justice requires it. The message of the gospel is that through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, the justice of God was met and his grace made available. The cross brings together God's justice and his love. That God "justifies the wicked" (Rom. 4:5), and this apart from anything they could do to merit this might seem to be the epitome of injustice, but Paul contends God "did it to demonstrate his justice" (Rom. 3:26).⁹

Finally, it should be noted here that the incarnation was also necessary. In the incarnation God identified with the human race. He took humanity upon himself. And this was crucial in two ways for the death of Christ to justly bring about our redemption. First, were an individual human being somehow to be sinless, that person's death might conceivably suffice to save one other person, but that Christ's death could make salvation available to all who have faith in him is due to Christ being both God and man. God, our creator, not just a human being, bore our sin on the cross, and it is because Jesus was God incarnate that union with him can result in our acquiring life and fellowship with God. Second, it also seems that it was essential that Jesus was fully human. Part of what made the death of Christ a just solution to human sin is that the penalty was born, not outside of humanity, but by one who, besides being God, was also human. The consequence of human rebellion of God was born by a human being, but the only human who could possibly do so, namely the one who was both God and man.

Satan's Role in a Fallen World

What other hints biblically are there that justice in the character of God's may be a significant factor in why God allows the suffering and evil that exists in our world?

One is the role the Bible indicates that Satan plays in the world today. One could postulate a greater-goods explanation, suggesting, say, that the influence of Satan demons in this world is beneficial to our spiritual growth, that it would be beneficial spiritually for us to have to struggle with the ploys of Satan as well as with our own fallen desires. Perhaps it makes our helplessness all that more evident and would encourage us to turn to the one who is able to deliver us

⁹ It is sometimes argued that justice and mercy are logical opposites. Mercy is not getting what we deserve and justice is getting what we deserve. Hence it can seem that to whatever degree God is merciful to that very degree he must also be unjust. This, however, is to fail to see that justice may be met in more than one way and that there can be a range of punishments (and rewards) that are compatible with justice. If a person is found guilty in a human court of law, the judge must issue a just sentence—to simply let the person go free with no penalty would be a miscarriage of justice—but the nature and the duration of the sentence is something around which the judge often has discretion. It is not the case that justice requires always requires the stiffest sentence that may be given. Having a range of sentences that may be given, the judge has the freedom to be merciful. This mercy is not to be arbitrary. It is to take into account special circumstances in the case and, importantly, can take into account how repentant the individual seems to be. In a similar way God's mercy is not just arbitrarily distributed; he is merciful towards anyone who comes to him in genuine repentance. It might be thought that being genuinely repentant ought to have no bearing on the justice of a lighter sentence vs. a harsher sentence, but in God's economy, in God's justice, it definitely seems to play an important role. Mercy is extended to those who turn to God in genuine repentance and who genuinely seek forgiveness. But it is important to see that forgiveness from God does not mean that justice may be ignored. What makes God's forgiveness of us consistent with his justice is that Christ took on himself the judgment we deserved. This itself, it is often argued, is unjust. I will not argue here for its justice other than to note that biblical notions of justice have a much stronger corporate element to them than is typically presumed by us in our very individualistic society. Even in our judicial context there are cases where another person can step in and pay what another owed, e.g., in the case of debt or reparations. The point here is that given that justice may in fact be met in more than one way and given that in many cases the severity of the sentence can vary and still be just, mercy and justice need not be incompatible. The repentant person can deserve a harsh sentence, in the sense that that harsh sentence is fitting for the crime, but the judge can be free to give a lighter sentence, thereby extending mercy because of the particular circumstances and these can include whether the person is genuinely repentant. In the case of the cross, God's mercy is extended by God, finding another way in which the sentence of death that we deserved could be met.

from the great adversary. However, nothing in the Bible gives any hint of this. An alternative is that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God they were aligning themselves with Satan, the serpent, and because of this Satan legitimately has some influence upon them and their descendants. Jesus refers to Satan (the Devil) as “prince of this world” and speaks of Satan’s demise in conjunction with what he, Christ, would accomplish on the cross, “now the prince of this world will be driven out” (Jn. 12:31). Such language of a limited reign that God has given to Satan comports the idea that such influence is his just due. If this is correct, then the limited power that Satan has been granted is not to be explained via some supposed greater good that is achieved, but because justice in God entails it.

The Role of Faith in a Fallen World

Another biblical hint is that God chooses to work through people who put their trust in him. Again, one might seek to explain this by saying that God wants us to learn to take responsibility for things and wants us to find our work significant, but if the salvation of people typically comes through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:13-15), why would God leave such an important task to human beings? Those who profess faith in Christ are in most cases woefully indifferent when it comes to the proclamation of the gospel.

