

The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Justice in God and the Problem of Evil Apologetics Note # 6

In the earlier essay, Apologetics Note #4, I discussed philosopher William Rowe's formulation of the problem of evil and suffering. This essay gives a fuller response to it and suggests that taking seriously justice in God might provide a significant clue as to why God allows as much evil and suffering as he does.

William Rowe's Argument

Rowe's formulation of the problem builds on the premise that there are instances of intense suffering the occurrence of which does not result in any greater good that would outweigh the negative value of the suffering itself. Nor is it the case that these instances of suffering are needed to avoid something worse.¹ The second premise of Rowe's argument is that a wholly good being would prevent intense suffering if he could unless he knew that either its occurring would result in a greater good or its prevention would result in a greater evil. But since premise #1 declares that there are such instances of suffering, it logically follows that there does not exist a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing,² and all-good. And since the God of the Bible is declared to have these characteristics, the conclusion is that he does not exist.²

Rowe's formulation of the argument:

Premise 1: "There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."

Premise 2: "An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."

Conclusion: "There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being."³

Most Christians⁴ have accepted the second premise and therefore are committed to the thesis that, despite the seeming plausibility of the first premise, it must be false. As Rowe points out, if one has strong enough reason to believe that the God exists, then this might reasonably outweigh first premise. It is not logically impossible that greater goods are achieved (or greater evils avoided) by God's allowing every instance of intense suffering that actually occurs. However, for it to be reasonable to believe that this is the case the positive reason or reasons for believing God exists must outweigh the seeming reasonableness of the first premise. Since the first premise seems quite strong, if it is to be outweighed, the reasons for believing God exists must be quite strong.⁵ The aim, however, of this essay is not to assess the strength of the positive reasons

¹ In what follows I will often call this "avoidance of a greater evil."

² In what follows, "God" will refer to the God of the Bible.

³ Rowe, William, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 1-11.

⁴ I believe that this is also true of most Jews. Indeed, much of what is said in this essay with regard to Christian belief also holds true for traditional Jewish belief. Hence, when I refer to "Christians" (or to "Christian belief"), one could, in most instances, add "and Jews."

⁵ Some Christian philosophers, e.g., Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, have argued that the reasonableness of embracing belief in the God of the Bible does not require being able to come up with reasons to show that it is reasonable. They argue that certain things that we quite reasonably believe, we believe not on the basis of other reasons but simply through perception or direct intuition. If everything we believe needed to be supported by other reasons, those reasons would need to be supported by further reasons, and so on, leaving one with an infinite regress. Therefore, some beliefs must be "properly basic beliefs," beliefs not needing further reasons to nonetheless be reasonably embraced. They argue that perception of God or direct revelation from God can provide one with properly basic beliefs. If their argument is correct, it doesn't guarantee that what we think are properly basic beliefs necessarily are, but it does open the door to the possibility that a belief in God (and certain beliefs about God) may be reasonable even if one cannot adduce further reasons for thinking that it is true.

The import of this for the present discussion is that for it to be reasonable to believe that God exists and is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, one does not necessarily need to marshal reasons in support of that belief that outweigh the seeming reasonableness of premise #1. Nonetheless since it seems (at least to many of us) that there are many instances of intense suffering that don't bring about a greater (or avoid a greater evil), this can lead one to question whether the belief in God (the God of the Bible) is properly basic. Thus, although one may not necessarily need reasons for belief in God that outweigh the reasons for believing premise #1, one's conviction about premise #2 needs to be strong enough to override the doubt aroused by the seeming reasonableness of premise #1. (Some of the reasons for thinking that premise #1 is quite strong were elaborated in the earlier essay.)

Some Christians have argued that, given our very limited perspective, we are not in fact in a good position to judge the strength of premise #1. This would significantly reduce the problem for the person who believes in God as described in the Bible. Although Christians believe that human beings are created in the image of God, God is nonetheless quite radically different from us. Also our perspective and our knowledge is quite limited compared to that possessed by God. Hence the question as to whether we are in fact in a good position to judge the strength of premise #1 is a question that needs to be raised. [The response of God to Job, in part, is that he, Job, is not in a good position to understand why God allowed him to suffer so much. This comes through a series of questions, e.g., "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." (Job 38:4)]

for believing in God's existence; it is to argue against premise #2. There can be other reasons why God would allow suffering and evil other than to bring about better outcomes. Furthermore, biblical teaching gives us hints as to the direction in which such reasons may lie.

Since the exploration of what the Bible says will be a significant part of this essay, this essay may be viewed as a theological response to the problem of suffering and evil. However, in the present context, the appeal to points of biblical revelation is philosophically as well as theologically warranted. This is so for two reasons.

First, regardless of whether one accepts the theological points raised, they provide a direction in which an explanation as to why an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good being might allow suffering and evil without supposing that it brings about a greater good or avoids a greater evil. Therefore the argument against belief in God from suffering and evil must show either that this alternative explanation cannot be true or that its plausibility ought to be viewed as too low to be taken seriously. And this implausibility needs to be more than just implausibility from, say, an atheist's perspective. The Christian takes seriously God being able to reveal himself in human language, and he believes that God has done so through inspiring the human authors of the Bible. Given this, he sees no necessity of justifying every biblically revealed claim in terms of antecedent expectation. Such claims may be deemed implausible by the nonbeliever, but unless he, the critic, can successfully show that there are severe problems, philosophically speaking, with the biblical claim, even from the Christian's perspective, his rejection of the claim will carry little weight for the Christian. (The non-believing critic may seek to argue that belief in such divine revelation is rationally untenable, but that is a topic quite different from the problem of suffering and evil.)

Second, the argument against of Judeo-Christian theism from the problem of suffering and evil can be advanced in two ways. One is for the critic to lay out an objective set of moral standards and then to contend that the God of the Bible fails to

However, there are at least two considerations that this kind of response to the problem of evil needs to address: (1) If the affirmation of God being "all-good" is to mean anything, there must be at least a considerable correspondence between our conceptions of what is good and what constitutes the good from God's perspective. (2) A defense needs to be made of the claim that we are not in a good position to judge the strength of premise #1. If one concludes this solely on the prior conviction that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God exists, then the weight of the problem has not really been diminished; the problem (the seeming reasonableness of premise #1) has simply been outweighed. If, however, the thesis that we are not in a good position to judge can be supported by arguments that don't presume God's existence, the seeming reasonableness of premise #1 will itself have been undermined. To achieve this, it is not enough simply to note that our perspective is much more limited than God's. What is needed is support for the thesis that the limitedness of our perspective is indeed apt to keep us from perceiving relevant considerations (considerations of which God is aware and we are not). Yes, our perspective is limited, and yes, God *may* know of greater goods (or greater evils) that we do not perceive, but this does not tell us that this is *likely*. Put another way, having a limited perspective on some issue only puts one in a weak position to make a judgment on that issue if it is deemed reasonable to suppose that one's limited perspective misses relevant considerations.

This is often not an easy matter to assess, but one way of evaluating whether one may well be missing relevant considerations is to try to come up with possibilities which, if known, would alter one's judgment. Failing to come up with any such possibilities does not imply that there are none, but it does strengthen the confidence that one can reasonably place in the judgment one has made. The relevance of this to the problem of suffering and evil is that, if one is unable to conceive of any greater goods (or greater evils) that might justify the amount and distribution of evil and suffering that exists—or even conceive of a domain of knowledge within which such considerations might reasonably be thought to lie—this strengthens the weight that can reasonably be assigned to premise #1, even given our awareness that our perspective is limited.

A final note: It might be argued that, on this issue, one should not give much weight to an inability on our part to conceive of such possible greater goods (or greater evils), but this needs to be argued and not simply presumed.

There are matters about which an inability to conceive of alternate possibilities ought not to carry much weight. If, for instance, one is not an engineer and one ponders possible explanations as to why, say, a particular machine stopped working, one ought not to give much weight to one's inability to come up with plausible explanations. Even if the non-engineer can think of a couple of possible explanations, he ought to take seriously the possibility that the correct explanation may be one which he presently cannot conceive. For the non-engineer to presume that the correct explanation probably lies with one of the few explanations that he is able to entertain is a rather weak presumption. But part of what makes this a weak presumption, is that the non-engineer knows that his understanding of the internal workings of the machine is quite limited as is his understanding of the structural dynamics of the machine's internal mechanisms. Also he, the non-engineer, knows that such matters are often important in understanding why a machine has stopped working.

