

God, evil and suffering

4. The use of suffering

It is sometimes claimed that God makes use of suffering, and that this helps us to understand its place within the universe. We look at a few examples of thinkers—from both within and without the Christian faith—who have explored this thought, as well as those who have objected most violently to it. Is there something *morally* objectionable about saying that suffering might be spiritually “useful”; or is this position inevitable for anyone who believes in a God who “works all things together for the good of those who love him?”

Suffering: useful or useless?

Let’s start by considering two diametrically opposed views on the very idea of a “use” for suffering.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is one of the most influential twentieth century philosophers. Levinas wrote in the aftermath of the attempted destruction of his people, and his work is full of the sense of the deep responsibility we have for others, and the way that this unsettles and provokes us. For Levinas, the attempt to articulate a possible use for suffering is a dangerous one, one that ultimately leads to oppression and injustice. This is because the idea that suffering has a use is a close cousin of the thought that suffering is justified. He says this: “for an ethical sensitivity... the justification of the neighbour’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality.”

What Levinas seems to be saying is something like this: that the thought that there might be a divine purpose for suffering, and that suffering might, ultimately, be “justified” by this purpose lives right next to another thought: which is that we, ourselves can live with, and perhaps justify the suffering of our neighbours. But, for people who want to obey the command to love their neighbour, and to be full of compassion for others, the suffering of others has to be felt as something unjustified and disturbing, something that cannot be lived with. So for Levinas, love of neighbour means that we have to refuse all sense that suffering might be cosmically necessary, or beneficial, or useful. In the wake of the “useless” suffering of the Holocaust, the only ethical attitude is to refuse all attempts to formulate a supernatural “use” for suffering. That is, Levinas thinks that if we are to be really compassionate to the sufferings of others, we must refuse the temptation to affirm grand schemes that promise to show us what suffering is *for*.

So this is one expression of a much more widespread thought: that there is something wrong with ‘theodicy’, the theoretical attempt to defend belief in God by giving some account of how God is justified in allowing suffering.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in the 19th century, has the opposite intuition. At the end of his famous book *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says this:

“Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind...”

Nietzsche is worried about what he calls nihilism: the sense that there is nothing that is really worth wanting, or willing. And the thing that really threatens to bring on this nihilistic despair is not suffering itself, but the thought that suffering has no great purpose. Nietzsche was a great enemy of Christianity, but he conceded that it did at least have this advantage: it shows people a meaning for suffering, by linking suffering with sin, discipline, reward, etc. It enables us to see suffering as something that has purpose, or that has a use.

But in the modern era, Nietzsche thought, there is a massive humanistic rush to eliminate or minimise suffering. So the greatest danger for humanity, Nietzsche thought, was that in process, we would lose our sense that everything truly great in human life emerges through struggle. He was worried that we would lose our appetite for struggle, our capacity to make creative use of our suffering. For Nietzsche, the idea that suffering is basically bad, something that ought not to exist is a terrible idea. It's an idea that puts us at odds with reality, because suffering is an ineliminable part of reality. One of the reasons that Nietzsche was so down on the idea of compassion, was because he thought that compassion presupposed that suffering is basically bad - something that ought not to exist, something that we should lament when we encounter it in others.

So the question of the use of suffering is a central issue in our ethical worldview as a whole. At the far end of the spectrum we have the thought that the very attempt to claim that suffering can be justified is the source of immorality, and at the other end, the claim that if we can't affirm suffering in some way, we will end up in nihilistic despair.

Scales of value

Let's return to an idea that we touched on last week: that if God has a "morally sufficient reason" to cause or to allow suffering in the world, then it means that suffering is the best means available for the realisation of some good that outweighs that suffering. If suffering—perhaps even terrible suffering—is somehow given a redemptive purpose, then it has to involve a good that is somehow more valuable than the suffering is bad.

At this point it's worth highlighting an issue which is easy to forget, and which often gets overlooked in discussions of the problem of evil. This is that there are different scales of value; that is, different ways of understanding what is valuable, or different understandings of the kinds of good that are possible for human beings. And conversely, there are different ways of viewing what is fundamentally bad, or what is the biggest danger or threat to us.

Let's go back to our example from week 3: the medic performing painful surgery in order to save a person's life. One reason why this example might be relatively uncontroversial is that it seems easy to weigh up one outcome against another: without the surgery, a person's life will be drastically cut-short, and this seems to be pretty much the worst that could happen to a person. On the other hand, the surgery will be tremendously painful, but for a limited duration, and the pain will have a purpose – it will help ward off the very worst that could happen. In this case, both sides of the balance seem to be relatively uncontroversial; that is, most of us can agree that extreme physical pain and death are bad, and to be avoided, and that staying alive is a great good, and something it makes sense for us to value.

