

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

Lecture 33

Refuting the Probabilistic Version of the Problem of Evil

We've been looking at the evidential, or probabilistic, version of the problem of evil and suffering. I suggested last time two responses to this problem. First that we are simply not in a good position to say with any confidence when some instance of evil or suffering enters our lives that God probably doesn't have a morally sufficient reason for permitting that. Given our finitude in time and space, our cognitive limitations and intelligence and insight, we simply aren't in a position to make those kinds of probability judgments with any confidence.

But secondly, I also suggested that probabilities are relative to background information, and that even if God's existence were improbable relative to the evil and suffering in the world alone, that doesn't mean God's existence is improbable. Because when you consider the full scope of the evidence, God's existence may be very probable. To illustrate, relative to the facts of reproductive biology, my existence is enormously improbable. Of all those hundreds of millions of sperm, what are the chances that just that one would unite with my mother's egg to make me? Relative to the facts of reproductive biology, my existence is incredibly improbable. So should I believe that I do not exist? Obviously not because I have very good reason to think that I exist even given any improbability that my existence might have relative to the facts of reproductive biology taken in isolation. In exactly the same way, when we consider the full scope of the evidence, God's existence is probable even given any improbability that evil and suffering might be thought to cast upon God's existence. In particular I argued evil itself is an argument for God's existence. Because in the absence of God, there is no absolute standard of good and evil, right and wrong. So in the absence of God there really are no objective moral values or duties, and hence if you think evil exists or that suffering ought not to exist, you have thereby committed yourself to the objectivity of moral values and duties. And that entails that God exists. So even on a superficial level, evil might seem to call into question God's existence, on a more fundamental level evil actually is evidence for God's existence.

Those two points alone, I think, are sufficient to turn back the force of the atheist's evidential argument from evil. But I now want to make a third point, and that is that Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the co-existence of God and suffering in the world. That is to say, if the Christian God exists then it is not really so improbable that evil and suffering should also exist. It actually turns out that the problem of evil is much more difficult for a sort of bare-boned theism – a mere monotheism – than it is for Christianity. For Christianity entails certain doctrines that increase the probability that suffering and evil should exist.

What are these doctrines? Let me mention four of them this morning.

1. *The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God.* This is absolutely fundamental. The reason that the problem of suffering seems so difficult, I think, to most people is because they just naturally assume that if God exists then his goal for human life is happiness in this life. God's role is to make a comfortable environment for his human pets. But on the Christian view this is false. We are not God's pets. The goal of human life is not happiness as such, but rather the knowledge of God which in the end will produce true and everlasting human fulfillment.¹ But much of the suffering in life may be utterly pointless with respect to the goal of producing human happiness. But it may not be pointless with respect to the goal of producing a deeper knowledge of God. Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer himself or on the part of those around him.

Of course, whether or not God's purpose is actually achieved through our suffering is going to depend on our response to it. Do we respond with anger and bitterness against God? Or do we respond with deeper faith and trust and dependency in God. Whether or not God's purposes are achieved through our suffering all depends upon how we respond to it.

Because God's ultimate goal for human history is the knowledge of himself (which will, in the end, bring eternal happiness to people), history cannot be seen in the proper perspective apart from considerations of the kingdom of God. The purpose of human history is establishing the kingdom of God. God's desire is to draw as many people freely into his kingdom. It may well be the case, I think, that suffering is part of the means that God uses to draw people freely into his kingdom.

Is this some sort of airy-fairy speculation on my part? Not at all! A reading of a missions handbook like *Operation World* by Patrick Johnston reveals that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe hardship, both moral and natural evil, that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates while the growth curves in the indulgent West are basically flat. Consider for example the following reports from *Operation World*.²

China: It is estimated that 20 million Chinese lost their lives in Mao's Cultural Revolution. Christians stood firm in what was probably the most widespread and harsh persecution the Church has ever experienced. The persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since 1977, the growth of the Church in China has no parallels in history. Researchers estimate that there were 30 to 75 million Christians by 1990. Today, it is estimated to be somewhere between 90 million

¹ 5:12

² Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 164, 207-8, 214.

and 100 million. Mao Zedong unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history.

El Salvador: The 12-year civil war, earthquakes, and the collapse of the price of coffee, the nation's main export, impoverished the nation. Over 80% live in dire poverty. An astonishing spiritual harvest has been gathered from all strata of society in the midst of the hate and bitterness of war. In 1960 evangelicals were 2.3% of the population, but today, they are around 20%.

Ethiopia: Ethiopia is in a state of shock. Her population struggles with the trauma of millions of deaths through repression, famine and war. Two great waves of violent persecution refined and purified the Church, but there were many martyrs. There have been millions coming to Christ. Protestants were fewer than 0.8% of the population in 1960, but by 1990 this may have become 13% of the population.

