

“I Doubt the Existence of a Good God Who Allows a Baby to Suffer and Die”

I came across an analysis of the dilemma confronting theism due to the occurrence of the Holocaust. The very question as to the existence of God remains unsettled for me, and I pose the question whether there is any acceptable “theistic” explanation to the all-too-common scenario of a newborn who suffers an agonizing brief life and dies shortly after birth.

A traditional response to that tragedy usually revolves around the explanation that God is goodness and can only do good. Even though we (with our limited intellects) cannot appreciate it, we MUST have “faith” and or “trust” that even that agonizing death was for the “purpose” of some “greater goodness.” Now while this may be a source of comfort to those who grieve for the baby (parents) the most important fallacy of the argument is that it is IRRELEVANT and of no value to the baby who suffered and died! That baby had neither the opportunity nor the intellectual maturity to reflect on there being some “greater goodness” to his/her suffering—as do those who are fortunate to survive tragedy, illness, the Holocaust. If one ascribes to a theistic belief system, there are numerous unacceptable consequences of this scenario.

1. A God who is omnipotent has chosen to allow that baby to die in suffering without granting him/her the benefit of realizing a “greater goodness.” That God is unacceptable.

2. Traditionally, God is described as not only having created, but that He continues to actively create all things. This is an aspect of Divine Providence. If that is so, then God directly created the suffering of the baby—without any relief. Again, this is an unacceptable God.

3. If one says that God does not have the power to intercede in relief of the baby's suffering (i.e., God is NOT omnipotent) then of what value is God? Why place one's trust in God for help in any affairs?

4. If one says that God did NOT cause the suffering, then God is an ineffectual creator, and why should one trust in the ability of God to create goodness, to ensure that the sun rises each day, etc.?

I have not been able to find any source to resolve these "difficulties" and I hope that your organization might provide some insight. I will add that I am Jewish and am very comfortable with that heritage. Being very familiar with Christian theology and respecting its belief system, I respectfully ask that you refrain from any attempts to convert me to another philosophy. Neither Jewish nor Christian theologies offer satisfactory answers. One is reduced (I fear) to the conclusion that God does not exist and that therefore life is essentially meaningless (nihilism). That is a position that I am desperately trying to avoid—as I am currently facing a critical health problem where my knowledge and trust in God's goodness would be of tremendous, if not life-saving, value.

Thank you for writing. You are well aware that there is no simple, cut-and-dried answer to the problem of suffering vis-à-vis the belief in the God of the Bible. I lay it out that way because, as far as I can tell, it is only in light of such a God that there is a (philosophical) problem at all. In some religions, it is accepted that their deity would be angry at times if, for example, people don't offer the right sacrifices (the reason Christians were disliked in the early church; their unwillingness to honor the local civic deities or worship the emperor was seen as a threat to their neighbors). Naturalistic atheists have no problem like it within the bounds of their worldview: suffering happens and that's that.

We can work to alleviate it, but there's no God to be angry at. No, it's only because the God-honoring people of Israel and Christians believe in a God who is fundamentally good is there a problem at all. In other words, it's a problem posed to people who believe in an all-good and all-powerful deity who has claimed to be concerned about humankind.

You said you don't want anyone to try to convert you, and I won't do that. But you have to understand that religions and philosophies are systematic; they contain a number of beliefs that are interconnected. The current penchant people have for creating cut-and-paste religions is only reasonable if it's the case that no one can know what's true about such things, or if it's been concluded that there really is no transcendent God, and that religion is merely a human invention created to meet particular needs or desires, or simply to offer a mythical explanation of life and the world. Your own religious/philosophical beliefs aren't clear; I see you've rejected Jewish theology as you have Christian. So I'll take Islam as an example. A Muslim's beliefs about particular issues that aren't laid out clearly in the Koran will be reasoned to in light of and in harmony with the nature of Allah as presented in the Qur'an. Those answers will only be acceptable (not just understandable, but acceptable) to a person who agrees on the presuppositions. The same is the case for me and my beliefs as a Christian. While you may not be interested in putting your faith in Christ, my thinking can only be understood in light of my basic Christian beliefs which are given in the Bible. Now, because there is some overlap in beliefs between different religions (explained in Christian theology by general revelation), it could be that you would find acceptable the picture of God I present if I can make it coherent with respect to suffering. But I'm thinking you will not accept it wholesale because the answer will involve more than just explaining how God could do things He does (or allows things He allows) given what the Bible says about His character; it will involve thinking about how to

live with incomplete answers in light of settled answers, primarily regarding the crucifixion of Christ, the Son of God, and what that means for God's interest in us. So I'll aim at at least presenting a big picture that is coherent and understandable in light of the whole system of Christian belief (without, of course, presenting a whole systematic theology!).

