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BOOK REVIEW

Eleonore Stump: Wandering in darkness: narrative and the problem of suffering

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Ivan Karamazov's statement in *The Brothers Karamazov* of his "rebellion" against God has become a canonical text in modern discussions of theodicy. In that passage, Ivan's approach to the problem of evil is marked by a few key elements. First, he focuses on particular narratives of human suffering. Second, the narratives he refers to all involve the suffering of young children. Third, the stories all end tragically after the children are unspeakably mistreated by adults. Finally, on the basis of these stories, Ivan rejects any divine plan for the universe that requires such suffering on the part of children.

One could think of Eleonore Stump as, in most ways, the antithesis of Ivan Karamazov in her recent major work on the problem of suffering, *Wandering in Darkness*. In this book, she does follow Karamazov in making the use of narratives central to her discussion. However, she omits children from her account of human suffering, and instead focuses on stories about mentally fully functional adult human beings. These narratives all involve significant kinds of human suffering and loss, but the stories conclude positively, not tragically. Then, on the basis of such endings, Stump argues in defense of there being a justified divine purpose behind such suffering. While Ivan Karamazov rebels against God in light of specific narratives of child suffering, Stump seeks to convince her readers that God's love and providential care is behind all cases of unwilling, innocent suffering that come to mentally fully functional adults.

Before turning to the heart of her view of the problem of suffering (it is specifically the problem of suffering, rather than the problem of evil, that is her concern,) a few preliminary items need to be mentioned. Stump emphasizes that her book is, using Alvin Plantinga's distinction, a defense and not a theodicy. She does not claim that she is articulating the "actual intentions and reasons for allowing evil on the part of God"

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(p. 19), but rather she is giving a possible explanation from a Christian perspective to account for the suffering we find in our world. The particular defense she offers is one based in the thought of Aquinas. Stump limits the focus of this Thomistic defense solely to the suffering of mentally fully functional adults who suffer unwillingly and innocently (p. 378). She writes that this means her defense bypasses consideration of "the suffering of animals, infants, or adult human beings who are not mentally fully functional" (p. 4). She does this because for her defense it is crucial to be able to have access to the thoughts of those who are suffering, and the challenges in this regard presented by these other groups of beings are significant. However, Stump does not rule out that the defense she develops could be also applied to the suffering of infants, non-mentally fully functional adults, or animals. At the same time, though, she does state that theodicies or defenses may not be a one-size-fits-all proposition. That is to say, maybe there is one religious explanation to be given for the suffering of mentally fully functional adults, and another, say, for that of infants.

Having addressed these basic issues, we turn now to the essence of Stump's defense. Central to her thinking is a high notion of God's omnipotence. This view of omnipotence is seen in the way Stump regularly refers to God "allowing" suffering to take place. When Stump makes such references, she is not in an abstract way asking "Why does God allow human beings in general to suffer?" Rather, she focuses on God deciding to allow suffering to take place in a specific person's life at a precise moment. One key example of this is found in her discussion of the story of Job. Stump writes that "God allows Job to suffer from the raiders as he does because God sees that this suffering can be turned into a benefit for Job" (pp. 393–394).

God would allow suffering to befall Job or others because, according to Aquinas, "all suffering is medicinal" (p. 399). For those who are already in relationship with God, suffering provides the possibility of them seeking and finding a deeper, closer union with God. For those who are alienated from God and consequently from themselves, the presence of suffering in their lives can provide the prompt for them to turn to God. It is because of this "medicinal" aspect of suffering that Stump writes, "On the Thomistic defense, even the worst and most apparently hopeless suffering has a point" (p. 477). So, if "a sufferer were single-mindedly rational in seeing what God was giving him through his suffering and were whole-hearted in responding to it, he would be willing to accept it" as the divinely-intended gift that it is (p. 375). However, humans are free, and have the choice as to how they will respond to the suffering that comes into their lives. It is because of this fact that while "[s]uffering can contribute to spiritual regeneration and growth … it cannot guarantee them" (p. 459).

It is this matter of humans' response to suffering that leads to the importance of narratives for Stump. She is particularly critical of someone simply looking at the bare, objective facts of a case of great suffering and assuming that the suffering in question is pointless or meaningless, and, as such, provides evidence against the truth of theism. Stump stresses the importance, instead, of moving beyond the bare facts of the occurrence of the suffering itself to look at how that suffering fits into the larger narrative of the sufferer's life. In a central portion of the book, she does precisely this by analyzing the suffering encountered by four biblical characters: Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany. For Stump, the stories about these four figures serve to provide "an iconic representation of the panoply of human suffering" (p. 375), and,

in the end, each character emerges with a deeper, more glorious relationship with God as a result of the suffering that comes into his or her life. Stump moves beyond biblical narratives as well to consider a handful of other cases where people come to see the suffering in their lives as an opportunity for growth and development, or where the suffering provided the opportunity for the person eventually to flourish in a previously unanticipated way. These cases include not only religious believers such as John Milton and John Hull, but also non-believers like Cory Friedman and Claiborne Park.