Examples like this could be multiplied. For example, since the recent earthquake in Haiti there have been tremendous revival such has never been seen throughout Haiti and people coming to faith in Christ.³ The history of mankind has been a history of suffering and war; and yet it has also been a history of the advance of the Kingdom of God.

In 1990, the U. S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena released information charting the ratio over time between Bible-believing Christians in the world and non-Christians in the world. Neither category includes merely nominal Christians. These are Bible-believing or evangelical Christians in the world compared to non-Christians in the world. In the first century when Christianity first began, for every Bible-believing Christian in the world there were thousands of non-believers. By the time of the Middle Ages, that figure had shrunk to about 1,000 non-believers for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. By the year 1900, that ratio had shrunk to 27 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. And by 1990, that figure had shrunk to 7 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. According to Patrick Johnstone, "We are living in the time of the largest in-gathering of people into the Kingdom of God that the world has ever seen." I think that it is not at all improbable that this astonishing growth in the Kingdom of God is due in part at least to the presence of terrible suffering in the world.

2. Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and his purpose. Rather than submit to and worship God, people rebel against God and go their own way and so find themselves alienated from God, groping in spiritual darkness, morally guilty before God, and pursuing false gods of their own imagination. The terrible human evils in the world are simply testimony to the state of man's depravity in this condition of spiritual alienation from God. So the Christian isn't really surprised at the terrible moral evils in the world.

On the contrary, he expects them. The Scriptures say that God has given mankind up to the evil that it has freely chosen. He doesn't intervene to stop it. He lets human depravity run its course. In Romans 1, three times (in verses 24, 26, and 28) Paul says, "God gave them up" to the evil and depravity that they had chosen. He lets human evil run its course. This only serves to heighten mankind's moral responsibility before God as well as our wickedness and our need of his forgiveness and moral cleansing.

3. God's purpose is not restricted to this life, but it spills over beyond the grave to eternal life. According to the Christian faith, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer that leads into the Great Hall of God's eternity. God promises eternal life to all who place their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. So when God asks his children to endure terrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond comprehension.

When you think about it, the apostle Paul lived a life of incredible suffering. He suffered from both some sort of debilitating physical infirmity (natural evil) as well as from moral evil perpetrated upon him by his persecutors. His life as an apostle was punctuated by "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger" (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).⁴ And yet he went on to write, "We do not lose heart for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Paul lived this life in the perspective of eternity. He understood that the length of this life being finite is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life that we shall enjoy with God. Think about it. The longer we spend in eternity, the more the sufferings of this life shrink by comparison to literally an infinitesimal moment. That is why Paul could call the suffering in this life a "slight momentary affliction." He wasn't being insensitive to people who suffer terribly. On the contrary, he was one of them. But he understood that these sufferings are simply overwhelmed by the ocean of everlasting joy and glory which God will give to those who trust him.

It could well be the case that there is suffering in the world which serves no earthly good whatsoever. It is pointless from a human point of view, but God permits it simply that he might overwhelmingly reward in the afterlife those who have borne such suffering in faith and confidence in God.

4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable good. The passage that I cited from 2 Corinthians also makes this point. Paul imagines as it were a scale on which the sufferings and the miseries of this life are placed on one side and on the other side is

⁴ 15:12

placed the glory which God will bestow upon his children in heaven. And Paul says, “the weight of glory” is so great that it is “beyond comparison” with the suffering. Think about it. To know God, the infinite locus of goodness and love, is an incomparable good. It is the fulfillment of human existence. It is what we were made for. Thus the sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. So the person who truly knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, “God is good to me.” Simply in virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.

These four Christian doctrines greatly increase the probability of the co-existence of God and the suffering and evil in the world. Thus they in turn decrease any improbability that the evil and suffering in the world would seem to cast upon the existence of God.

The atheist might respond at this point that we have no reason to think that these four doctrines are true. Whoa! Wait a minute! He is trying to shift the burden of proof again! Remember, it is the atheist who says that the suffering in the world makes God's existence improbable. So it is entirely legitimate for you to respond, “Not the Christian God!” The atheist needs to show that the Christian God is improbable relative to the suffering in the world. In order to do that he either needs to show that these four doctrines are probably false or else show that God's existence is still improbable given the truth of these four doctrines. But in either case he has the burden of proof here. It is not up to you to prove that these doctrines are true. It is up to the atheist to show that they are either probably false or that evil and suffering is still highly improbable given the truth of these doctrines.⁵ The atheist is the one who has the burden of proof here. Don't let him foist it upon you.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I actually think that the fact that for humans the main drive is happiness and comfort and so on and so forth. That is a huge kind of a mole hill to get over in a lot of cases.