To answer your question, I took the opportunity to re-read John Stackhouse's book *Can God Be Trusted?* the title of which, I think, asks the right question. I also scanned a few other books to help me think about the matter. I've read a good bit on the subject, and still find myself hoping I'll find the answer to the dilemma. The fact that there is still no widespread agreement in theological and philosophical circles is good evidence for what so many have said: we simply don't have a final or comprehensive answer to the presence of evil and suffering.

This response will be very long for two reasons. One is that, while the problem of evil and suffering is often posed just to try to make believers in God look stupid, yours is one of the few I've received that shows a genuine interest in thinking the matter through. As such, it deserves a thoughtful response. Second, the problem itself simply can't be dealt with briefly. If you were a Christian who just wanted some reassurance, I could offer that more briefly. Because you apparently are not a Christian, I have to paint a bigger picture in order to situate the main point in a fuller context. And so I step out with a certain sense of fear and trepidation, knowing that the subject can't be dealt with summarily, but also knowing that many words can be like dust in the air, obscuring the view.

You've put me in a rather awkward position for two reasons. For one thing, you don't believe Christian theology has an answer to the problem of suffering, but it's from within that framework that I must obtain the answer (or as much of it as I

may). So perhaps all I can do is re-state or possibly add something to what you've already heard. Second, you don't want to be converted. While I have no inclination to engage in any intellectual arm-twisting here, I will conclude that, even though I can make strides toward an understanding of suffering that might make sense to you—one that is consistent and coherent in the framework of Christian doctrine—if it's true it can only apply directly and fully to the person who is in a position to receive it; that is, from a place of faith in Christ. This isn't just a question about the nature of God; it isn't an abstract matter (as you well know because of your own illness). It's also a question of what God is doing in our lives. We're talking about the acts (or apparent lack of acting) on the part of a Person toward people who are connected with Him. I'm not good at analogies, but just to take a shot at one, think of the difference between what one reads in a book about what makes for a good football player and what a specific coach does with the players on his team. The player can only experience the facts he's read in the book by getting on the field. And even then, the generalities of the book will be put into practice on the field differently according to particular circumstances and the wisdom of the coach.

Since I don't know what you believe about "God, man, and the world," I don't know how to even attempt to make sense of suffering within the framework of your worldview. In this matter, one size doesn't fit all, so to speak. My thinking about it will come out of, and be tested by, my larger framework of beliefs as a Christian. What this means is that, from one direction, once the Christian view of life and the world has been accepted as true, the believer's thinking about suffering will have to take into account Christian doctrines. From the other direction—for someone standing apart from Christianity—the sense one can make of suffering in light of Christian doctrine and particular historical events can induce a person to give the broader framework of belief a closer

look. So while I won't try to directly persuade you to become a Christian, I do hope that any light I can shed on the matter will prompt you to give Christ a closer look. That move, from the problem of suffering to the claims of Christ, isn't a forced leap, for the Christian's thinking about suffering has to be addressed in light of the person and work of Jesus.

Your primary motivation for writing, I take it, is your own current experience of illness. When you think about God and what He might be up to or whether He is a safe place in which to rest your hope, you find opposition to that hope coming from a difficult situation: a baby who suffers and dies soon after birth. To find a solution or a resolution in the most difficult cases makes it easier to think there is one for our own situation. So you ask what good can come from such an experience for the baby. He or she can't reflect on the good that has come from the suffering. Nor did the baby experience any greater good resulting from it.

It should be noted up front that the greater good defenses aren't accepted by all Christians. It would be impossible to know whether a greater evil has been prevented or a greater good produced in all experiences of suffering. We do know that good can come from suffering. Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered (Hebrews 5:8). We read in the Gospel of John that it was necessary for Jesus to die "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:49-52). But these sufferings were accepted by the one suffering, a very different situation from that of the suffering baby.

