

# The Problem of Evil and Suffering:

## Gaining Perspective

### Apologetics Note #4

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This is the first of several apologetics notes on the problem of evil and suffering<sup>1</sup> 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 and/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 the holocaust 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, his 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 which is being addressed here is a philosophical/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.<sup>3</sup> 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 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Possible candidates for such "greater goods" include freedom of the will and virtues 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. learned fears or distress when offspring are threatened) but such suffering is of enormous import for humans. Our capacities to anticipate possible future states of affairs, to fear such things as cancer, 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.

(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, of spiritual death, 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, at least to us, 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. Can 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 in general to have prevented the holocaust.) Alternatively, couldn't God have prevented the holocaust by, say, having Hitler die at birth? Can one believe that the lesson to be learned about human moral depravity warranted allowing the atrocity? Can the reduction in anti-semitism after the war be thought to warrant it? Can the courage demonstrated by Schindler and others warrant it? Can it be warranted by all such goods taken collectively? It does not seem so. 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, but 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.<sup>6</sup>

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? (Rowe's argument is in terms of intense suffering, but even if we just think about intense physical pain, the premise is quite strong.) The problem with rejecting premise #2 is that goodness, if it means anything, is concerned with the welfare of others, or perhaps overall welfare. 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 judgment which is reasonable given the data one has. The difficulty arises either when one doesn't have sufficient data to make an informed judgment or when one is lacking data which one should perceive as being 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.

Regarding premise #1, an over-hasty judgment might arise at two points. One concerns the judgment regarding the value of overall outcomes. 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 (via 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. We want our children to develop good character, and if we are wise, we allow them to undergo some pain and suffering, but we do not wish on them intense, or at least not prolonged, suffering. We want them, overall, 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 pain?

Having said this, one should pause and ask whether there might not be greater goods which are relevant to God or to God's actions 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. Indeed the analogy is appealed to by both sides of the debate. This is all well and good"significant points can be made by use of the analogy. But there are significant ways in which God's relationship to us is unlike the relationship of parent to child and unlike the relationships which exist between 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 which may make for an over-hasty judgment regarding premise #1 concerns the matter of divine omnipotence and what God is free to do. (As it turns out, this point is closely related to the last one.) 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 topic of free will. Is it logically possible for God to create beings with free will while guaranteeing that they make only choices he wants? There are those who have argued that it is logically possible, but this does not imply that it is actually possible.<sup>7</sup> Another, and 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?" I contend not just that he will not, but that he cannot. If God is wholly good, then he cannot do what is evil. It may well be logically possible for him to do so, but this does not mean that it is actually possible. One might object saying, "If God wanted to do evil, he could." That statement is true, but he cannot want to do evil. There is no external power that could coerce God to do it, nor that could trick God into it, and there is nothing in him which could motivate such an action.

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. He cannot fail to fulfil what justice requires. Both this and what was said about God and evil imply that there are what might be called "internal constraints" on what God is free to do. If "constraint" tends to imply *external* constraint, then perhaps one needs a different word, but the point being made here should be clear enough: For God to act in accordance with his character is not a limitation on God, nor is it a denial of omnipotence.<sup>8</sup>

Turning to the problem of evil and suffering, the question becomes what relevance might this have. I suggest that it could make a huge difference and will develop this idea further in the next note.

### 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 for that trust itself 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 the next 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.

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### Footnotes

1. For brevity I will occasionally shorten "the problem of evil and suffering" to the more traditional expression, "the problem of evil." ([back](#))
2. To 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. ([back](#))
3. For 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. ([back](#))

4. See for instance J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," first published in *Mind* 64 (1955). Reprinted in a number of anthologies. ([back](#))

5. One 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. ([back](#))

6. Rowe, 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. ([back](#))

7. The argument for its being logically possible hinges on two assumptions. One is that God knows all possible worlds. The second is that in creating the world God was able to select whichever possible world he liked. The argument then proceeds with the contention 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 the possible world.

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. It may be logically possible for God to have that broader omniscience and that broader omnipotence, but if he does not, then God is not free both to create free agents and to guarantee that those free choices match what God desired. (I have not addressed the doctrine of God's sovereignty over all of history. It is clearly taught in Scripture. But it is also clearly taught that God is grieved and at times angered by things that human beings sometimes do. Unless all such language is simply feigned displeasure, one cannot conclude divine sovereignty implies that all that happens is what God desires.) ([back](#))

8. An 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.) But, however such questions get answered, the central point above still holds: God cannot act contrary to his character. ([back](#))