

# The Problem of



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# The Problem of Pain

## INTRODUCTION:

The pain of humanity is one of the most important issues facing the theist in a desire for non-theists to come to the place of perceiving that there is indeed a God who is good. This paper will attempt a response according to the perspective of a pastor.

In the face of pain or trial every person knows what it is like to ask the question “why?” Why did this happen to me or why did this particular thing in question happen at this particular juncture in life? What did I do to deserve such tribulation in my life? These and questions like them tend to follow trials or suffering in life. If God is good and if He is all-powerful then why is there evil in my life? Why is there pain?

It could be rightly pointed out that such questions are often self-centered or simply excuses for finding blame. People often ask such things in a desperate grasp for a change in circumstances toward personal comfort. There are other times when such things represent a search for some kind of justice in a given situation of pain or suffering. The questions are therefore very understandable. A short and theological response could simply state what the scriptures reveal regarding God’s righteousness and goodness and how we should therefore trust Him in our pain. This may be true but often does not satisfy the heart, especially the heart of one who has not yet acknowledged God as His Maker and Sovereign. Scripture does declare that God is a God who dwells in eternity (Isaiah 57:15) and that before He created time He counseled with Himself before bringing His creation into existence (Ephesians 1:11). He no doubt then regarded the potential goodness of the kind of earth He was about to create and foresaw our current world as a just and ultimately good world. From the perspective of absolute Truth as revealed in the Bible then, there is no justification for questioning the goodness of God. One of the defenses then must

be that there is a value of good in the pains of life since God is good. Pain must be necessary in some way since pain/evil exists in a world created by a God who is truly good. It has been pointed out by John Hick that in all of our western comfort and affluence we are as a society yet languishing in depression and misery. In an age of little material lack and an abundance of creature comforts in America such as the world has hardly realized before, we nevertheless have the highest rates of suicide, drug addiction, alcoholism, divorce and juvenile delinquency in the world.<sup>1</sup> Of all the things that this might spell out, one may be that pain is necessary in this life and will never be wholly eliminated on this side of eternity. The question of purpose in pain then looms large as an essential question in life.

### **I. Concepts of Perspective and Goodness**

It has been stated that the contemporary discussion of evil in the world, at least philosophically, might trace its beginnings to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume.<sup>2</sup> Hume threw down the gauntlet of challenging God's character with whether or not He is willing but not able to prevent evil or whether He is malevolent and lacks a willingness to prevent the evil that is plain to see in this world. In entering into a dialogue of this nature it first is important that certain parameters be outlined. Two main concepts that bear greatly on this discussion are the aspects of our ability to perceive and therefore make judgments regarding potential benefits of the pain that is allowed in this world and then also a solid and working definition of what is called good. These two areas of our "perspective reach" and a definition of "good" may lay a stable foundation for a more clear perspective on this subject of pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, Editor, "The Problem of Evil," (New York; Oxford University Press, 1990), page 175, 176

<sup>2</sup> Stephen T. Davis, Editor, "Encountering Evil," (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), page 146

Stephen Wykstra in his philosophy of CORNEA (Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access) outlines parameters of appearance regarding what we may or may not know or make statements about regarding evil.<sup>3</sup> Wykstra basically lays down a sense of limitation in what we may or may not say regarding the potential benefits or lack thereof in seemingly gratuitous evil. Such limitations from the standpoint of human perception and the consequent development of a fully developed hypothesis are further outlined by William P. Alston who rigorously details the cognitive limitations of the human intellect.<sup>4</sup> Many areas of knowledge then may be brought to bear in support of this particular argument regarding the many aspects of life and future outcomes from pain that we simply do not know. Our inherent cognitive limitations then establish some well defined barriers of understanding, preventing us from premature conclusions regarding the benefits or lack thereof for pain in life.

