

The Problem of Moral Evil and Suffering: A Christian Theistic Defense

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The problem of suffering and evil in the world is, without question, problematic to the Christian position. Suffering, pain, and evil seem to be unavoidable. When we lose a loved one, we may experience intense psychological pain that overwhelms us. And, naturally, it is common to react passionately to such frank horrors as those carried out in Auschwitz under Hitler's Third Reich. The same can be said of Pol Pot's Cambodian genocide or the many other atrocities that have been perpetrated across the globe and throughout the ages.

Addressing the problem of evil and suffering is made all the more difficult because of the emotions evoked by the subject. Underlying heartache often causes us to abandon logic and lose ourselves in bitterness and despair. Thus, the problem of human suffering poses both objective and subjective challenges that make it a thorny issue no matter where one chooses to lay the blame.

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Why do people sometimes suffer and die in agonizing or seemingly pointless ways? When confronted with the question of why God would allow such evil and suffering to exist, many Christians have no answer. The fact that a Christian does not have a ready answer to the problem of suffering and evil is not itself evidence

against the existence of a transcendent Being. After all, even if there are good reasons for God to allow suffering, why should a theist be the first to know?[1]

A skeptic who claims that suffering in the world invalidates a belief in God must press the argument further. Indeed, they must demonstrate that the mere existence of evil in the world makes belief in God *irrational* or *unreasonable*. However, to do this, the skeptic must show that it is *impossible* or, at the very least, *unlikely* that God has sufficient reasons for permitting evil.[2]

The present paper will be confined to two topics: (1) human suffering—especially of the type that is caused by moral evil, and (2) possible reasons why an all-good, all-powerful God (i.e., the God of Christian theism) might allow such suffering. The topics of *natural evil*[3] and *animal suffering* will not be considered in the current essay.

Definition of Terms

“Any existing condition where people are kept from achieving what they ought or desire to be can be viewed as a type of suffering.”

Physical Pain is an unpleasant sensory experience that is often associated with actual or potential tissue damage. While it is usually undesirable for most species, sometimes pain acts for human benefit. For example, reflexive pain occurs when we involuntarily jerk our hands away from a fire before suffering serious injury. Indeed, pain often alerts us to the fact that there is something wrong with our body, thus prompting us to seek immediate and necessary relief or medical attention. In other cases, pain may be recognized and welcomed as something we need or want. Without this type of pain, we would not know, for example, that we have a sprained ankle or suffer from acute appendicitis. Therefore, not all pain and, hence, not all pain is unneeded, unwanted, or unwarranted.

Suffering. For this paper, suffering will be defined as *psychological pain*, which may or may not be brought about by physical pain. In other words, physical pain and psychological pain may be experienced differently. The author will distinguish between the *pain* experienced by animals and the *suffering* experienced by humans. While both humans and animals experience pain, the extent of the “psychological reactions” to pain by animals and whether or not they lead to states like introspection, depression, mental anxiety, or despair is unknown. While animal pain is undoubtedly an important consideration for all who respect and seek to protect the animal kingdom, such pain may not lead to the same kind of *suffering* that we see in humans and, therefore, will be considered separately in a future essay.

According to philosopher Eleanore Stump, to suffer means *to be kept from being what one ought or desires to be*.[\[4\]](#) Chronic medical conditions, long-term physical and mental abuse, and the “pain” of losing a loved one are examples of the type of pain that may lead to human suffering. However, not all suffering violates a person’s will or desires. There are some who *voluntarily* suffer to achieve a desired end. For example, athletes and women who bear children may gladly accept pain and suffering as necessary to become what they willingly desire (i.e., a great athlete or mother).[\[5\]](#)

Moral evil. For this paper, moral evil consists of free actions that are contrary to God’s nature, will, or both.[\[6\]](#) Moral evil is a product of *free human activity* that may be perpetrated against others (e.g., armed robbery, torture, murder) or is self-directed (e.g., drug addiction).

Moral evil can be distinguished from *natural evil* (i.e., that precipitated by natural disasters). The present paper will only deal with moral evils and will save a discussion of natural evils for a future paper.

Theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to demonstrate that there are *morally sufficient reasons* for God to allow evil and suffering in the *actual world*. The current paper is not a theodicy and will not attempt to explain why God allows suffering and evil in the present world. It would seem presumptuous on my part to claim I know God’s reasons for allowing evil. Indeed, it may be beyond the capacity of finite humans to fully understand the intentions of an infinite God apart from explicit revelation.

Theistic defense. A theistic defense proposes *possible explanations* for why an all-good, all-powerful God might allow evil, pain, and suffering in a “putatively possible” world. A *putatively possible* world is a world much like our own where the Christian God exists. It is a hypothetical world that is consistent with the Christian worldview and where one can propose possible reasons for the problems at hand, even though they might not be the actual reasons of God.

