

# The Problem of 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 theistic position. Suffering and pain are conditions that are relevant to all humans. When we lose a loved one, we may experience intense psychological pain that overwhelms us. Furthermore, it is common to react viscerally 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 calamities that have been perpetrated across the globe and throughout the ages.

Addressing the problem of suffering is made all the more difficult because of the passions evoked by the subject. Underlying heartache often causes us to abandon logic and lose ourselves in emotion. 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 allowing suffering, why should we expect that Christians would be the first to know?[\[1\]](#) Nevertheless, it is easy to see why the existence of suffering sets the stage for skeptical arguments against the existence of God.

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 topic of *natural evil* will not be considered in the current essay.[\[3\]](#)

## 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.”

**Suffering.** According to philosopher Eleanore Stump, to suffer means *to be kept from being what one ought or desires to be*.[\[4\]](#) Suffering is most often considered something bad or unpleasant. Chronic medical conditions, long-term physical abuse, and the psychological pain of losing a loved one are examples of 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).[\[5\]](#)

Other kinds of pain may often be recognized and welcomed as something one needs. For example, reflexive pain is desirable, for instance, when we involuntarily jerk our hands away from a fire before suffering serious injury. Pain may alert us to the fact that there is something wrong with our body, thus prompting us to take immediate action and seek relief or medical attention. Without this type of pain, we would not know, for example, that our shoes are too tight or that we have suffered a sprained ankle or acute appendicitis. Therefore, not all suffering or pain is unneeded, unwanted, or unwarranted.

Some people may not even realize that their sufferings impede their ultimate well-being. For example, unless they had other experiences for comparison, slaves in the Antebellum South or some women in *patriarchal societies* (i.e., those with absolute inequality between the sexes) may not fully grasp the true nature or extent of their suffering.

**Moral evil.** The evil resulting from free human activity can be termed *moral evil*. For this paper, moral evil consists of free actions that are contrary to God's nature, will, or both.[\[6\]](#) Some moral evils are perpetrated against other people (e.g., armed robbery, torture, murder), while other evils may be self-directed (e.g., drug addiction).

**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 speak for God since it is not clear that God has revealed all, or even most, of his 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 one where the central claims of Christianity are true, and suffering and evil exist. In other words, it is a *possible* world much like our own and one in which, for the sake of argument, 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 a theist 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 such reasons might be possible, plausible, or even probable.

**Flourish.** To flourish means to experience a close union of love with God. The Christian position is that all humans were created for the purpose of reaching fulfillment through a close loving relationship with God and with other humans and that this relationship might 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 suffering may aid human flourishing in a putatively possible world.

## A Theistic Defense

# An Atheistic Argument

“*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.

The current 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 might have 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

*Some suffering may be essential to human flourishing.* Humans are made in the

image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26a), and, therefore, humans display, however imperfectly, God's goodness and love. In explaining the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas on the *greatest good* for mankind, philosopher Eleonore Stump said: "The ultimate good for any human person is union with God" [i.e., flourishing].<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, God may want all humans to flourish to the greatest extent possible, *both now and in the afterlife*.

One of the key questions presented by the problem of suffering is, "Can suffering contribute to flourishing?" The question can be subdivided as follows:<sup>[8]</sup>

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?

On the one hand, someone might argue that suffering *prevents* one from achieving closeness to God and/or from attaining one's greatest desires. On the other hand, perhaps suffering *is* useful in achieving one's greatest purpose and desires (i.e., a loving unity with God).

“*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 can be seen as God's "medicine" for achieving one's ultimate purpose.<sup>[9]</sup> 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. For example, the lives of many



Christians of the first and second centuries bear witness to the strength of their belief in God. Their relationship with God was more valuable than even their own lives. Indeed, Pliny the Younger, writing to the emperor Trajan, 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 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 (Phil. 3:7, 8; 2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Moreover, even non-believers in God may benefit through suffering. After noting that many documented studies 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 some types of severe suffering might not accomplish the greatest good of bringing one closer to God? It seems plausible that one could answer this question in the affirmative. Nevertheless, suppose God is *always* willing that humans should flourish, *whether it be now or in the afterlife*. In other words, suppose God’s purpose for humans is not merely for the present world but is *eternal in scope*. This point is especially important to Stump, who 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]*

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 in the afterlife. 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. Therefore, 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]

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On the issue of helping humans become all they *desire* to be—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*. A loving and wise God would know what things people need to best establish their relationship with him. And, while the things that people desire can be positively correlated 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.*” However, this



premise has an implicit assumption: An omnipotent God can do *anything whatsoever*. If this is true, then God *can* prevent suffering in any and every instance, and he would be morally deficient if he didn't. However, is it really true that an omnipotent God can do whatever he wants? 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, being all-powerful means that God can do *anything consistent with his nature*. So, 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). Moreover, *God cannot not exist* because he, by nature, exists eternally (Ps. 90:2). God is who he is and nothing other.

Alvin Plantinga suggests that God always acts 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."[\[17\]](#) Indeed, 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.

Nevertheless, 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. 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? This type of solution would obviate human free will. In such a case, human will would be replaced by the will of God, who would control the action in the same way a driver controls a car. In such a world, it seems that chaos would result. God would have to regularly break the laws of nature to intercede in such a manner. There would be no regularity in the world. Indeed, miracles would be the norm. 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."[\[18\]](#)

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.”[\[19\]](#) Thus, 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. If it is true that God places more value on free creatures, then perhaps one morally sufficient reason for him to allow some suffering is to preserve free will.[\[20\]](#)

What would happen if God chose to eliminate *all* suffering? Is it possible that *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 sufferings 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 or non-believer in God, she will probably agree that all humans are capable of evil and can inflict severe suffering on others if they so choose. However, the non-believer 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? The argument from suffering operates under the

working assumption that the God of Christian theism exists and has attributes that are derived from the Bible. Therefore, there is no fallacy or logical violation when one responds to the argument by appealing to the same source: The Bible.

“ *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.*”

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

In Christian doctrine, 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<sup>[22]</sup> 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 allows humans to flourish in the afterlife since, without redemption, humans will not share the afterlife with God (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.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Conclusion

The basic 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. The current paper provided reasons why God might have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering in such a world.

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 opaque to our finite understanding. Even if an all-powerful God *could* eliminate suffering, perhaps an all-good God *would not*. Maybe the reason for not removing all suffering is that such a process would *preclude human freedom* or would *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, which represents a step forward in achieving the greatest possible good: a close unity of love with God.

In the end, those interested in the problem of suffering must ask and answer the following question: "Is it possible that there are morally sufficient reasons for God to allow suffering?"

## About the Author

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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 that is due to the causes of nature: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, lightning strikes, viruses, and 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] Ibid., 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*. This means that humans can make one choice or choose otherwise at any given time. 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.