In the consideration of pain in this world then we also must define what is good and beneficial and what is neither good nor beneficial and we must do so within the confines of our limited cognitive abilities as mentioned above. Marilyn McCord Adams points out the well developed idea that God in His interaction with us is not, from a biblical point of view, a pleasure-maximizing God.<sup>5</sup> This essentially defines God's goodness to then include the possibility that pain is allowed for a positive result. It outlines the reality that goodness at least includes some benefit in this present world and/or the world to come from the pain and difficulties that God in His innate goodness allows us to experience. Norman L. Geisler addresses the human side of this when he rightly suggests that we truly do not want God to intervene at every difficulty for our good in the form of our best interest. We do not want Him to intervene with filling our mouth with cotton if we say something negative about Him and we do not want God to explode our pen

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, "The Problem of Evil," page 151, 152

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, Editor, "The Evidential Argument From Evil," (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1996), page 120

<sup>5</sup> Adams, "The Problem of Evil," page 210

if we write something against Him. At best, we only want God to intercept some evil actions.<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis also addresses this important aspect of God's love for us shown in trials He allows because as he says, "He does not house-train the earwig or give baths to centipedes."<sup>7</sup> He reminds us that God thinks more of us than to simply leave us to our own impulses and desires. He has purpose and design in all He allows. Pain then becomes an important tool for our betterment in the hands of an all-seeing God of eternity. Our part is to seek out His devices and ways. This is best and first accomplished by trusting in His goodness and His purposed outcome and not trusting our limited perspective or our own definition of goodness. We trust instead that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (I John 1:5), that there is nothing condemnable nor is there ever injustice with the Almighty (Job 34:10).

## **II. Arguments of Lewis and Frame**

One of the major considerations in the search to understand pain in the world is tied in with whether or not this world can be considered the best possible world given all the possibilities of worlds that could have been created. Since God is thoroughly good then He would of necessity desire to create a good world in all possible respects. G. W. Leibniz and others have argued that this world in spite of all its evils is indeed the best possible of all worlds out of the very logic of creation where certain evils must be allowed in order to produce some of the greater goods in man.<sup>8</sup> Both John Frame and C.S. Lewis generally agree on this point on the basis of the best possible world requiring free souls who must be allowed to choose for themselves without restriction. It is this power of choice then also that plays an important role in this best of all possible worlds. In the context of the free will of every creature God is then let off the hook (so to

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<sup>6</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "The Roots of Evil," (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), page 75

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain," (San Francisco; Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), page 36

<sup>8</sup> John M. Frame, "Apologetics to the Glory of God," (Phillipsburg, New Jersey; P&R Publishing, 1994), page 157

speak) with regard to moral evils that come about as a result of man's choices. Lewis rightly concludes that to leave out the possibility of pain in a world of order and free wills would be a contradiction. One would find that life itself would be excluded in such a scenario.<sup>9</sup> The consequential reason or purpose of the permission of evil in the context of free will then becomes a key point in this consideration. As John E. Hare states, "the existence of evil would only prove the non-existence of God *if* we could add the premise that God could have no reason for allowing evil to exist."<sup>10</sup> This reality opens the door to the argument of John Hick and others all the way back to Irenaeus that soul-making is a strong argument for the existence of pain in this best possible world of choices. This *making of the soul* then puts pain and evil in the category of a necessity. Although John Frame argues that not all suffering builds character, that seems to be an argument forgetting the contingency of the possible wrong use of free choice. If character is not built in trial, it would not necessarily be the fault of the context of life nor would it be God's fault. We are reminded in scripture that tribulation works patience (Romans 5:3) and that other goods also emanate from that point onward. If we do not experience the patience that God designs from the tribulation of our lives then we can hardly blame Him. We are the ones living our lives. We are the ones who need to choose rightly, in avenues that produce the fruit of benefits from our tribulations. Stephen Davis argues further that pain also reveals to us that something is wrong that needs amended in our lives. Pain helps to take away satisfaction with ourselves and draws us toward God. It humbles us, shows us our frailty and turns our attention to the heavens for which we were ultimately made.<sup>11</sup> Frame seemingly has missed that sense of personal accountability in this process, an accountability to turn toward God in the midst of suffering. Thomas Aquinas takes this even further in his demonstration that pain and suffering are God's medicine for the