The current paper is a defense and will, therefore, offer reasons why God might choose to allow evil and suffering. By viewing the problem of suffering in this manner, the reader might see possible, though not necessarily *actual*, solutions for the problem of pain and suffering in the world. This allows the theist (me) to propose solutions without claiming to *know* the reasons of an infinite God. These modest solutions will be something for the reader to ponder and determine for herself whether they might be possible, plausible, or even probable.

Flourish. A human can be said to “flourish” if she experiences a close union of love with God and his creation. The Christian position is that all humans were created to reach personal fulfillment through a loving relationship with God and with other humans that will continue throughout eternity. Thus, flourishing is ultimately attained by the achievement of one’s desires *insofar as they are aligned with the goal of unity with God*. This paper will explore whether some kinds of pain and suffering may aid human flourishing in a putatively possible world.

The Argument from Suffering

“*The defense will focus on premise (3) and consider whether God might have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering to exist.*”

Many arguments are used to cast doubt on the existence of God. Typically, they appeal to the existence and prevalence of evil, suffering, and pain in the world.

One argument goes like this:

1. An omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God exists.
2. There is suffering in the world.
3. There is no morally sufficient reason for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God to allow suffering in the world.
4. Therefore, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God does not exist.

My defense of theism will stipulate that premises (1) and (2) are true. The defense will also concede that there *seems to be* an incompatibility between the simultaneous existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God and suffering in the world. Therefore, the defense will focus on premise (3) and consider whether God has morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering to exist. If it can be shown that premise (3) is false or unlikely, then the seeming incompatibility between premises (1) and (2) dissolves, and the **argument from suffering** loses its strength.

Suffering and Human Flourishing

According to Thomas Aquinas, “The ultimate good for any human person is union with God” [i.e., flourishing].[\[7\]](#) Therefore, some suffering can contribute to flourishing. Two questions follow:[\[8\]](#)

1. Does the suffering allowed by God contribute to human flourishing (i.e., closeness to God)?
2. Does the suffering allowed by God help us achieve our greatest desires?

“*Not only did suffering—or the threat of suffering—not deter these Christians but they seemed compelled to endure all manner of evil for the surpassing value of knowing God.*”

In response to (1), suppose that suffering positively addresses the flourishing of humans by helping them achieve what they *ought* to be. In this important sense, suffering may be seen as God’s “medicine” for achieving one’s ultimate purpose.^[9] It is possible that suffering may remove or balance the obstacles (e.g., pride, self-centeredness, anger, greed, and others) that prevent humans from coming into a closer relationship of love with God. If unity with God is the greatest possible good for humans, then flourishing may be *compatible* with suffering. Indeed, some suffering might be essential to flourishing.

The lives of many Christians of the first and second centuries bear witness to the strength of their belief in God and their willingness to suffer. Their relationship with God was more valuable than even their own lives. Pliny the Younger, writing to the emperor Trajan (c. A.D. 112), said that he attempted to make professed Christians *curse* the name of Christ. But he admitted that “those who are really Christians cannot be induced to [curse Christ’s name].^[10] Even under the threat of imprisonment and torture, these early Christians would choose God over the threats of their accusers. Such was their relationship with God that they could not be forced to deny their faith, even under extreme forms of moral evil. Not only did pain and suffering—or the threat of pain and suffering—not deter these Christians, but they seemed compelled to endure all manner of evil for the surpassing value of knowing God (Phil. 3:7, 8; 2 Cor. 11:23–27).

Even non-believers in God may benefit through suffering. After noting the documented studies that have shown that people can and do benefit from the consequences of trauma and adversity, Stump submits that God is present to *every sufferer*:

No sufferer is isolated from the love of omnipresent God; and to the extent to which the sufferer is open to it, the presence of God to that sufferer comes

with shared attention and closeness, for the consolation of the sufferer.[\[11\]](#)

Thus, it is possible that suffering serves as God's tool to help all humans flourish.[\[12\]](#)

However, what about the kinds of suffering that are so severe that they destroy one's moral responsibility for action and full mental functionality? For example, those subjected to prolonged torture such that they suffer irreversible physical and/or mental damage. Is it possible that this type of severe suffering might prevent faith in God? Suppose God's purpose for humans is not merely for the present world but is eternal in scope. Stump believes that any response to the problem of suffering *must necessarily include a mention of the afterlife*:

If we insist that there be some response to the challenge of the argument from evil that does not make mention of the afterlife, in my view we consign such a response to failure... the notion of an afterlife is central to any attempt at theodicy (or defense) that is to have a hope of being successful. [\[13\]](#)