Dr. Craig: Mountain!

Student: Yeah. Because I think somebody said something on stage one time that she thought that Christianity was, *You give your life to God and then you get the American dream.* I don't know if those were her exact words, but I think a lot of us when we come to God that is what we expect. We think if we stop living a worldly way everything starts going right. I think when you are battling the problem of evil, you are also battling that bad theology. You have to kind of put the two together and say, *OK, it is not about your happiness. It is about you knowing God and about more people knowing God.* Obviously when you see more suffering groups of people dig down and seek God.

Dr. Craig: I think this is absolutely foundational, and moreover I think pastorally it is incredibly important, as you say, when we go through apparently pointless evil and suffering in our lives as well to realize that God isn't there to make us happy. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised when we suffer as we do.

Student: I once heard . . . one of the ways that I like to respond to unbelievers when it comes to the problem of evil and suffering, also what gives me great comfort when I am suffering, is to say not only all the things that you just said but also to reflect on Jesus' suffering on the cross and saying that . . . I once heard Dr. Peter Kreeft say that the problem of evil puts God on the hook but with Jesus God *is* on the hook, or something like that. Just a little play on words. But it is to say . . . I think it was Malcolm Muggeridge who said something like, *I couldn't worship a God who is far away and just kind of stood off, but the fact that God enters into our suffering and I look at the cross and I think, "That is the kind of God that I need in a world with so much suffering."*

Dr. Craig: It is remarkable that we follow a crucified Savior, isn't it? Jesus is called a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. That gives us strength. I am going to draw on this point when we get to the emotional problem of evil. I think that is where this is most relevant.

Student: Could the atheist respond by saying that we are begging the question – that we are assuming that God exists – because when we say that knowledge of God is extremely valuable we must assume that God exists for that proposition to hold.

Dr. Craig: No, it is not begging the question because, as I said a moment ago, it is the atheist who is shouldering the burden of proof here. When we wanted to affirm that God exists then we have to bear the burden of proof and give some sort of evidence for that or justification at least for why we think we are warranted in believing that God exists. But now what we are looking at is arguments for atheism. This is the atheist's attempt now to show that it is improbable that God exists. We are not assuming that God exists. We are just saying relative to the evil and suffering in the world, it is not improbable that God exists, especially the Christian God. If the Christian God exists, we would expect to see an awful lot of suffering and evil in the world. So come on, Mr. Atheist, give us your argument here to show that it is improbable in a significant way that the Christian God exists.

Again, it is so easy to allow the atheist to shift the burden of proof in these discussions onto the Christian shoulders, and therefore it is really important that we understand exactly who is the one making the claim here and who is the one now that is simply on the defense.⁶

⁶ 25:02

Student: I am continuously debating a friend of mine who used to be a believer and he walked away. When I shared with him about the miracles of healing and so forth and so on, most people he sees are not healed. Because he is not healed, that is evidence for him not to believe in God. How would you respond?

Dr. Craig: I don't appeal to miraculous healings as arguments for God's existence. If you look at my book *On Guard* or *Reasonable Faith*, I think that there are weightier arguments for the existence of God than pointing to miracles. I think they can be part of a cumulative case. Having given arguments for God as the creator and designer of the universe and the source of moral values and as the best explanation for who Jesus of Nazareth was, his radical claims, his resurrection from the dead, then I think one could say, "And you know God still does miracles today" and point to something like Craig Keener's two-volume work on miracles.

Student: I shared that with him.

Dr. Craig: I think that could be part of a cumulative case. But I wouldn't ever appeal to that as my sole foundation for why we ought to believe in God.

Student: It is not the sole foundation, but he just says basically God has a bad plan because there is so much evil in the world, and lots of people aren't healed. You can't deal logically with him. He is more emotional.

Dr. Craig: Oh! OK, that is why you need to share with him point (1) – the purpose of life is not human happiness, so we shouldn't be surprised at all that God doesn't heal everyone. That will come with the resurrection. But look at 2 Corinthians 4 where Paul talks about how he says "though this outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." He says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." This is to show that the power belongs to God and not to us. Whether you like that view or not, that is what Christianity teaches. Christianity is not the health-and-wealth Gospel that says everybody ought to be healed or prosperous. It is a Christianity that says God will renew you in the inner spirit as you endure a life that is prone to suffering, corruption, and ultimately death, and is under the power of Satan and his minions and therefore filled with wickedness and evil. It is not a Pollyanna-ish view of the world.

Student: Where is that verse?