But we are *not* always able to agree so easily on the question of what is valuable. And one set of beliefs that massively complicate the question of what is ultimately valuable is the question of the existence of God, and the possibility of life after, or beyond, death. So on the face of it, we should not be at all surprised if someone who believes in God, and in the possibility of life beyond, or after death, has a fundamentally different scale of value to someone who does not.

Let's consider one question we could ask if we wanted to get a sense of what a person values, and what their scale of value looks like. Typically, when we love someone, we want the best for them. So we could ask a person: what's the best that you could possibly hope for someone you love? If you were to love someone with a perfect, unselfish love, what would you hope for them?

Or, we could ask the opposite: what's the worst thing that could befall a person? If you loved someone with a perfect, unselfish love, what is the thing that you would want, at all costs, to save them from?

In this week's reading, Eleonore Stump, drawing on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, makes the point that the Christian tradition has a fairly consistent answer to these questions: the best possible thing a person could hope for is union with God, forever. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, we find Paul praying along similar lines. What does he wish, or hope, for them? He says this: "that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Conversely, the worst thing that could befall a person would be to lack this union, forever. Together, we can say that these mark out the upper and lower limits of human life, according to most Christian ways of thinking. And so, it seems, this scale of value shapes the way in which we might approach the question of the justification of suffering.

One important point that Stump makes is that when one's scale of value is shaped by belief in God, who is thought to be infinite (whatever that means) or perfect (whatever that means), and the possibility of eternal union with that God, then we are in a fundamentally different situation to a person lacks those beliefs. But, she says, it seems fundamentally unfair to expect a believer to find a way to justify suffering that doesn't make any reference to the things that they actually take to be most valuable. If we are to show that suffering—or some suffering—can be justified, this has to be done in reference to some scale of value. So it makes sense for someone who believes in God to try to show that suffering is justified with reference to the scheme of value that goes along with belief in God. That's because the question, she takes it, is a question about the coherence of theistic belief. It doesn't make any sense to try to show that suffering could be justified with reference to a scale of value that is alien to theistic belief. And, she thinks, theism implies a scale of value with very different "upper" and "lower" limits to scales of value based on other worldviews. In other words, the best that we could hope for, as theists, is rather different to the best that we could hope for if we are atheists. And, conversely, the worst that could happen is also very different.

"This love that surpasses knowledge"

So let's consider Stump's point in a little more detail. Consider that one possible answer to the question "what's the best I could hope for someone I love?" is something like this: that they live a long, healthy life, filled with meaningful activity and relationships; that they live free of fear, unnecessary pain, and die contented".

Of course, my guess is that most people who love someone would say that they hoped that they have a long meaningful life, free from fear, unnecessary pain, and so on. But the question is: is that the *best* that can be hoped for them? And if not, how does this change our way of valuing what is suffered in life?

Let's make a very, very obvious point here: if the best that can be hoped for for a person is the long, happy life that I just mentioned, then there are some people – many, many people, in fact, perhaps most people – who never even come close to this, simply because they die young. And there are many more whose lives are so unhappy or unfortunate, that they seem to be robbed of most of what makes life valuable, on this view.

However, on Stump's account, one of the key messages of the New Testament is that those who suffer in the very worst ways, or whose lives are violently cut short, are *not* thereby prevented from receiving from God the very best that could be offered. And this is not because God makes possible a heavenly afterlife in which there is a second chance to live the kind of life which has been denied. It is, instead, because the best that God can give is something that is only ever hinted at in ordinary, earthly life: union with God. And, Stump says, the key thing to understand about suffering is that God uses suffering as part of the process that leads to union with God. More specifically, she says that suffering has two primary uses: firstly, it helps to "ward off" the danger of being permanently alienated from God; secondly, it enables an increased degree of everlasting union with God. In more conventional theological language, suffering has a role in justification, and in sanctification.

So we need to ask: why is this – what is it about suffering that means that it can have this use? Her full answer to this question is long and complex, and involves careful reading of a number of biblical stories, so we will have to skip over some important points here. She begins with consideration of what it means to love someone. Love involves the desiring the best for someone, but it is also more than this, because I could desire the best for someone without really wanting anything to do with them. Love also involves the desire to be close to someone – to be with the person one loves. As Stump sees it, in the case of God, these two things are the same, because God wills the best for us – but for humans, the best that can be imagined is a mystical good, union with God. So in loving us, God wants the best for us, which *is* for us to be with God.

But being close to someone is not straightforward – it is not enough just be in their presence. It seems that real union in love is only possible where there is a shared will. To be properly close to someone means to be oriented towards the same goals, or as Stump puts it, to be oriented around a shared good.

Consider the case of a parent whose relationship with their teenage child is affected by their teenagers' heroin addiction. This kind of addiction involves a change in what the addicted person wants. They want things that are at odds with other things that they also want: they may cheat and steal from their parents, so as to fund their addiction, even though they also love their parents, and don't really want to harm them; they might want to train to be an athlete, but they also want to take more drugs. And whilst their parents may continue to love them, the disorder in the child's will inhibits their ability to be close to their parents, because they are not oriented towards their own good in a way that harmonises with the parents' love for them.