It is a mistake to think that permanent physical and/or psychological suffering prevents one from flourishing. Otherwise, only those deemed "healthy" in body and mind would be able to flourish. God may allow humans to experience severe and perhaps irreversible physical and/or psychological suffering in this life if it provides them the opportunity to flourish in the afterlife.[\[14\]](#)

“*Since flourishing is primarily a function of the closeness of one's relationship with God, suffering must be weighed against the potential benefits of one's relationship with God now and/or in the afterlife.*”

Even though humans may desire to flourish, Stump questions whether a human's *desires* are necessarily in sync with all that they *ought* to be: “Sometimes humans can set their hearts on things that aren't necessary for their flourishing.”[\[15\]](#) Though suffering has been shown to lead to spiritual

regeneration, growth, and, hence, a closer relationship with God, there is no guarantee that any given individual will see suffering as a means to achieving her *own desires*. Thus, a loving and wise God would *know* what things people need to best establish their relationship with him. While the things that people desire can lead to unity with God, many desires—including those that are self-centered or uninformed—may not always lead to flourishing.

Suffering and God's Omnipotence

Some will say, "*There is no morally sufficient reason* for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God to allow suffering in the world." But does this mean that an omnipotent God can do *anything whatsoever*? Theologian Thomas Oden defines omnipotence as "the perfect ability of God to do all things that are *consistent with the divine character*."[\[16\]](#) In other words, God can do *anything consistent with his nature*. For example, God is always truthful (Jn. 33, 34)—his word is truth (Jn. 17:17)—therefore, *God cannot lie* (Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

Alvin Plantinga suggests that God must always act in line with his perfections. He states: "What the theist typically means when he says that God is omnipotent is not that there are no limits to God's power, but at most that there are no *nonlogical* limits to what He can do."[\[17\]](#) Because God is perfect, he never acts in ways contradictory to his perfections. He will never make a square circle, a married bachelor, or a false truth. Since God exemplifies logic, he never does anything that is illogical or contradictory to his nature.

Given the constraints of God's perfect nature, *it may be impossible to abolish all moral suffering without eliminating human free will*. Consider what might transpire if an all-powerful God chose to eliminate moral suffering. Plantinga sums up the implications: "To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, [God] must create creatures capable of moral evil, and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and simultaneously prevent them from doing so."[\[18\]](#)

Suppose that one person wanted to kill another using a gun. Should an all-powerful God respond by turning the bullets into bubbles? Or, if someone picked up a rock to throw at a window, should God turn the rock into a feather? Such solutions would eliminate human free will, and God's will would usurp human action in the same way a driver controls a car. This would result in chaos. God

would have to regularly break the laws of nature to intercede in such a manner and there would be no regularity in the world.

The Free Will Defense

Plantinga suggests a possible guiding principle: “A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal than a world containing no free creatures at all.”[\[19\]](#) So, perhaps God may allow humans the freedom to choose between good and evil acts because he considers it more valuable to have creatures who can freely choose rather than not have such free creatures. If it is true that God places more value on free creatures, then perhaps one morally sufficient reason for him to allow suffering is to preserve free will.[\[20\]](#)

What would happen if God chose to eliminate *all* suffering? Is it possible that *even greater suffering would result*? Plantinga uses a thought experiment to show that perhaps God does not eliminate some suffering because doing so might bring about *greater suffering*:

You’ve been rock climbing. Still something of a novice, you’ve acquired a few cuts and bruises by inelegantly using your knees rather than your feet. One of these bruises is fairly painful. You mention it to a physician friend, who predicts the pain will leave of its own accord in a day or two. Meanwhile, he says, there’s nothing he can do, short of amputating your leg above the knee, to remove the pain. Now the pain in your knee is an evil state of affairs. All else being equal, it would be better if you had no such pain. And it is within the power of your friend to eliminate this evil state of affairs. Does his failure to do so mean that he is not a good person?[\[21\]](#)

Obviously, amputating a leg would cause greater suffering than allowing the lesser evil of short-term pain to run its course. From a finite perspective, some suffering may seem unnecessary or counterproductive to human flourishing. Nevertheless, it is possible that preventing minor suffering might result in greater suffering.

In summary, it is possible that an all-good, all-powerful God would not eliminate all moral suffering because doing so would either *preclude human freedom* or *bring about greater suffering*.

Suffering and Human Culpability

Whether one is a believer in God or an atheist, she will probably agree that all humans are capable of evil and can inflict severe suffering on others if they so choose. However, atheists cannot blame God for this human proclivity. After all, how can one legitimately assign responsibility for suffering to a God they don't believe exists?

