

Popular Misconceptions About the Problem of Suffering

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The presence and extent of suffering is one of the great perennial mysteries of human existence. People grapple with life's meaning, and suffering more than anything throws meaning itself into question. Conversely, a perceived lack of meaning is itself a source of suffering.

The existential questions that follow from suffering naturally involve questions about the existence or nature of God, the incompatibility of suffering with an all-good and all-loving God. In my view, these questions have been well understood, and well answered¹. Perennial mysteries remain perennial not because they are ultimately impermeable, lacking adequate answer, but because such answers must be learned and integrated within the life of each individual. Here we can differentiate how we understand suffering in the abstract vs that which we experience first-hand (whether as one who suffers or as a witness). The questions of suffering are uniquely posed to each person – what does suffering mean in the context of my life?

With this in mind, I'd like to address two areas of popular misconception in thinking about God. The first is about suffering that is incidental to life vs that which is caused deliberately, maliciously. The second is the way in which an afterlife may account for suffering, even potentially.

I recently read a bumper sticker with three questions in increasingly small and hard-to-read font: *How am I driving? How does an engine even work? How could a good God cause such suffering?* It was something like that, anyway. I took the tone to be sarcastic, an example of taking it for granted that there is no adequate answer to the last inquiry. Admittedly, most people of any religious creed would struggle to answer it.

¹ The best work on suffering that I'm aware of is Eleonore Stump's *Wandering In Darkness* (2010), which explores the problem of suffering through biblical narratives. I highly recommend reading at least the section on Job. Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* is of course also a wellspring of insight.

The question may fit on a bumper sticker, but it requires a much bigger answer than a bumper sticker, or a meme, or a video clip affords in response.

In brief, the age-old discourse about why we have suffering despite there being a good God largely centers on questions of free will and the nature of love. If we are to be truly free to choose love, to accept God's love for us, then we must also be free to reject it. Love is not and cannot be compulsory. Within this freedom and the possibility of rejection lies the possibility for evil, that which is contrary to the good God intends and has offered. Suffering is a consequence of our willing departure from God, one that has echoed through human history as something of an ancient trauma of the rupture in our relationship with God. The story is familiar enough; I won't rehash it further. What I want to speak to instead is our ability or willingness to come to terms with the consequences, if the story is to be believed.

So then, *how could a good God cause such suffering?* Well, let's start by acknowledging that we typically aren't depressed or in pain by default. We have bodily needs, yet they are pleasurable to satisfy – a good meal, a good night's sleep. Natural life is tough, sure, and it's not heaven, but it's also not hell. Our natural state is not just contentment but real happiness when our needs are met. This also involves more complex relational and emotional needs, which, though generally more difficult to satisfy, also offer a higher and deeper satisfaction in their fulfillment. To be satisfied in being loved, in being close with others, provides richness and meaning in a way that food cannot.

Of course, these needs can go unfulfilled. Our bodies experience illness, and hunger, and pain. And here no writing can address the problem adequately for what it means to people, any explanation will always fall flat next to the immense weight that suffering can have as it's lived out. It's not something that can be fully rationalized. In many ways it is more a question for the heart than the mind, the answer found in compassion and a certain kind of vulnerability rather than ideas. But we can at least speak to a contrast in the kinds of ways in which suffering occurs, and the response that that elicits or affords.

Generally, natural suffering is less severe than what is human afflicted. There are circumstances in which nature seems to torture us, but even that is not to the same degree as human torture, not nearly so horrendous. We can console each other and find meaning in the anguish of cancer or other illness, or injury, or natural disaster. These things lose meaning precisely in the absence of community, of loving support, in the solidarity of shared pain. Meaninglessness is what throws God into question. Even death can be accepted, and more still offered to God as a sacrifice. Even death can be lovingly understood.

Death is a reference point for the offering of everything that we will make at the end of our lives. Willingly or unwillingly, we will relinquish everything. We can know this about our life now, that none of it was ever ours to keep, all of it is given from God as gift – and it is up to us to determine in what form the gift will be given back. We will offer the gift of our life back to God in whatever form we have made it into. Essentially, that gift is the heart. The external form that our life took in its incidentals is not what remains; whether we received good things or bad as far as worldly life is concerned. The heart is how we responded to it all, as this life comes to us in ourself and in others.

In this we see two very different challenges for the heart. Natural suffering challenges us physically, but suffering caused by others often cuts deeper. It wounds our sense of dignity and trust, making forgiveness difficult – not only toward people, but even toward God. This difficulty is often bound up with our earliest experiences of family, especially with fathers. That topic requires its own treatment, and for now must simply be noted in its importance in shaping how we struggle towards wholeness as individuals. Early wounds of insufficient love often feel irreparable.

To be clear, all suffering is something of a violation of our integrity. Our bodies are not meant to be damaged, but whole. What I'm trying to point out in the distinction between natural suffering vs that which is a result of evil is how much more *incongruous* with our nature the latter is. Yet we tend to elide the two, we don't recognize how evil corrupts our view of what life is (or would be) absent that evil.

