

How can I reconcile belief in God with all the pain and suffering that is in the world?

Yet another good question, if not also troubling! And let's be honest, is there anything that challenges the belief in God more than the reality of suffering in the world – what C.S. Lewis once described as the “problem of pain?” We should therefore consider why pain and suffering is so acidic to the belief in God, even as this will, I think, anticipate a response.

First, the reason that pain and suffering is so offensive to belief in God is, on the surface at least, really very simple. A shortened summary of what we are feeling might go something like this:

1. A Perfectly good and all-powerful God would not allow evil and suffering.
2. There is evil and suffering.

3. Therefore God does not exist.

Notice especially the assumption about what makes God, God! That if God is God, then God is “perfectly good *and* all-powerful.” To be sure, it could be argued that this definition is arbitrary—God could be malevolent vs. benevolent toward humanity (*c.f.* the Greco gods). But suffice it to say that I have no interest here in defending a malevolent God anyway. So let's go ahead and assume that God is perfectly and immutably good, together with being omnipotent, which means that it would seem a fair assumption to say that if God were BOTH, then there would be no evil and suffering in the world. He would have the power to stop it, and the will to stop it! And so let's go deeper with our feelings such that a more unpacked version would go something like this:

1. God is by definition all-good, all-powerful and all knowing.
2. An all-good God would want to eliminate all evil.
3. An all-powerful God would be able to do anything He wanted.
4. An all knowing God would see the suffering and know how to stop it.
5. If evil and suffering does exist, then God is not all-good, all-powerful or all-knowing.
6. If God loses one of these attributes, He stops being God.

7. Therefore, God does not exist.

Again, this seems to make perfect sense of our emotions, if from a logical perspective. (Which of course doesn't do justice to the real pain of suffering). So the question that needs to be asked is this—do you see any assumption in the above “logic” that could be called into question, other than our assumptions concerning a description of God? Does, for instance, “evil” exist? For the present, I would like to suggest the answer to this question is “yes and no!” (The people of CPC are quite familiar with this sort of

answer to all sorts of questions—bear with me!). Of course, the equivocation has to do with what we mean by “evil.” Let me explain.

Is there suffering in the world? Yes! Is this suffering at least sometimes directly related to malevolent intentions playing out in the world? Yes! But can we say *for certain* that the “pain” that is in the world is sufficient to cancel out any greater and more ultimate good that could come from that pain, as hard as this is to say emotionally? No! To say otherwise would presume to know “ultimate” things, both in terms of how things eventually play out in temporal history and, if there is a history that transcends the temporal order, then this too would need to be understood before we could say “yes” to this last question.

In other words, from the standpoint of belief in God, would it change things if we believed that there is a God, and because God is good, that ultimately all pain and suffering will result in a greater good as to somehow eclipse the penultimate or temporal manifestations of pain and suffering? Why is it we start with suffering and then ask the question of belief in God, rather than start with belief in God as to perhaps transform the way we think of suffering? What if there is *no* utterly *pointless* suffering? What if, because there is a God, and that because he is always good and always powerful, he insures that all suffering will eventually result in an ultimate “good?” And what if this “ultimate good” is such as to require the possibility even of evil action on the part of humanity in order to preserve the exalted nature of humanity that is presupposed by human freedom of will. And if on the one hand we say that God is “all-powerful,” can’t his ultimate “power” be such as to work through the penultimate power of human will, such that we can both and at the same time believe in “evil” as by the malevolent actions of people based on the free exercise of their own will and believe that God could work through human evil to bring about a greater good, to the praise of his glorious goodness and power, albeit without perversion of human freedom and the freedom to will bad! Whew! you say. So let’s try to summarize all of this briefly.

First, let’s restate the “problem of pain” in a way that exposes the unproven assumption:

1. If God exists, he does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. There is pointless pain and suffering *from our perspective*.
-
3. Therefore God does not exist.

Of course, the “from our perspective” is crucial. It assumes that our perspective is the only vantage point, which then limits our perspective to our own history and experience. But what if there is a God and a history that transcends our own? Then of course the perspective from the vantage point of belief in God opens the possibility of a whole new way of thinking about pain and suffering. Therefore, from the perspective of belief in God and God’s history of working in the world:

1. If God exist, because he is both all powerful and all good, he does not allow any utterly pointless pain and suffering, but insures that all pain and suffering will result in an ultimate good.