That another explanation is possible is suggested by the various references to the importance of prayer and of faith on the part of God’s people. There are a number of instances where, when Jesus does healings or miracles, there is explicit reference to the presence of faith, either on the part of the person being healed or by someone else close to that person. The promises about prayer often make a connection with faith. The gospels tell us that Jesus could not do many miracles in his hometown of Nazareth because of their lack of faith.

Matt. 13:58: And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Mark 6:5: He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

The question this raises is what is meant by “could not”? Is faith, at least in general, a requisite condition for the manifestation of God’s miraculous work in a fallen world? There are enough instances of God acting where there is no obvious reference to faith that it seems unlikely that faith is always required, but there are plenty of indications that it plays a significant role. The broader question is whether there is something about justice in the character of God that enters into the question as to how God interacts with a fallen world. God generally choosing to work through people who have faith in him may be due not simply to greater-goods considerations but may be due to the fact that this is a fallen world.

A Reflection on Moral Freedom

A reflection, that I admit is extra-biblical but which seems plausible and is not inconsistent with biblical teaching, is the idea that when God gave us significant moral freedom, part of his giving us that freedom, justly, is that we live with the consequences of our actions. If this is so, then God will not (or at least in general will not) manipulate the outcomes of our actions so as to optimize the results.

Consider the following example. Suppose I were to pull out a gun and fire it point-blank at the chest of a person in front of me. If it were incumbent on an all-good God to make sure that no intense suffering occurs unless it is for a greater good (or the avoidance of a greater evil), then if God allows me to kill the person, it must be because, despite appearances, it was for a greater good (or the avoidance of a greater evil). Now it might be that for God values human freedom and of our learning that our actions have consequences, but it seems that God could do the following. He could turn the bullet into rubber in mid-flight. When it hits the person, the impact would hurt, but the person wouldn’t be killed or permanently injured. Indeed, the person might come over and clobber me, in which case I would have the opportunity to learn to behave better next time.

Of course, it doesn’t appear that God does this sort of thing. It is logically possible that a greater-goods explanation is correct, but it does not, at least to us, seem in most cases the person’s being killed will bring about the greatest ultimate good. Instead, however, of supposing that greater goods warrant God allowing such murders, it seems plausible that when God gave us significant moral freedom part of what the justice in his character entails is that he lets us live with the consequences of our actions even if they those consequences are severe. Thus, it may be that the reason God allowed the Holocaust to occur, which involved the killing of six millions Jews (and others) is that justly has us live with the consequences of our actions, even Hitler’s actions. This does not mean that God is pleased with what Hitler did; indeed, the teaching of the Bible is that God hates all evil, and that his heart goes out to all who unjustly suffer. It does not mean that God wants us to sit idly by in the face of human evil. If there is something about God and his relationship to us in a fallen world which accounts for his allowing such instances of evil to unfold, it does not follow that this also applies to us. Indeed, we are called by God to oppose evil and to defend the powerless and the oppressed. Nor, even if the speculation here is correct, does it imply that God never intervenes to ameliorate the consequences of bad actions, but it does imply that when God does so intervene there must be special circumstances which justly permit such intervention. The presence of

faith may be one such factor, but not the only one. It is also clear that faith may be present and God not intervene. Is this due to a greater good that will be achieved by God's not intervening. Perhaps, but perhaps there are other factors of which we are not aware.

If the above speculation is correct, it is important to note that mystery remains., but the problem has shifted. The Bible does not give us a clear map as to why and when God intervenes, nor as to what circumstances need be present when God does so. Thus, we are still left with considerable mystery as to why God does what he does and allows what he allows, but the mystery is significantly different from what it would be if we thought that every instance of suffering needed to result in a greater consequent good or result in the avoidance of a great consequent evil. No longer is there the pressure to suppose that, despite appearances, this is the best of all possible worlds.

Suffering in a Fallen World

The Bible does not teach us that this is the best of all possible worlds. It does not teach us that every instance of suffering or intense suffering is actually needed to bring about a greater good (or avoid a greater evil). In fact, it tells us that this is a fallen world, a world in which even the world itself cries out (metaphorically speaking) for redemption. It still reflects some of the goodness of its creator, and human beings still in ways reflect the image of God (this due to God's "common grace"). Also it is true that God is able to bring some good out of every situation for those who trust him, but this does not mean that every situation is actually good or is in the long run for the best. The biblical account portrays this world as being far from the world that God desires it to be. Indeed, the short explanation—and a biblical one—as to why there is so much evil and suffering in the world is that it is a fallen world.