Again, it's not that nature isn't without terrible difficulties, whether illness or predation or earthquakes. Yet the greater tragedy is how our choices have squandered the opportunity for most people, most of the time, to flourish. We aren't close to where we could be as a human society in this regard, as the result of our own doing. This is in some ways easier to see at the level of our individual lives, in our selfish or self-defeating tendencies. Conversely, we have a strange difficulty recognizing the full consequences of choosing moral wrong, even for our own life². This all assumes that the free-will account holds up, that manmade trouble in the world really can be attributed to us rather than something to blame God for – that though God provides the opportunity and assistance to choose the good, it is ultimately not something God forces us to do.

And so, to make an honest assessment of how we might understand natural suffering in this life apart from that which is human caused, we must attempt to separate the two. This requires us to envision what this world was meant to be, without sin. There are of course a number of moral wrinkles to iron out in understanding how God intends us to live, but for now we can at least converge on a broad commitment to the principles that God should represent, like justice and truthfulness and peace³. It sure is a different picture to think of what our government would look like if everyone was without a hint of dishonesty or greed or corruption, everyone transparently characterized by charity and fairmindedness and devotion to the common good. We could be that people that takes everything in life as it is given – that both rejoices and mourns most deeply, as the occasion calls for it, and always together. And there would be much more rejoicing, and all the consolation for one another in suffering. This is what it would mean for us to be a people aligned with rather than opposed to God. We don't know what we've lost, we don't see this world as it was intended³. Yet we *still* find the spirit to persevere, despite this world being about as badly messed up as we can manage.

² I address our lack of moral clarity and its implications in my two-part essay *Right Relationship With Life*.

³ CS Lewis explores this point beautifully in his work *Perelandra*. Christianity in particular is meant to regenerate each person, and the world; it is less intelligible to us in a world that is failing.

We are indeed still left, nonetheless, with so much utter brutality, whether of our own doing or not. This brings us to the matter of ultimate justice and reconciliation. What a cheap cop-out the notion of heaven can seem to be, in the face of what many endure. There are some for whom suffering will have no answer in this life, no seeming purpose, who are victims through and through and can make no sense of their victimhood. Yet if it seems cheap to say that their lives could be reconciled in eternity, we must also consider the alternative, that their lives are consigned to the apathy of fatalism. Suffering remains in either case, and it seems strange to me to reject God on behalf of those who suffer, who themselves would not see their suffering as an occasion to rail against the divine. More commonly it is precisely the opposite, God being their only recourse and hope and justice.

To assess this honestly, as in any discussion, we must take the idea on its own terms: if heaven is true, these are the implications. Regarding this I'd like to draw attention to something of a double standard that seems to creep into people's view as part of the misconception, which is to both critique and dismiss God simultaneously. By all means, do one or the other, but to do both at the same time is only to feign honesty or seriousness on the subject. The simplified version in this case is something like: I don't believe that earthly suffering could be adequately atoned for in heaven [and I don't believe in God or heaven anyway, so I need not rigorously consider the matter]. One problem is when the bracketed part goes unrecognized or unacknowledged (at least to some degree, if not entirely) as a pretense. A greater problem which is harder to recognize is that, as with so much of human mentality, we take the context of existence for granted through habituation. The full impact of what we are thinking about doesn't land in our evaluation. We presume to encompass God. We must think about these things *for what they actually are* and *as if they are actually true* – if *God* truly exists, if *heaven* truly exists, both are beyond our imagination. We are out of our depths to recognize how these things may in fact be capable of atoning for the worst horrors of this life. Were we to come face-to-face with such surpassing and transcendent realities, we might understand them according to the eternal love of God. The fact that we can't understand this now is not grounds for dismissing the whole prospect; certainly not as carelessly as some are prone to do. These are hard questions which must be met at the

level of personal significance. In the end, accepting God is not beyond human reach, with no illusions or naivety about the suffering this life requires of some. On the other hand, dismissing God is not a justification for abdicating moral responsibility and seriousness. And premature conclusions which preclude deeper investigation of such matters have further-reaching implications than we suspect⁴.

I've argued thus far to avoid conflating the problems of suffering and evil. It really is hard to parse the two – to imagine a world without evil, and how that would mitigate the extent of suffering. Nonetheless, does the presence of evil, even as a result of free will, stand as an indictment of God? Or does suffering in and of itself do so? Once again, these questions require a deeper recognition of the context of our existence. Yes, our context includes suffering, but it is also one in which we can offer suffering in sacrifice. And if God and eternity are real, they are more than consolation – they are the context that can redeem what seems irredeemable.

Flannery O'Connor wrote, "this is the central Christian mystery. Life has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for." This is the other side of the mystery, that we don't see the beauty of this life; we are in it and yet unable to recognize it. We don't recognize the saints we could be, nor as much in others, and the difference this would make for the world. Not everyone has the wherewithal to find meaning in suffering. But most of us can find in it at least some measure of choice, to despair of or to affirm life's goodness, to foster our resiliency for love. Goodness is not an escape from suffering; it is an answer to it. The world can only learn this through our embrace of transformative compassion in daily trials. And just as our inmost personhood can be shared in faith with God, there is a mysterious and profound intimacy in this part of our lives, that we could suffer *with God* and *for God*. This is suffering never for its own sake, but in the full measure of love afforded by vulnerability.

⁴ I also take up this point in *Right Relationship With Life*. How we engage (or decline to engage) with inescapably foundational, universal human questions shapes our view of and relationship with the world.