“ *It is entirely possible that an all-powerful, all-good God would not eliminate all suffering because doing so would either preclude human freedom or would bring about greater suffering.*”

The doctrine of original sin explains the human propensity for evil actions (Rom. 5:12). Moreover, the responsibility for moral suffering may reside solely with human free agents acting of their own accord (Rom. 3:9-18). The human inclination to cause suffering (called “sin” in the Bible) results from people turning away from God and following their own desires (Rom. 1:28-32). Such a condition is not compatible with flourishing.

Christian doctrine proclaims that Christ—who is both God and man—became the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 9:14) to redeem human creatures whose natural inclinations drive them to commit moral evil. In their natural state, humans are both mortal and corruptible[\[22\]](#) and yet ultimately redeemable. The predisposition to commit moral evil represents the reason why all humans must be redeemed by God's grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8; Gal. 2:16). Redemption represents the solution for a lack of flourishing (Rom. 3:23, 24). Moreover, redemption that is offered by God allows humans to flourish in the afterlife since, without redemption, humans will not share in the afterlife (Jn. 3:36). Indeed, according to Aquinas, the worst possible condition for humans is that they would never achieve or even desire to achieve, a real closeness of love with God and that that condition might last eternally.[\[23\]](#)

Conclusion

The atheistic argument from suffering claims that God exists, suffering exists, and an all-powerful, all-good God does not have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering. Therefore, God cannot exist. However, a theistic defense casts this argument in a different light by asking a person to consider a possible world in which God and moral suffering both exist.

First, it may be that flourishing is the greatest good for humans. If so, whatever brings one closer to God represents an aid to flourishing. If it is possible that suffering aids flourishing by removing obstacles that prevent humans from establishing a closer relationship with God, then suffering may be compatible with flourishing.

Second, there may be some concerns that are unclear to our finite understanding. Maybe the reason for not removing all suffering is that such a process would *preclude human freedom* or *bring about greater suffering*. Giving people free will and then rescinding it every time it is abused would leave humans bereft of true freedom. God may allow humans to freely choose between good and evil acts because he considers it more valuable than not to have truly free creatures.

Third, many of the responsibilities for evil and suffering may lie *solely* with free human agents acting of their own volition. The human propensity for evil may result from turning one's back on God's commands and pursuing one's own desires. This may be why all humans need redemption. The greatest possible good—a close unity of love with God—may be achieved by accepting God's grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8; Gal. 2:16).

About the Author

David P. Diaz, Ed.D. is an author and retired college professor. His writings have spanned the gamut from peer-reviewed technical articles to his memoir, which won the 2006 American Book Award. Dr. Diaz holds a Bachelor's and Master of Science degrees from California Polytechnic State University, a Master of Arts in Philosophical Apologetics from Houston Christian University, and a Doctor of Education specializing in Computing and Information Technology from Nova

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Footnotes

[1] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, Kindle ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle location 97.

[2] *Ibid.*, Kindle location 112–13.

[3] Natural evil refers to suffering caused by natural causes, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, lightning strikes, pathogenic viruses, and many others.

[4] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 90–107.

[5] *Ibid.*, 5–6.

[6] *Ibid.*, 11.

[7] As cited in Stump, *Wandering*, 93.

[8] *Ibid.*, 455–465.

[9] Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Suffering: a Thomistic Approach,” in N. N. Trakakis, ed., *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17.

[10] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* X, 96.

[11] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 411.

[12] Though, according to Christian doctrine, there will be no more suffering in the afterlife (Rev. 21:4), some suffering in this life may be instrumental in bringing one to salvation or into a closer relationship with God. Thus, entrance into the afterlife may be attributed, at least in part, to suffering.

[13] *Ibid.*, 419.

[14] Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil and the History of the Peoples: Think Amalek,” in Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37–39.

[15] Eleonore Stump, "Suffering, Evil, and the Desires of the Heart," *The Table, Biola CCT*. February 9, 2018. Educational video, 1:12:06. <https://youtu.be/VOOhQyiMtEU>.

[16] Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 51.

[17] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Kindle locations 184-85.

[18] *Ibid.*, 342-343.

[19] *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 340-341.

[20] Of course, all of this presupposes that humans possess *libertarian free will*. Though this topic is not addressed in this paper, the author has addressed it elsewhere: David P. Diaz, "Socratic Dialogue: Does Man Have Free Will?," n.p. [cited 7 October 2021]. Online: <http://thingsibelieveproject.net/socratic-dialogue-does-man-have-free-will/>.

[21] *Ibid.*, Kindle locations 202-206.

[22] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54.

[23] As cited in Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 387.