An illustration that, at least for some may be helpful, comes from the Star Trek television serials (from Next Generation, onward). The space ship has a "holodeck," a part of the ship that generates a virtual reality that not only looks real but which feels real. One can do combat drills with opponents that can hit you, even knock you over, and when you get hit, it can hurt. Nonetheless the holodeck has "safety protocols" that prevent one from being seriously injured or hurt. Upon occasion, however, something happens and the safety protocols get turned off exposing the crew to serious injury or death.

The holodeck illustration does not match either the separation from God that resulted in the Fall nor the inner change that took place in Adam and Eve when they rebelled against God, but it can be an image of what can happen when the protection of God is removed. In the garden, Adam and Eve were both in close communion with God and under his protection. When they chose to disobey God and their relationship with God was broken, they were thrust out of the garden and into a world where the protection of God was removed. They then found themselves in a dangerous world, one where tsunamis, earthquakes, etc. do take place. For the human race, it is as though "the safety protocols had been turned off." In this world there is disease and injury is possible and death will come to all of us.

I once heard a TV news reporter interviewing a 10-year Christian boy who was dying of cancer. The reporter asked the boy, "Don't you ever ask, 'Why me?'" The boy's rather amazing response was "Why not me?" I am not sure what lay behind his comment, but it is the kind of response that I would hope that I would make if I were to find myself in his position. We live in a fallen world where tsunamis and cancer are realities. God gives general promises to care for and to bless his people if they are faithful to him. And I believe that these general promises are true, but this does not mean that Christians are exempt from such things as tsunamis and cancer. God does not exempt Christians from the dangers of this fallen world, and my hope would be that if God permitted my acquiring terminal cancer that I would be able to say, "Why not me?" After all, I know a God who is able to carry me through to the day when suffering and tears will be no more.

Prior to his death Jesus said to his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Returning to William Rowe

I have yet to come back to William Rowe's supposition that even if an element of deontological value (or disvalue) be given to certain kinds of behavior or attitudes, that a wholly good being would override these norms if the consequences became sufficiently severe.¹⁰ I will just say a couple of things about this here.

One is that people are sometimes inclined to think that justice is at root like a social contract with arrangements of fairness that are mutually beneficial for everyone. I don't know if William Rowe takes this kind of approach to

¹⁰ I have also not addressed the question as to how or why "natural evils" came to exist. I have suggested that our suffering from them may be a consequence of the Fall, but I have not addressed the problem of animal suffering and death. Nor have I addressed whether death and suffering was a part of God's created order prior to the Fall, and, if they were, how one squares this with God being all-good. I will to address the topic of animal suffering at another time.

understanding justice, but if one takes this approach, then it certainly seems that Rowe would be right in thinking that the “good” or “right” norm should be overridden if the consequences of keeping to the rule or norm become sufficiently bad.

But the idea that what a person deserves is a matter of social contract is at best problematic. If ideas of justice vary from one society to another and if justice is a matter of social contract, then, where societies differ, there can objectively speaking be no right or wrong. Deserving a particular treatment is then just what the society decides the person “deserves.” But Christians are not alone in thinking that there is an objectivity to justice, that it is not defined by social consensus. (Indeed, I would argue that this presumed objectivity is part of the conventions of the proper use of both the language of justice and the language of moral obligation. But that is not something I will pursue further here.)

A second thing to note is that because individual persons are not the embodiment of the law, it is possible for us to choose to go against the law, be it law in the civil sense or in the moral sense. Even in the illustration mentioned earlier of the mother who is also a judge, although she has an obligation to execute justice, she could choose to abrogate her responsibility and not pronounce sentence against her son, is also a judge, could choose to disregard her duties as a judge and give a verdict that violated what justice demanded. What makes it possible for people to defy or “override” a law is that they are not the law. However, in the case of God, God is not separate from the principles of justice; they are part of his very character. If it is in his character always to will do what is right and just, then he cannot (definitively will not) choose to do what is unjust. If it were part of the mother’s character that she always does what is just, then she would never act unjustly, or at least not intentionally.

Of course, one can object that if the consequences of doing what is “just” is sufficiently bad, then surely the right thing to do would be to override it. But this is not obvious, or at least it is not obvious if one thinks that utilitarian considerations are not the bedrock of right and wrong. If the only way to save the lives of ten people is to kill one innocent person, would killing that person be the right thing to do? One could argue that killing him would be unjust but, nonetheless, the right thing to do given the circumstance. However, if the utilitarian outlook is not embraced, it is not clear that killing the person is right. Now, I do think that, for most of us, as the number of people whose lives could be saved mounts there would come a point where we would be willing to kill the innocent person. But, again, we as humans are not the ground of justice and hence we may choose to violate what we take to be just even when we view justice as being independent of what particular societies may happen to embrace.¹¹ This is not so of God. Justice itself is rooted in his very character.

