

God, Evil and Suffering

Week 1

Getting clear about the problem(s)

This course examines a few central moments in these kinds of discussion, from philosophical arguments about suffering and belief in God, through to the way that suffering is dealt with in the Bible, and recent debates in theology about the nature of God and the meaning of the cross. The course does *not* aim to resolve all the questions that suffering raises for people of faith; it *does* aim to help us to think more deeply, honestly and clearly about them.

This course is about God, Evil and Suffering, and is going to involve a mixture of philosophical and theological reflection on the topic: on the questions or problems that arise when one thinks about how we are to think of the relationship between God – a God of infinite goodness, according to most Christians – and the evil and suffering in the world.

But what exactly are these questions, or problems? If we want to have a fruitful inquiry, it will be helpful to consider carefully what it is that we hope to ask; what it is that motivates the inquiry. So in this introduction, I'd like to begin in a fairly philosophical way, by inviting us to try to clarify this, as best as we can, at least.

There are many different accounts of what, exactly, philosophy is, and different views on what philosophers want. In fact, philosophers love nothing more than to argue about what philosophy is. Still, I think that it's fairly safe to pick out two things that drive philosophical reflection: clarity and depth.

Let's think about clarity. Philosophers tend to notice that some of the biggest, most important ideas that we talk about are also quite unclear. For example, consider a word like freedom. We use this word a lot, and more than that, the idea plays an important role in all sorts of ways – in political discourse, in how we might think about our own lives, in the stories we tell about the past, and so on. But look a little closer and you will find that it's far from clear what, exactly, we mean by the word: it is not so obvious what it means to be free, or what we want, when we want freedom.

So one possible role that philosophy can play in our lives is try to bring some kind of order to our thinking. Mary Midgley, the British philosopher, said that philosophers are like plumbers: you only call the plumber because you've

started to notice a leak, or a bad smell coming from a pipe somewhere. What she meant was that we need philosophy when we have started to notice some confusion, or something odd, about some of the big ideas that shape our view of the world. For my own part, I think that this is certainly the case when it comes to how understand the relationship between God and suffering.

But another thing that philosophers tend to want is to think deeply about things. That is, to investigate questions and issues that seem important, but which don't seem to have straightforward answers. Classic examples would be things like the existence of God, or the nature of reality, or the relationship between the mind and the body. These issues seem important, and in asking these kinds of questions, we feel that we're trying to come to a deeper understanding of the world. It certainly seems as though questions about the relationship between God and suffering fits into this category.

So philosophers tend to be interested in clarity, and they also tend to want to explore things deeply. Unfortunately, these two things don't always go together! In fact, thinking about God is the classic example of this. Questions about God – whether God exists, what God is like, how God could be known – are all examples of deep questions. They seem important, and central to our search for meaning, but there's no agreed upon way to find answers to them. But it actually seems that the depth of these question is also the reason that it is hard to be clear when thinking about them. Many theologians seem to agree that thinking deeply about the existence of God seems to be mean acknowledging the limits in our own understanding more honestly.

So this tension between clarity and depth leads me to consider a third thing that will be important in this course: honesty. If we want to think clearly and deeply about this subject, I think that we will have to be honest about where our understanding runs out. My own view is that getting a clear idea about where my understanding runs out might actually be a big advance – it might mean that my understanding has got a little deeper.

Anyhow, in this course, we will try to think deeply, honestly and as clearly as we can about God and suffering. So now let's think about what it is about this topic that might mean that this is difficult.

Kinds of suffering

Let's start with a phrase that one might hear, or read in books or articles on the subject: we read that the existence of suffering leads to something called

the problem of evil. One way to express this problem is in the question: why does God allow suffering? Well, here is *one* reason why our thinking in this area it might have gotten confused: we often use a single word, “suffering” to describe a huge range of things. Perhaps, by “suffering”, someone might mean something broad, like “anything that seems unpleasant or negative”. If that’s what we mean by “suffering”, then this probably includes things like mild stomach ache, hangovers, the frustration caused by a disagreement, etc. In one sense, all of the above are cases of suffering.

But then, someone else might find that a great many instances of “suffering” in that very broad sense are actually fairly trivial, and don’t cause any particularly deep religious questions at all. They happen, but they don’t really provoke any difficulty, they don’t destabilise our understanding of the world in any significant way.

On the other hand, when another person uses the word “suffering”, they might have in mind the kinds of traumatic experiences that come close to rendering life un-liveable. They might have in mind: the unexpected death of their only child; the existence of incurable and debilitating mental illness; the experience of intense chronic pain, and so on. Or someone might be thinking of some of the horrors of history, which may be distant from *us*, but which are almost too terrible to understand: the Transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and so on. Finally, they might have in mind the sorts of events that make it hard, for most of us I think, to watch or listen to the news at the moment.

So one source of confusion might be that we are not always clear about what kinds of things we are referring to when we talk about “suffering”. Or, we might be involved in a conversation without having established exactly what kind of things we have in mind.

Kinds of problem

But the word “problem” could also be used in different ways. Someone who talks about a “problem” of suffering, or a problem of evil, might be talking about a number of different kinds of problem, in reality.

Firstly, there are a range of different *practical* problems connected to suffering. For example: how to *stop* it, how to best *alleviate* it, how to *live with*

it, how to make *use* of it, how to *prevent* it, etc. And theology, and Christian ethics, certainly does have quite a bit to say about these practical problems – or should do.

Then there are also a range of theoretical problems, which concern what we can, or should, believe with regard to suffering, how we should think about suffering. And these theoretical problems could be quite different. For example, there is the problem of whether it makes sense to believe in God *at all* given the existence of certain kinds of suffering. That might be the problem that first comes to mind for some people: the problem of suffering might be the main barrier to belief in God, or the main support for atheism. We will examine this problem in more detail in the third week of the course.

But then, there is also the problem of *how* one should *understand* the God that one believes in. And for many people who believe in God, this might well be the main problem, as atheism might not seem to be an option at all. I think that these two problems – whether or not it makes sense to believe in God at all, given facts about suffering; how we can understand God, in the light of suffering – are very closely related. But they are still quite different, in important ways, I think.

With regard to the second question – how we could, or should, understand the goodness of God, it might also be helpful to try to be clear about what we are focused on. It could be the quite general thought that God is good, and yet has created a world such as this: how are these two things compatible? Or, it could be a slightly more specific thought: that God is supposed to be just, and fair, and yet the suffering within the world is distributed so unfairly? Or again, the thought might be about the other side of the problem, focused on God's power – the question of whether God is really in control, or whether God can be trusted. One of the things it could be useful to ask, in this course, is not just 'is God good?', but what kind of goodness does the Christian story invite us to think of? Once again, we will probably find that the word 'good' is used in many different ways, and might be helpful to consider what we are trying to get at when we use it.

We might also distinguish a third kind of problem, which is not straightforwardly about what to do, or about what to believe – but about something broader, and perhaps more fundamental than either. For many people, the challenge that suffering presents is at the level of our basic attitude towards our existence, or our lives, or the world as a whole. We might

call this kind of challenge an existential one. In the Book of Job, Job's wife presents Job with one possible basic existential response to the suffering he has endured: to "curse God and die". In his famous description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul describes love in terms of a basic attitude that should pervade our lives: one that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". And in the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche—a sworn enemy of St Paul, returned again and again to the idea of what he called "yes-saying" – a basically affirmative attitude towards life, regardless of the suffering it brings. So perhaps for some people, suffering presents a challenge as to how we can sustain a particular attitude towards our lives, or towards the world as a whole.

We will explore some of these distinctions as the course goes on. For now the point is just that we can easily imagine that two people could seem to be talking about the same "problem" – the problem of suffering, the problem of evil – but in fact, they might well be talking at cross-purposes. And more than this, we might also find that in our own thinking, we could be trying to deal with several different kinds of issue at once. So one thing that will be useful at the start of this course is to reflect on what kind of challenges we find emerging in our thinking, what are the most important questions for us, and why they arise.

The general and the particular

In addition to the distinction between theoretical and practical problems, there is another way in which we might be able to bring some clarity to our questions: to reflect on the level at which they are situated.

We might be mainly provoked by particular cases. Sometimes we might be struggling, for example, with the fact that someone we love is seriously ill, or we may ourselves be seriously ill. When we see someone suffering in this way it might be hard to understand how God can be loving in the way that we have always believed God to be loving. So in this case we might be trying to figure out *how* to understand the relationship between God and what actually goes on in our own lives, or in the lives of those we love.

Or, perhaps our focus might not be on anything that is presently happening, but on particular events of history. But just because something is in the past, that doesn't necessarily mean that it won't matter to us, and to our own

attempts to understanding how God relates to suffering. Considering awful suffering from history, for example, the Transatlantic slave trade, or the slaughter of the First World War might lead someone to the question of what is sometimes known as “providence”. Is God involved in what happens in history? If so, how on earth could we conceive of God’s loving, faithful presence in the midst of the very worst horrors of history?

But at another time, our questions might be focused at a more general, or abstract level. For example we might not know of any mothers who have suffered from part-partum psychosis – but we know that people *do* suffer in this way, and we know that this *kind* of suffering exists. So, without knowing of any particular cases first hand, we might still be provoked by the existence of that kind of suffering, in general.

Or at an even more abstract level, a person might reflect on the fact that agonizing pain, or severe, debilitating depression are actually *possible* at all. Here they are not thinking about what we might call the background conditions of life: the structural openness of reality to certain kinds of suffering. These kinds of reflection might lead someone to question of the goodness of the world as such, or reality as such. And the question of the goodness of the world seems closely connected to the question of the goodness of God. If we can’t find a way to see the world, as a whole, as being good, then it may be hard for us to understand how it could be dependent on a perfectly good Creator.

These two levels – the particular, and the general – are obviously related, and considering the first might well lead us to the second. But equally, they are still very different kinds of question, and what seems like a good response to the second kind of question may well not be a very good response to the first kind. Just because we feel like we have a good response to the question “why does God allow cancer?”, it does not mean necessarily mean that we’re going to have a good response to questions that a person may ask in response to their own cancer.

So at the start of this course, it might help to try to begin to sort out our thinking a little bit – to distinguish between different kinds of problem, challenge or question, or between different aspects of the same problem, challenge or question. To articulate more clearly what it is that seems to call

for serious thinking, and why it does. And more than this, to consider, as individuals, which are the questions that seem to impose themselves on *us*, in particular.