2. God does exist.

3. Therefore there is no utterly pointless pain and suffering from the perspective of belief in God.

Here again, while we may never understand within our own lifetime and experience the ultimate point of some particular manifestation of pain and suffering, it doesn't preclude the possibility that there isn't an ultimate good. Nor does it diminish the humanity and even validity of "grief" that we feel when we, or someone we know, suffers great pain or loss. It *would* mean, however, that while we justifiably grieve based upon our experience and perspective of pain and loss, we need not grieve without hope, even that hope that is based on belief in God! (Interestingly, it is usually the people who are suffering who have the greatest belief in God, when the "problem of pain" is no longer academic. It is as if something within us clicks on when we suffer as to find God more believable!)

Let us then consider the problem of pain from the perspective of belief in God, and especially how this perspective is vindicated in the narrative of both the Old and New Testament history of God's people!

From the perspective of faith in God, in so far as God is both "good" and "powerful," we can say that God is the first and ultimate cause of all things whatsoever that come to pass such that if something does happen that seems *from our perspective* to be an utterly pointless manifestation of pain, by faith in God we can hope that "God will cause all things to work out for good..." (Rom.8:18-25, *cf.* Romans 5:3-5, 1 Peter 1:6-7, Hebrews 12:5-11). Moreover, even as humanity is made in the image of God to both "will" and to act upon that will, it is entirely possible that what man *intends* for evil (acts of murder for instance), God could, without violation of human freedom of will, act through this will for some ultimate good.

Take for instance the case of the Exodus in the Old Testament. The language of the narrative is clear. Pharaoh is evil in his malevolent actions in the oppression of Israel, even as God acts through Pharaoh's malevolent actions to do an ultimate good for Israel in giving them a promised land. Notice then this perspective in scripture:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them,

Exodus 10:1

So then [it] [is] not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

A Biblical Commentary in the New Testament in **Romans 9:16-18**

Pharaoh is both, and at the same time, considered an evil person for his treatment of Israel, even as he is considered the “hand of God” in terms of the ultimate good that God produced through Pharaoh’s actions. While it can be said that ultimately, God’s power was operative as to “harden” Pharaoh to do the things he did, it is also the case that Pharaoh was acting freely so as to not implicate God in the evil! This is a mystery ultimately (which of course if there is a God, it should not surprise us that we can’t fully understand Him), but it has to do with the idea that while there is human freedom, it is not an absolute freedom, but rather a freedom relative to the absolute and ultimate freedom of God. How all this works out in our present discussion is that what a person might intend for evil, it is said that God is causing an ultimate good.

Of course, another example of ultimate good through seemingly pointless suffering at the hands of evil actions is the story of the crucifixion of Christ on the cross. This is the point of Peter in his sermon:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Acts 2:23-24

The crucifixion of Christ was arguable the most unfair, evil act that was ever committed. A man who was guilty of nothing but love, was martyred in a way that was arguably one of the cruelest ways to die in human history. And yet, it was at once the most evil and cruel moment in history as it was the most merciful and good moment in history. For the story of Christ’s death is the story of human restoration to God by means of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, and especially as this led the way to his resurrection, and the covenant that was made with Christ whereby many would be restored to God and set free of the fear of death itself. (Thus, the designation “Good Friday” for the day the church remembers Christ’s crucifixion)

In other words, if it is true that Pharaoh was the hand of God in eventually bringing God’s people out of bondage into the temporal land of promise by means of the Exodus, it is the same pattern wherein Herod and the Jewish authorities condemning Jesus to death on the cross was at the same time the hand of God in eventually bringing God’s people out of spiritual bondage and fear of death into the eternal promised land of eternal life! What from the perspective of the moment seemed utterly pointless evil and suffering was in fact ultimately the hand of God in a greater and more ultimate good!

Is there any utterly pointless evil and suffering? Not from the perspective of belief in God and the narrative of God’s action in history! Not from the perspective of belief in God and the reality of eternal life, wherein if suffering in this life can have any value in preparing for a better life in all of eternity in so far as human will is made more willing to receive it, from the vantage point of belief in God, and even the perspective of eternal life, it can be said “by faith” if not by sight that there is no ultimate pointless pain and suffering. Belief in God is more than justified, and even desired, if it is the

basis of a new hopeful perspective in suffering. And by this, we certainly do NOT diminish the real grief, and even justification for grief, whenever we encounter pain. We are told that Christ wept and was deeply troubled at the death of his friend Lazarus. But it was also the occasion for hope in so far as Christ announced his promise of being “the resurrection and the life.”

In closing, here is the way C. S. Lewis responded to the “problem of pain,” very much along the lines of what we have been saying here.

Beyond all doubt, His idea of "goodness" differs from ours . . . By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His Kindness. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven -- a senile benevolence . . . Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms . . . If God is Love, He is by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all records, that though He has often rebuked us with contempt, He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense . . . The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love" and look on things as if man were the centre of them.

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*: