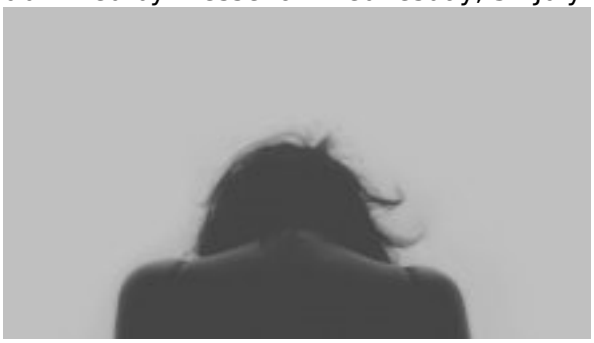
An Utterly Unsatisfying Answer to the Problem of Evil [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Wednesday, 31 July 2019 - 21:12



Read time: 12 minutes
The problem of evil is perhaps the most pernicious argument against theism. Specifically, the problem of *natural* evil[1]. The natural problem of evil asks: why do people (some being good, moral and pious) suffer because of natural disasters, diseases, birth defects, and/or other terrible things. In other words, why do people suffer if no human caused it?

In this article I am going to provide a possible answer to the problem of evil (in general, but as can be applied to both logical and natural evil).

I say “a”, because I do not believe that there is necessarily one single, neat, concise answer to the problem of evil. If there is, we may very well have known what that is by now. I also say “possible”, because I am open to being proven wrong on this and for my mind to be changed; I am not going to dogmatically assert that what I write here is unassailable truth.

With these two disclaimers in place, I need to issue one more caveat: my proposed answer to the problem of evil is likely going to be distasteful and may well not help sceptics overcome their objections. However, I do want to urge anyone reading this to carefully reflect on my argument, rather than reject it because of a visceral aversion.

The Argument

Simply put, the purpose of evil happening to someone in some cases (I propose) does not so much have to do with the victim, but with those *around* the victim, and how they *react* to the situation of the victim. Stated another way, a person can suffer something terrible, and it may be that in some cases their suffering has nothing to do with punishment for doing evil, or to shape or mould that person into a better human being. Instead, the purpose of that person's suffering could be all about how other people respond to their situation, and how they are treated. That reveals their heart: whether compassionate, loving, indifferent, or malicious.

Examples

Take, for example, a man whose house has burned down in a freak accident, and who lost everything in the process. We may ask “why has this tragedy befallen on this man?”, “what has this man done to deserve this suffering (or ‘punishment’)?”, or “what purpose does this man's suffering serve?” Indeed, the man may well ask these questions himself. This is a victim-centric view of the man's suffering, and is perhaps humanity's default reaction to suffering. But what if we take another perspective: what if we look at the *onlookers* of the man's suffering? Do they take him in an give him refuge? Do they mock him in his misfortune? Do they promise to help, but do not actually follow through on their promises? Are people indifferent to his situation? Do they come to him with promises of help, only to rob him of whatever was donated to him?

Or what of the example of a faithful wife and loving mother who, at the end of her life, develops dementia? Her family agonises as they watch this beloved person become helpless and even child-like. Do they abdicate their responsibility of looking after her, and have her committed to a low-cost care facility, erasing her from the consciences? Or do they provide care for her as best as they can, despite the financial and emotional difficulty of doing so?

One last example: an unborn baby is diagnosed with a genetic disorder. There is a high probability that she will die within two weeks of being born. If the baby survives past infancy, then she will have a difficult life, and her parents will have great difficulty in raising her. How do the parents respond to the situation? Do they terminate the pregnancy to save themselves the emotional and physical hardships of watching their daughter suffer? Do they terminate the pregnancy because they make a judgement on her behalf about what is best for her? Or do the parents endure the hardship and love her as best as they can? What is the “best” that they can love; what limits are there to their love?

These are uncomfortable examples, because they are commonplace (although I give these examples without having any specific people or situations in mind). But I hope that these examples have shown that someone's situation of suffering can reveal a great deal about the own hearts of the people around that person.

Biblical Support

There are Biblical precedents which indicate that some suffering may not be so much about the victim, as it may be about how the victim is treated by other people. In the first century, there was a Jewish school of thought that suffering is because of some wrongdoing. We see this in John 9:2. Here Jesus encounters a man who was born blind, and His disciples are asking Him whose fault it was that divine punishment was meted out on this man. Jesus's response in John 9:3 reveals that the man's suffering was about more than the suffering endured by the blind man:

> Jesus answered, “Neither did this man sin, nor his parents; but, that the works of God might be revealed in him.”
>
> John 9:3

The rest of John 9 shows an indictment of the Pharisees for their unbelief, while the man himself is commended for his belief. Here, the purpose of his suffering is not that he suffered, but that he was healed; to reveal the hearts of the people who witnessed his healing[2]; and for our benefit as readers of the Bible two thousand years later.