Stump's view is that this is a good analogy for what sin is: sin is a disorder in our will, and it means that we prefer our own individual short-term pleasure, happiness or assertion of will to our own deeper good, which is only found in God. And because God wants the best for us, as long as we do not will the best for ourselves, we cannot be close to God in the way that love demands. God is close to us, but we are not close to God.

Essentially, then, according to Stump, a key part of the Christian tradition is the thought that suffering can be used to painfully reorient us towards God, and towards what God wills for us. Samson is one of Stump's prime examples here. Samson's will is disordered, in the sense that it pulls him in different directions, and means that he ends up living a superficial, vain and dishonest life. Although Samson's eventual suffering does result in part from his own actions, the suffering is not willed by God as a punishment for his actions. Nevertheless, the *effect* of the suffering is to reorient Samson towards his real good, and his real desires: he finds, in his final moments that what he wants above all is to serve God. So although his life ends in real disaster, his suffering helps him to avoid the bigger disaster, which would be to have continued as he was. Without the tragedy of his

downfall and imprisonment, and the wreckage of his life, Samson would have remained distant from himself, and so from God. So although Samson's life ends up being a disaster, in one sense, in another sense, he gets what he most deeply wants, which is to serve God, and the people of Israel.

So that's one side of the equation: that suffering can help to 'ward off' the danger of the worst that can happen happening: permanent willed loneliness. The other side is that suffering can become a means through which we further expand our desire for closeness to God. We don't have time here to consider exactly how Stump thinks that this works, or why it works like this. As previously stated, Stump emphasises that union with God is only possible to the extent that it is desired. She also thinks that it is possible in degrees, so that the more that one desires union with God, the more that one will find union with God. And suffering seems to have the effect of deepening the desire for union with God.

But we can note briefly that on this point, much of the Christian tradition is in quite strong agreement with this claim about the effects of suffering, and Stump thinks that we this is how we should understand Christian language about 'glory'. There is quite a lot to worry about in the claim that through suffering we attain to greater glory with God in heaven – one is the concern that it might end up glamourising or romanticising suffering in a slightly masochistic way. Another is that the idea that suffering on earth correlates to glory in the life of the world to come could be a convenient way for powerful interests to justify and legitimate the suffering of the poor and oppressed in the here and now.

But Stump has elsewhere made an important point in response to these kinds of problem. As we've already seen, Stump wants to resist the idea that our scale of value should be formed independently of belief in God. But she also thinks that the scale of value that Christianity puts forward is actually a challenge and rebuke to the one that tends to be operative in our societies.

In the book of Hebrews there is an extraordinary phrase, in chapter 12: "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." To be crucified was to be tortured to death in public. On the surface of things seems to be a contender for being one of the very worst things that could happen to a person, and yet, we find the thought that this was endured "for the sake of the joy set before him". Or, put differently, there is a kind of joy that somehow outweighs the pain, disgrace and horror of death by crucifixion. Or again, it is as if the passage is saying that despite his being crucified, Jesus still received the very best of good gifts from the Father – to be seated at the right hand of the Father. So Stump thinks that the theological affirmation of the connection between earthly suffering and 'glory', whatever that may be, actually helps to challenge the unconscious thought that most rich, comfortable, healthy people tend to have: that the kind of life *they* have is intrinsically more desirable than the lives of those characterised by serious suffering; that the poor and wretched of the world would rather live like they live. As she points out, the Christian tradition has at times been drastically at odds with this thought; for Gregory the Great, in the sixth century was more troubled by the problem of why *good* things happen to good people, than he is by the reverse. His question was why God would allow people, through no fault of their own, to avoid the suffering that could lead them to greater glory, and give them opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ.

Stump uses the case of Harriet Tubman to make this point: she was horrifically abused as a slave in the American South, sustaining injuries that affected her throughout her life. After escaping, she repeatedly risked her life to help other escaped slaves, and played an important role in the

abolitionist cause. So, she says, Christianity asks us to think that the lives of people like Harriet Tubman are somehow intrinsically more glorious, and so desirable, than the lives of rich, comfortable people who lead long lives without trauma. This is part of what it means, on this account, to want to be like Christ, as Paul suggests, when he says in Phillipians 3:

‘Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him [. . .] I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.’

Now it’s important to note that Stump does not claim that the reasoning above will help us to understand each and every instance of suffering, or that it can be applied to every kind of suffering. Rather, she says that she thinks that these points are the central components of a satisfying Christian response to the problem of suffering.

So she is saying that Christians can only defend against the argument from evil by putting forward and a distinctively theistic – and Christian – account of what is valuable. Only in relation to *that* scale of value can we hope to show that a perfectly good God could will a world such as ours.

In our seminar, we will consider how to respond to these claims.