A frequently posed answer to the problem of evil is the free will defense, but there is no way from the illustration you used to know how that would apply. We often distinguish natural evil (such as sickness) from moral evil. However, it isn't always possible to separate the two (which is why one theologian uses the categories of *evil endured* and *evil committed*). Surely there was nothing the baby did to bring about the suffering, but there could have been something the

parents or the medical professionals did. One might claim that God should have prevented their blunders (if we can imagine any) from resulting in the child's suffering and death, but we would then have to extend that thinking to all instances where one person's actions harm others. Was the child an AIDS baby? Did her mother engage in promiscuous sex, resulting in her contracting HIV and passing it along to the baby? You may be thinking I'm stretching this all out of shape, but it's important to situate fictitious illustrations into real life types of scenarios for them to be meaningful.

But let's assume the best for the parents and the medical professionals. No one did anything wrong, and the baby wasn't born in a time when a plague was raging. The baby simply suffered the worst of what this fallen world has to offer: suffering for just being born. And short of a message from God, there is no answer to the question why. We mustn't assume, however, that if we don't have the answer, there is no good one. Neither can we conclude that if there is a God He must not be good or powerful enough. The well-known story of Job, accepted as canonical by Jews and Christians, leaves us there with no answer to the why question. God allowed Satan to have his way with Job, a righteous man, and never gave His reason. What He told Job, in short, was that He knew more than Job did, that Job was in no position to tell God He was doing things wrong. (Isn't it peculiar, if this story were simply made up by some people who were inventing a religion, that it would be so inconclusive? Surely a story made up just to take a stab at understanding why good people suffer would offer some kind of answer.) We can't know whether, in the great scheme of things, it was better for the baby's life to be short. Of course, one's perspective on that will be informed by one's worldview. For the naturalist, there is no afterlife, so what we experience here on earth is it, and the early death is simply a tragedy. If there is an afterlife, however, what happens here on earth isn't all there is to it; death isn't the defining end.

Given (and I think it is a given) that there is no authoritative answer to the big question of why God permitted evil and suffering in the first place, nor can it always be discerned why particular instances of suffering are allowed, what shall we do? No alternative belief will take away the suffering; even if we believe suffering is an illusion, as some religions teach, it's still painful (I prefer my illusions to be pleasant!). So we wonder how to think about life and the world in order to make our suffering easier to abide. What are the options?

We can go the naturalistic route and just believe that there is no purpose behind it all, and do what we can to alleviate suffering. But there's no moral imperative behind that; life is bottom line just a matter of survival. And if there is no God and no moral imperative, why worry about anyone else's suffering besides our own? And regarding our own, there's no one to be mad at. We live, we die, we are annihilated.

But this brings us to a new problem, namely, why it is that suffering and evil make people rage if there is no God at all, if we're all just products of the natural process of conception? Bad things happen. Why keep trying to find an answer? It's hard to settle into an apathetic attitude.

We can go the (atheistic) existentialist route and try to deliver ourselves from this rage by establishing our own meanings. I think of Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* who murders someone and in prison finds freedom when he settles in his mind that there is no God and no hope. But that's artificial, even if we only take human experience as our guide. There's something in us that makes us think there is indeed more than this life, or, at least, that there ought to be. The afterlife plays a major role in religions in determining how people live this side of the grave. Where does that come from? The Old Testament says that God has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11), and human experience bears that out.

We can choose any number of other gods to believe in (besides the one of the Bible), but we won't find much satisfaction. There is a variety of explanations—suffering is an illusion; it results from upsetting the gods; we're caught in an eternal battle of good vs. evil. Mercy and love toward people are not the strong suits of many other religions as they are with Christianity. But that's why we have this problem of evil. We're used to thinking of God in Christian terms, and He doesn't seem to always play by the rules (funny how we like Him to play by the rules by exempt ourselves from them).

We can make up our own notions about God and the world that can make our suffering more livable, but our imaginations waver. A God that is no bigger or more metaphysically fixed than my own imaginings doesn't make for a stable foundation upon which to build a life. What we all want is what is real and can be relied upon, something that doesn't change with our states of mind or emotion.