Dr. Craig: That is 2 Corinthians 4 that I was quoting before. That whole chapter is wonderful.

Student: It has been a while since I've seen the debates; I don't remember a lot of it. I remember you debated Walter Sinnott-Armstrong on the problem of evil and you were giving the same sort of argument you've been giving the Defenders class. I remember one example when he was giving his speech he was leading with attempting to show that

gratuitous evil and suffering exists – it was something about how he gave this example of what about a child who has some really horribly painful debilitating condition where shortly after birth they just die. Examples like that seem to be such a clear example, so he says, of pointless suffering because it didn't benefit the child, it didn't benefit the parents, so it just seems obvious that that is an example of gratuitous evil since there are so many ways a loving God could have prevented that.

Dr. Craig: Certainly he could have. OK, so how would you respond to an example like that?

Student: I guess I would just appeal to what you were saying earlier – you don't know, because what if it does have this ripple effect that causes some other good to come about? Maybe the parents end up learning something from this and maybe they end up turning more to God or something, and therefore they are saved.

Dr. Craig: Yeah. We just don't know. That is absolutely right.

Student: I have encountered people who will ask, “Why didn't I get an answer to a particular prayer?” I forgot who I said this to, but I said, “Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed, 'May this cup pass from me.' He didn't get that. He got crucified instead.” It was a revelation to them. I said, “Jesus didn't get what he prayed for.” And they were so just flabbergasted by that because they had been steeped in the health-and-wealth prosperity doctrine their entire Christian life.

Dr. Craig: This is so important. Notice one other feature of Jesus' prayer. He ends that prayer by saying, “Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done.”⁷ I think that that ought to be at least tacitly the prayer of all of us when we do pray for things like medical recoveries or healings or things of that sort. It may well be that God's will is that that person not be healed and that something terrible happen. That is his sovereign discretion.

Student: For every one of us, death is inevitable.

Dr. Craig: Yes, eventually.

Student: I've seen people who feel guilty . . . they believe that they would go on living if they just had enough faith. That is really sabotaging yourself because you are not . . . it is bad theology.

Dr. Craig: It is, and as you say it can be very self-destructive because of the doubts and the unanswered questions that it engenders.

Student: Here is one of Jesus' promises that you don't hear much about. In John 16:33 he said, “In this world you will have trouble but take heart I have overcome the world.” The

Greek word there is *thlipsis* (Strong's 2347) meaning “oppression, affliction, or tribulation.” So we are promised that we will have that.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that is right. And also in 1 Peter (I can't cite the verse exactly) where he says all who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. This is our lot. We shouldn't be surprised.

Student: Just to connect some dots with an earlier point - when I was 33 I had cancer. I went through the whole surgery, chemo, radiation. I didn't know why or how that fit into God's plan. I think that from the parent of the child that seems to die for no good reason, sometimes not only is it, like you mentioned, an opportunity for the parents to exercise faith and trust God and say, “Though he slay me, I trust him” that is also . . . we don't know what the ripple effect is on other people who see how they handle that tragedy. Even though I never lost faith through my journey through that, I was really surprised. Countless people who said that their faith had been strengthened or they had been inspired because they saw how we handled it as a family. Even in the chemo room where you'd think this would be a field ready for harvest – right? - I found that in trying to share Christ with people in the chemo room, that those people were more worried about losing their hair than losing their lives. I just thought they are so vain. It is just stunning how even in the face in a lot of cases almost certain death that they were so much more concerned with how they look. I was fine with seeing my hair leave. *[laughter]*

Dr. Craig: You look great!

Student: Thanks! But so many people . . . even the nurse right before I went in for surgery said, “You are so joyful. I've never seen anyone headed into surgery as joyful as you are. What is the reason for that?” And I thought, “God! How could you tee that up any better to be ready for an answer for the hope that lies within?” You never know what that hardship is going to lead to or what seeds were planted or how other people's faith is impacted.

Dr. Craig: Thank you! That is a wonderful testimony. And we are glad you are still here with us as well.

END DISCUSSION

Let's wrap up this discussion. In summary then, the evidential version of the problem of suffering just can't be put through successfully. It requires probability judgments which are beyond our ability. It fails to take into account the full scope of the evidence. And it is diminished in force when it comes to the Christian God.

Since neither the logical nor the evidential version of the problem of evil goes through, I think that the intellectual problem of suffering and evil fails as a disproof of the existence of God.

But when I say “fails” I mean “fails intellectually.” The anguish of the suffering and the gnawing doubt may still remain. That brings us back to the emotional problem of evil. I’ve already said that I think for most people the problem posed by suffering is really an emotional problem. That will be the question we will want to turn to next week.⁸