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, "The Problem of Pain," page 25

<sup>10</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, Editor, "Evidence for Faith," (Dallas; Probe Books, 1991), page 233

<sup>11</sup> Davis, "Encountering Evil," page 79

spiritual cancer of sinful character.<sup>12</sup> All things considered, the potential for building character stands as a strong reason for the existence of pain in a world constructed by a good God.

In considering the best possible world as well as the free will and soul-making of individuals, one covers major ground with regard to understanding pain in a world of good. Moral evil is therein answered quite conclusively but gratuitous evil is not quite addressed. Gratuitous evil may have some connection with the overall continuity and stability of the environment as suggested by some but this is hardly a satisfactory response. With gratuitous evil in nature C.S. Lewis responds the best when he rightly suggests that we do not know what consciousness is possessed by a fawn in the forest (for example) who is dying as the result of a fire. Lewis has said, “a great deal of what appears to be animal suffering need not be suffering in any real sense. It may be we who have invented the ‘sufferers’ by the pathetic fallacy of reading into the beasts a self for which there is no real evidence.”<sup>13</sup> This reality eliminates a good deal of what is considered gratuitous evil. Alston’s delineation of our limited perspective also reminds us of our inability to fully search out and understand gratuitous evil in the context of time and nature. Lewis therefore may be perfectly correct.

### **III. The Greater Good**

It is John Frame who points out that the greater good defense where God uses evil for His own purposes is the only defense with scriptural support.<sup>14</sup> If this world is indeed the best of all possible worlds, created by a Good God who presents to us free will to choose and consequences to match our choices, and if this making of the soul is part and parcel of the plan of the ages then we can know that good shall eventually come from situations of pain. Some of these goods we

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<sup>12</sup> Snyder, “The Evidential Argument from Evil,” page 55

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, “The Problem of Pain,” page 137

<sup>14</sup> Frame, “Apologetics to the Glory of God,” page 184

will take note of with satisfaction but others we very well may not observe this side of heaven. Trusting in God's goodness then becomes all-important. This idea then takes on further significance in the words of C. S. Lewis who points out our limitations to fully grasp the goodness of God by saying, "it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel."<sup>15</sup> Understanding the greater good in life is intimately linked with understanding God Himself, walking with Him and trusting in His goodness as a precedent set down by biblical truth.

### **CONCLUSION:**

All things considered, for humanity to trust in God and His goodness in the midst of a world containing much pain is certainly a key component for wrestling with the reality of that pain in this world. The lesson comes out clearly in the biblical book of Job where Job himself seeks an explanation from the Almighty as to the reason and purpose behind his terrible plight. Graciously, God does eventually enter the scene of pain for Job but interestingly does not respond to any of Job's questions and actually does not explain Himself at all. God instead reveals Job's ignorance by asking question after question of him. Job can answer none of those questions and rightly sees himself to have been out of line in questioning God in the first place. This need for Job to have trusted God in spite of evil circumstances is further enhanced by the consequence of Job's friends. God rebuked his three oldest friends but did not rebuke Elihu. This informs us that the words of Elihu have merit. Elihu's response included the need for all of them to focus their attention in the direction of trusting God. If we would do the same in our pain and trials then we may find that the world around us is drawn to the God of all things because our gaze is riveted to Him. If our gaze as believers then is riveted to His goodness then we also will see our place in this world is to meet the needs of others in their pain. Our lives and the ways we meet needs and

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis, page 30

alleviate suffering in the world are the best response to a world in search of a solution to the problem of pain. An apologetic of touch and healing then would transform our world in the best possible way.

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