A third and final, thing to note is that the best way to answer the question as to whether God ever would, or even could, override aspects of justice in his own character is to reflect on what God has revealed to us in the Bible. Despite the proposal I have just given, the Bible does not give us a definitive answer on this. However, if we return to the topic of the cross, we have at least a strong indication of the depth of God’s commitment to upholding justice.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays to the Father, “If it be possible let this cup pass from me,” the cup being the suffering and death that Jesus is about to face and also the burden of bearing on himself the sins of the world and experiencing the separation from God and his judgment against sin. It seems clear that the biblical answer to Jesus’ plea is that it is not possible for this cup to pass from Jesus, at least not if Jesus is to do what was needed to make possible the restoration of humankind back into relationship with God. But if one were to suppose that justice is something that he could override, then why wouldn’t God simply have chosen to forgive human beings and miraculously make them pure and holy? Wouldn’t that have been the far more loving thing to do? Who of us would allow a son or daughter to go through an ordeal like crucifixion, if it were in our power to avoid such a thing? That God the Father was willing to send his Son to identify with our humanity and then to suffer and die on the cross seems to indicate that God was not free to override justice. This was not due to a deficiency of love of God the Father for God the Son, for surely the Father’s love for the Son

¹¹ A question which arises here builds on the observation that although justice is part of God’s character, so is love and mercy. Surely the loving thing for God faced with something like the Holocaust would be to intervene and prevent the carnage. If one suggests that God did not do so because it would have been contrary to justice as it pertains to free human actions, doesn’t this place justice as being more fundamental to God’s character than love? Why should one assume that justice trumps love but that love can never trump justice. This is a good question. It gets into the mystery of how justice and love relate in the character of God. According to Jesus one of the errors of the Pharisees was that they allowed strict adherence to certain laws, e.g., not working on the Sabbath, to block them from doing what love called for. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27) But it also must be remembered that Jesus never suggests that the demands of justice can be overridden. What is not clear is what justice in the character of God entails. I for one, do not think that God is internally conflicted, torn between the demands of love and the demands of justice, but be that as it may, we do not know with any clarity the mind of God with respect to how justice and love cohere in God himself. It would be a mistake to so elevate justice in our view of God that God is reduced to being a machine that measures out justice by some set of rules unaffected by the love God has for us. Again, the cross is instructive both in its illustrating the imperative that justice be fulfilled and in demonstrating the depth of God’s love for us. In the cross God finds a way to extend mercy without subverting justice.

is as great as his love for us. And there is no greater demonstration of God's love for us than what he did for us through Christ on the cross. If, then, God's commitment to fulfilling the justice that is rooted in himself runs as deep enough to send his Son to suffer on the cross, then it should not be surprising if God's commitment to justice would allow human beings to suffer the consequences of their actions. And just as his sending Christ into the world to die on the cross was not incompatible with his love for the Son, so his allowing us to suffer as we do in this fallen world is not incompatible with his love for us.

Final Thoughts

The speculations above might be mistaken. One of the lessons from the story of Job is that we should not expect to understand all of God's ways. Our understanding is limited. Nonetheless the above speculation is consistent with what has been revealed to us in the Bible. It is certainly not the full answer and it may not even be the right answer, but it does offer a direction in which at least a significant piece of the answer may lie as to why God allows so much evil and suffering. The case against Christian theism from the problem of evil and suffering is strongest if the atheist is able to contend, "Not only do you not have an answer to the problem, you are not able to come up with even a direction in which an adequate solution may lie." But the above speculation does at least provide a direction in which a significant part of the answer may lie, and, again, it is speculation that is consistent with biblical teaching.

I sketched the above argument in a debate once and in the Q&A a person who was trained in philosophy commented that she thought that my explanation was clever but rather fanciful and *ad hoc*.¹² But I pointed out that if the problem of evil is understood as an attack on the internal coherence of Christian beliefs, it is not at all illegitimate philosophically for me to appeal to anything that is a part of the set of beliefs that Christians in fact embrace. I also noted that my proposal is not *ad hoc*. It is not a proposal created out of a clever imagination, it is (for the most part) an appeal not to extra-biblical ideas but to things that Christians already believe.

In conclusion, the thesis of this essay has been that it is a mistake to assume that if a wholly good God allows suffering and evil, it must be because greater goods arise out of the suffering and evil (or greater evils are avoided). The reason why God allows suffering and evil, and why he allows as much as he does, may be rooted in the justice that is part of God's character. His not intervening, or at least his not usually intervening, may be because allowing the evil and suffering is the just and right thing to do.

¹² *Ad hoc* speculation is speculation made to rescue a theory from adverse evidence and is speculation that does not flow naturally from the theory itself.