One of Jesus's most famous parables, is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Here a person is attacked while travelling and left for dead. Two “pious” and “righteous” men pass by but ignore his plight. He is helped by the third man, a Samaritan (who were a racial group whom the Jews despised). In this story, almost nothing is said about the victim: we don't even know his final fate. Instead, all of the attention is on the people who encountered him, and how they reacted towards him. The moral of the story is precisely how they acted towards him.

Another example, which speaks for itself, is in Matthew 25:34–46. Here Jesus says:

> Then the King will tell those on his right hand, ‘Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’ The

> King will answer them, ‘Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’
>
> Then he will say also to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn't visit me.’ Then they will also answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.’ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
>
> Matthew 25:34–46

Also, in the book of Job, we have a long dialogue between Job and his four friends. His four friends speculate that he is guilty of something deserving punishment. Job insists his innocence (and, we know from the prologue of the book, that he was, although none of these characters knew that for certain). Towards the end of the book, Elihu (another friend) accuses Job and his friends of having a too small a view of God; that, as mere humans, we cannot begin to know the depth and complexity of the world, and the causes and effects which exist within it. God Himself then answers Job in a similar manner. He does not explain or excuse Himself to the suffering Job, but Job's mind is put at ease that his situation transcends his own perspective.

An Evaluation of the Argument

As I have indicated, I fully expect most people to find this argument distasteful, if not downright revolting. We seem to have a “narcissistic” thinking around suffering, where we believe that it *needs* to be about the victim, otherwise it is unfair. We know that if we exploit others for our gain, then it is wrong. So how can it be fair for God to “exploit” someone who is innocent in order to instruct other people or interrogate their hearts?

Firstly I would say that no-one is innocent: we are all sinful and deserving of punishment. Some people may be rebuked during their lives, while others will be in agony over their separation from God after the final judgement.

Secondly, it may well be that our individualism is not nearly as important as we think, and that the suffering which we undergo might be to the benefit (or just detriment) of others. If we suffer personally, we might yet be convinced that that suffering has a higher purpose. But when we see “innocent” people suffer, we are enraged, possibly because (at some level), *we* would not like to suffer unfairly. Now, if we think of ourselves as one humanity, or a church united in Christ, or a nation, or other corporate body, then what happens to and through us may not be all about the individual, but the corporate “body”. Looking at language such as that of Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, we see that we have a superimposed reality where we *are* individuals (with individual value), but we also *are* members of a corporate entity and not responsible to and for ourselves.

The proposed answer to the problem of suffering presented in this article does not answer for the individual, but it may be an answer if we take a corporate view of our existence. This is not a common or instinctive view of reality which we have, especially in modern times. If we can learn to have such a corporate perspective of our existence, then perhaps we can understand that our suffering may not be all about ourselves. (It will be need to be the task of another day to explore the perspectives which a Christian should have about the superposition of realities.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to the disclaimers with which I began. The topic of suffering is complex, and

we should avoid simplistic answers. I am not saying that people suffer only to expose the hearts of others. Rather, I want to suggest that others' hearts are exposed in the process of suffering *in conjunction* with other reasons why someone may suffer. Many people have come out on the other end of suffering strong and confirmed in their faith and character: hindsight clearly explains why they suffered. Other people suffering in silence and obscurity, and seemingly nothing good or positive comes from it. There is nothing to which to point to say why it was that they suffered. And for that reason, the question of the problem of evil will remain thorny. However, when we do see suffering, let us not become so engrossed by question of the unfairness towards the victim that we miss the possibility that their suffering we may well be a crucible for our own character, kindness and love.

- 1. It is my opinion that the *logical* problem of evil has been successfully answered. See, for example, this short video summary [2].
- 2. It is also possible that, up until that point, how people the blind man also reflected on them. For example, those who showed him compassion and mercy, while those who treated him ill would have the evil within their own hearts revealed.

Tags:

- problem of evil [3]
- problem of pain [4]
- problem of suffering [5]
- suffering [6]
- pain [7]
- evil [8]
- corporate [9]
- community [10]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1214

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1214
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k64YJYBUFLM
[3] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/696
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/955
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/956
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/708
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/957
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/695
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/958
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/415