

A Supplemental on the Sovereignty of God and the exhaustibility of God's decrees over all things whatsoever that happens:

The "problem" of pain and suffering in the world

Is suffering an "ultimate" problem of faith in a Sovereign God? E.g. does it deny either God's absolute goodness or God's absolute power? (c.f. WCF 2.2, 3.1-3)

1. Note that paragraph WCF 3.1 indicates an *awareness* of the common "objections" to the idea of God's ordaining all things; yet, it also denies that any of the common objections are valid. That is, the Confession affirms *both* God's sovereign ordination of all things *and*:
 - a. neither is God the author of sin,
 - b. nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures;
 - c. nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.
2. What is denied in paragraph 2?
3. What, specifically, is affirmed in paragraph 3?

A. From the vantage point of a-priori skepticism:

Short Version:

1. A Perfectly good and all-powerful God would not allow evil.
2. There is evil
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3. Therefore God does not exist

Unpacked Version:

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 now how.
5. If evil does exist, then God is either not all-good, all-powerful or all-knowing.
6. If God loses one of these attributes, He stops being God.
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7. Therefore, God does not exist.

The Fundamental Assumption: Ultimate evil. (3 options)

Ultimate Evil: That evil that is utterly pointless. Evil with a good purpose ceases to be ultimate evil.

B. From the vantage point of a-priori faith:

Problem Restated:

1. If God exists, he does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. There is pointless evil from our perspective.
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3. God does not exist.

Theocentric Response:

1. If God exist, he does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. God does exist.
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3. Therefore there is no utterly pointless evil.

Fundamental Perspective:

Theology interprets suffering rather than suffering interpreting Theology.
God-centered Perspective vs. Human centered perspective.

C. The Testimony of the Redemptive History:

The Exodus: God's love in Israel's Suffering:

Ex. 10:1 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,

Rom 9:16 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.

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The Cross: God's love in Christ's Suffering

Acts 2:23 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. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

D. Testimony of Scripture:

Romans 5:3-5 ... we exalt in hope of the glory of God, and not only this, but we also exalt in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 8:18-25 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ... For in Hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

1 Peter 1:6-7: In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:5-11ff:...All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

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

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.

The fall... to that doctrine, man is now a horror to God and to himself and a creature ill-adapted to the universe not because God made him so but because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free-will... Christianity asserts that God is good; that he made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil.

E.g. What is "normative" for a Christian in this present age with respect to suffering? (Not to necessarily diminish the normative aspects of God's Kingdom that is now with respect to the "tastes" of heaven now-- but even as the Kingdom of God is now present, it is present in the midst of the Kingdom of darkness which will result in the inevitable "suffering." Yet for the Christian, even this suffering is controlled by God so as to be "disciplines" rather than "punishment" for the Christian.)

In the New Covenant, the nature of our union with Christ is such that we "suffer with him, in order that we may be glorified with him." It is not exceptional, but normative, within our administration, for the outer man to be "wasting away" even as the inner man is being renewed. T. David Gordon

E. The Testimony of a Suffering Christian: (c.f. attached letter)

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Dear R.L. Dabney:

Yours of the 28th, just received, relieved a tension of feeling which has held me painfully ever since Mrs. Dabney's last. I dreaded to hear, and then to hear you are in any degree better was an inexpressible comfort. It melted me to hear of your prayers for faith and dying grace. The stress of such constant and severe bodily pain is enough of itself to try you; and the tempter is sure to use it to affect your hope. Pray on, dear old soldier, of course; but listen to me awhile. I want to give you a morsel of honey out of one of my dead lions, though, in fact, there is a large herd of them still living, and they roar on me often till I am sick with fears. You want more faith. Do you remember, in the stress of your trial, how faith comes? Let me remind you, although you know it. You know we are sanctified through the truth. Sanctification is just the growth of the particular graces of the spirit, of which faith is one. Just here is where Christians make a great mistake. When they want more faith, or want to know whether the faith they have is the right sort of faith, instead of looking at *the things* to be believed, they turn their eyes inward and scrutinize their *faith*. They want to see something in their faith to trust in, something that will *certify* their faith. Of course, self-examination is all right, but not when it practically substitutes faith for our Lord, grace and righteousness. Even a great theological thinker is as apt to make that mistake when he has come into the practical stress of this awful world as a common Christian. Now, suppose a traveler comes to a bridge, and he is in doubt about trusting himself to it. What does he do to breed confidence in the bridge? He looks at the bridge; he gets down and examines it. He doesn't stand at the bridge-head and turn his thoughts curiously in on his own mind to see if he has confidence in the bridge. If his examination of the bridge gives him a certain amount of confidence, and yet he wants more, how does he make his faith grow? Why, in the same way; he still continues to examine the bridge. Now, my dear old man, let your faith take care of itself for awhile, and you just think of what you are allowed to trust in. Think of the Master's power, think of his love; think how he is interested in the soul that searches for him, and will not be comforted until he finds him. Think of what he has done, his work. That blood of his is mightier than all the sins of all the sinners that ever lived. Don't you think it will master yours? Think of his great righteousness: will it not avail for all you hope to gain? That great work is enough; it needs not to be supplemented; it meets every demand. It warrants you to come into the King's very presence, assured of welcome, because you can come in the name of the King's Son. ... Think of the Master when you want your faith to grow.

Now, dear old friend, I have done to you just what I would want you to do to me if I were lying in your place. The great theologian, after all, is just like any other one of God's children, and the simple gospel talked simply to him is just as essential to his comfort as it is to a milk-maid or to a plow-boy. May God give you grace, not to lay too much stress on your faith, but to grasp the great ground of confidence, Christ, and all his work and all his personal fitness to be a sinner's refuge. Faith is only an eye to see him. I have been praying that God would quiet your pains as you advance, and enable you to see the gladness of the gospel at every step. Good-bye. God be with you as he will. Think of the bridge!

Your brother,

C. R. Vaughan