We can believe in the God described in the Bible but believe He really isn't powerful enough to conquer evil. That isn't much of a God to believe in; we can do better with good medicine and education than with an impotent God.

The best choice in my opinion is take the Bible's description of God as true (that He is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful) and receive what the Bible has revealed in Jesus about God's concern for us even if He doesn't explain Himself in all matters, and this for a few reasons.

First, the reality of evil does not disprove the reality of the God of the Bible. Maybe we cannot imagine how the all-powerful and loving God could permit suffering, but our lack of understanding does not mean He isn't there. A famous syllogism that has often been used to disprove the God of the Bible is this:

- A good God would want to destroy evil.

- An all-powerful God would be able to destroy evil.
- However, evil is not destroyed.
- Therefore, such a good and all-powerful God cannot possibly exist.

A syllogism like this is only as strong as its premises. The first thing we need to do is substitute “the God of the Bible” or “Yahweh” for “God”. The reason is that we think we know what a good and all-powerful God would want to do and when He would want to do it, but we should rather think in terms of a specific God. This syllogism surreptitiously assumes particular things about God that may or may not be so, or may contain understandings that are hindered by being limited. What would Yahweh want to do and when and how would He want to do it? How would we know? We can only know (in so far as we can know) by seeing what He has revealed to us about Himself. We ourselves can have purposes for the things we do or don't do that can only be known if we reveal them. Much more is this the case with God.

The fact is that syllogisms can be constructed to “prove” most anything. In fact, they often are used just that way; it isn't immediately apparent that they assume what is to be proved. Here's another argument to consider about evil:

- *If God is all-good, He will destroy evil.*
- *If He is all-powerful, He can defeat evil.*
- *Evil is not yet defeated.*
- *Therefore, evil will one day be defeated.*

(Adapted from Geisler and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy, p. 323.)

This argument assumes God exists, which you might think is cheating. But the former syllogism made assumptions that require grounding that isn't stated.

The fact is that there are good reasons to believe God exists

that outweigh the problem of evil. I gather from your email that you do believe God exists. You are questioning whether this is a God worth believing in. This problem can be a major intellectual, emotional, and psychological hurdle, but it doesn't end the discussion. There are many arguments out there for acknowledging the reality of the one true God, so I won't go into that discussion here. I'll just note that you have to admit it's a very odd situation for there to have been so many people who believed and still believe in God throughout history (and many who have died for their beliefs) despite this problem. And they believe this God is good even despite their own suffering.

My response has grown very long, so I'll (finally!) get right to the main points.

First, God is a Person whose purposes can't simply be ferreted out by philosophical conjecture. He has to reveal Himself. We believe He's done that in Scripture. And in Scripture He hasn't bothered to explain Himself about everything.

Second, God's scope of vision is much broader than mine, and it's His purposes that are being worked out. Philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams noted that "the rationality of a person's behavior is in part a function of his purposes and his consistency and efficiency in pursuing them" (Adams, "Redemptive Suffering," in Peterson, ed. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, 184). As some have said, the logic of God's acts can more resemble the "logic" of a mountain range than a logically organized set of truths. In other words, one cannot start at one end of the Rockies and logically conclude the shape of the mountain range and where it will end. As one flies above the Rockies, one can see how one peak gives way to a valley and then to other peaks and valleys, but one cannot know all this merely using logic. Similarly, while there are some claims that are clearly contradictory to the nature and promises of God, we have to adopt a wait and see attitude for much of what He does. What we have is the broad framework of

creation, fall, redemption, and future glory. In between there are events that we could not predict, nor can we always know how they will fit in the big picture.

Your illustration of the suffering baby doesn't tell enough. I've already broached the question of what might have happened on the human level to bring about the suffering. What came about as a result of the suffering? We don't know that either. Your point was that the suffering didn't help the baby any. I can't see how it could have. However, the baby's death isn't the end of the story. Whatever God's reasons for it, if King David's claim about his son who died in infancy (the child of Bathsheba) applies to all children—that David would go to him after death; i.e., the child would enter the presence of God—then the baby's experience after death would completely overshadow all that came before (2 Samuel 12:15-23). This isn't to try to make heaven a justification for suffering; it's just to say that the game ain't over until it's over, and one has to step back and see the bigger picture before making a final judgment based upon one small part.