In terms of strengths of this work, one point that immediately comes to mind is the impressive, wide-ranging nature of Stump's scholarship. One encounters not only medieval philosophy and the problem of evil here, but also detailed discussions of topics such as mirror neurons and autism, in addition to presentations of recent scholarship on the nature of love, shame, and trauma. Then, with regard to the specific content of the book, a number of sections stand out for their interesting or thought-provoking quality. For example, Stump develops a contrast between Dominican and Franciscan ways of knowing (here she identifies the Franciscan way with the use of narratives), and her discussion gives an insightful way to think about these two closely related religious orders. Stump also interprets the story of Abraham and Isaac by placing it in the broader context of all of God's addresses to Abraham throughout the course of Genesis. This approach definitely provides a new, fruitful angle on this oft-considered passage. And, in general, I find Stump's basic point about the good that not only can but does come out of some specific instances of horrible suffering to be a helpful corrective to the temptation automatically to view cases of extreme suffering as pointless or meaningless.

However, in terms of an evaluation of Stump's defense itself, one can at the very best say that her argument is incomplete. This may seem like a strange claim to make about an extended book such as this one that contains careful, detailed formulations throughout. Yet there are at least three major ways in which *Wandering in Darkness* bypasses key issues that need to be addressed before one could judge the merits of Stump's position. I will touch on each of these three in turn.

First, while Stump claims her defense covers all cases of unwilling, innocent suffering on the part of fully mentally functioning adults, a consideration of the narratives she focuses on in her book shows that, in fact, she is only dealing with a limited range of adult suffering. In terms of the biblical and non-biblical narratives to which she gives primary attention, my guess is that it is only the story of Job that would immediately come to mind as the sort of extreme case that has led to the formulation of the problem of suffering as we know it. This is not to deny that suffering of a significant sort is present in these other narratives, such as the autism from which Claiborne Parks' daughter suffers, or the blindness which struck John Hull. However, the various stories which serve as the key examples in *Wandering in Darkness* are primarily about individuals dealing with disappointment, grief, illness, and loss simply on an individual level. The book does not give sufficient consideration to systemic, societal evils, repeating cycles of harsh abuse, or cases of vicious, heinous moral evil. This is significant because it would be much more difficult for Stump to argue for benevolently intended, divinely "allowed" suffering in cases like these. For example, would Stump say that God allowed, for some range of "medicinal" benefits, the thousands

of cases of torture, murder, and disappearances that occurred in Chile during the reign of Pinochet? Or, would she argue that in each case of a woman being sold into sexual slavery that God is allowing this to happen because this may lead the woman to the benefit of a closer relationship with God? Questions of this sort can, of course, be greatly multiplied—I here am only offering two examples. Stump may have ready responses to questions such as these, but, based on reading this book, I am not sure what those answers would be.

Second, *Wandering in Darkness* would benefit from a more detailed discussion of the role that God's knowledge plays in the divine decision to allow instances of suffering. As it stands, this major topic is dealt with only in a section less than three pages long, in addition to a handful of footnotes. This topic of God's knowledge is so crucial because of the question of what God knows in advance of allowing suffering to happen to an individual. Does God know exactly how people will react to situations of suffering before God allows those instances of suffering to take place? That is to say, does God know whether an individual will be led closer to God by said suffering, or will he or she end up crushed in spirit and in turn distance themselves from God? Stump argues that in Aquinas's thought God is not seen to possess middle knowledge (p. 564), so God cannot in advance of allowing suffering to take place know how the individual will react to that suffering. However, unanswered questions still remain for the Thomistic defense Stump presents. If God allows an instance of suffering, does God then at that point foreknow how things will turn out for the sufferer? If so, if God sees that the allowed suffering will indeed eventually crush the sufferer's soul, can God fix the situation, or is the die already cast? Further, to what extent is God taking significant risks in allowing cases of suffering?

This second topic leads into the third. When considering questions such as the previous ones about the eventual outcome suffering leads to in an individual's life, an issue that arises for a defense like Stump's is the level of success that God would be expected to have in allowing the vast number of cases of innocent suffering that have occurred over the course of human history. What percentage of these cases would need to result in people becoming closer to God for this strategy of allowing suffering to be seen as justified? Or, conversely, what percentage of cases leading sufferers away from God would there need to be to raise significant questions about the nature and the existence of God? Obviously, no precise answer can be given to questions such as these, but that does not mean we cannot provide at least some ballpark sense of where we stand. At one point Stump writes, "if it turned out that most suffering really is pointless, as many people suppose, that would be evidence against the Thomistic defense" (p. 457). Elsewhere she states that "if our own experience or the experience of others were always only of psychic disintegration in consequence of suffering, that would count against the defense" (p. 460). However, these are pretty low bars to set for the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God presented in Stump's defense. Why would we not expect this God to be primarily successful in the employment of the medicinal means of suffering? Based on the narrative examples Stump focuses on, with their uniformly positive outcomes, it seems like we should be able to do so. A fuller explanation of these matters from Stump would greatly assist the reader in evaluating her Thomistic defense.