Third, God's purposes include providing for our redemption and for ridding the world of evil and suffering. "God shows His love toward us," Paul wrote, "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). If God really is a "malevolent bully" in the words of Richard Dawkins, why did He send His son to die for our sins and to rid the world of evil? I said earlier that Christians can't give anything approaching a good answer for the problem of evil without taking Jesus into account. The reason is that in him we see God's attitude toward us and toward sin and its ravages, for he is the image of God, God in flesh, who reveals to us the Father (John 14:8-10). And He himself suffered both the rejection of people (which reached its climax in crucifixion) and the weight of the sin of the world as he died. The one who knew no sin was forsaken by the Father for our benefit. Furthermore, he did it to bring an end to the effects of sin: evil and suffering.

Understanding that God is working out purposes bigger than we can know and that they include bringing an end to suffering gives meaning to what we suffer now. We want God to act against such things, but He already has in the best way possible, the way that brings a final solution in a most surprising way. Theologian Henri Blocher offers the metaphor of Jesus as a judo player who uses the strength of the opponent to defeat him:

Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. The maneuver is utterly unprecedented. No more complete victory could be imagined. God responds in the indirect way that is perfectly suited to the ambiguity of evil. He entraps the deceiver in his own wiles. Evil, like a judoist, takes advantage of the power of the good, which it perverts; the Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent. (*Evil and the Cross*, 132.)

Jesus dealt with sin and its consequences by stepping into the worst it can offer. Writing during World War I, P.T. Forsyth said this: "Our faith did not arise from the order of the world; the world's convulsions, therefore, need not destroy it. Rather it rose from the sharpest crisis, the greatest war, the deadliest death, and the deepest grave the world ever knew—in Christ's Cross" (*The Justification of God*, 57). There won't be an eternal back and forth between the forces of good and of evil. Evil and suffering will end because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

In the meantime (and this is where the personal application fits in), we individually can find meaning and hope in our own sufferings even if we don't understand it all when we situate ourselves in the grand project of God on earth. Christianity doesn't only offer a particular way of thinking about evil and suffering that can reduce cognitive dissonance; it offers a way to participate in that reality that makes suffering

meaningful in our own lives. This shouldn't be taken as implying we are an exclusive club with special rights and privileges that we dole out to those we consider worthy. This is simply how we understand the way things work, and anyone can participate who does what God requires (repent and believe the gospel).

How those "benefits" apply to given individuals, however, varies enormously. Like everyone else, Christians wonder, Why me when others don't suffer this way? Why these obstacles to godly things I want to accomplish? Why must I be a burden on other people? God isn't only concerned with the interests of the person who is suffering, although He certainly is concerned with that person's interests. This is where the testimonies of Christians who have suffered are so meaningful. How is it that these people are able to find joy in life in spite of their hardships? Can they all really be delusional? I cannot myself offer any testimony as one who has suffered. I've lost a sister to cancer, and my wife has arthritis, but I haven't suffered as you apparently are. But I know there are people who've found joy despite the obstacles. (If you are interested in reading about people who've found hope in their suffering, I recommend the books *Where Is God?* by John Feinberg and *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada. Tada is a paraplegic and has developed a ministry to people with disabilities.)

The bottom-line question, as I noted at the beginning, is this: Can God be trusted? Given this suffering, now what? If there are other reasons to trust God that outweigh this reason not to, then we must deal with that. It won't do any good to reject God because we don't like what He's doing, because there are consequences to that. We must step into the relationship He has offered and see where He takes us.

I'll draw this tome to an end with a quote from John Stackhouse:

In Jesus we see what we desperately need to see: God close to us, God active among us, God loving us, God forgiving our sin, God opening up a way to a new life of everlasting love. If Jesus is the human face of God, Christians affirm, then human beings have a God who cares, a God who acts on their behalf (even to the point of self-sacrifice), and a God who is now engaged in the complete conquest of evil and the reestablishment of universal *shalom* for all time. If Jesus is truly God revealed, then we can trust God in spite of the evil all around us and in us. (*Can God Be Trusted*, 120).

Because of Jesus, we can have hope. Not the “I hope it rains tomorrow” kind of hope, but hope as understood in the New Testament: confidence in the future based upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all which demonstrate God’s love for us.

If you want to continue the conversation, please do write back.

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