One could think of this situation as being like a multiple choice question that has as its options the possibilities which the non-engineer is able to imagine, but which also includes "None of the above" as an option. That the correct answer may well be "none of the above" is something that the non-engineer ought to take seriously (particularly if the explanations entertained by him do not seem very plausible). But regarding suffering and evil, the atheist will contend that we cannot even conceive of a domain of knowledge that God may possess and within which may lie the explanation as to why God allows such much suffering and evil. If this is so, it constitutes at least some reason for doubting that there is an adequate explanation. Yes, our knowledge is limited and our perspective is limited, and, yes, this may give rise to judgments on our part that are mistaken, but limited knowledge and perspective does not by itself entail that one should discount those judgments or give them little weight. How much weight one should assign to those judgments will depend on how likely it seems that our limited perspective deprives us of relevant information. If the critic of Christianity (and of Judaism) were right in contending that one cannot even come up with a domain or direction wherein the answer may lie, then premise #1 remains quite strong. (This essay will, in fact, challenge the claim that one cannot even come up with a domain wherein the answer may lie.)

meet those standards. Note: "Objective" here means *independent of what individuals or communities may happen to embrace*. To point out that God's behavior does not line up with a particular culture's moral sensibilities is not sufficient to show that God is not wholly good. It must be shown these moral sensibilities are objectively correct. But it is no small task for someone who is an atheist or naturalist to establish that there is a set of moral values that transcends societal consensus, much less to lay out what those values are.

Given this, it is much easier for the critic to advance the argument as a problem of internal coherence or tension within the beliefs that Christians embrace. If this second approach is taken, then it is philosophically appropriate for the Christians to appeal to the content of their beliefs in responding to this charge.⁶⁷

Before turning to the aspects of biblical teaching which are relevant to a response to Rowe's argument, a philosophical question regarding ethics needs to be raised.

Utilitarian vs. Deontological Ethics

As noted in the previous essay, Rowe's argument seems to presume a utilitarian view of ethics. Ethical utilitarianism takes an act (thought or character trait) as being right or wrong in terms of the consequences to which it gives rise. For example, if telling a lie in a particular situation gives rise to better consequences than telling the truth (and the agent judges that this will be so), then, according to utilitarianism, telling a lie in that situation is the morally right thing to do.⁸

In contrast with utilitarian ethics there is "deontological ethics." The deontologist maintains that what makes an act right or wrong is not just the consequences that result from it. Consequences are often relevant to what is morally right or wrong, but, at root, right and wrong are intrinsic to the kinds of actions, attitudes or principles in question. Consequences can be relevant in knowing how to apply principles and they can have relevance in how one weighs competing principles, but the consequences are not themselves determinative of moral right and wrong. The statement, "The end does not justify the means," reflects a deontological posture towards ethics.⁹

Now, Rowe's argument appears to be thoroughly utilitarian. Premise #2 contends that any instance of intense suffering that a wholly good being permits, and which he could have prevented, must have been permitted in order to bring about a greater good (or avoid a greater evil).¹⁰

⁶ In a debate I sketched the argument present in this essay, and in the Q&A a person commented that she thought that my explanation was clever but rather fanciful and *ad hoc*. (*Ad hoc* speculation is speculation made to rescue a theory from adverse evidence and which does not flow naturally from the theory itself.) But I pointed out that if the problem of evil is understood as an attack on the internal coherence of Christian beliefs, it is not illegitimate philosophically to appeal to anything that is a part of the set of beliefs that Christians in fact embrace. And because my thesis flows out of what the Bible actually teaches, it is not *ad hoc*. It is not a proposal created out of a clever imagination, a proposal appealing to extra-biblical ideas concocted in my head; it is—for the most part—an appeal to things that Christians already believe.

⁷ The problems with being able to establish belief in objective moral right and wrong from a naturalist perspective are great enough that many theists have advanced the following argument: Premise #1: If God does not exist then there can be no objective moral right and wrong. Premise #2: There is objective moral right and wrong. Conclusion: God does exist.

⁸ Utilitarianism embraces the principle: What is right is what maximizes overall good results. The concern is to take into consideration every individual and do what will cumulatively be the best overall. Utilitarianism comes in a variety of forms depending on what one thinks constitutes "good" (e.g., pleasure over pain, or happiness, or human fulfillment) and on how one weighs various goods. For much of the 20th century utilitarianism was quite popular amongst secular ethicists, but its popularity has waned considerably. One problem is that it is not hard to imagine situations where a calculation of overall happiness (or overall human fulfillment) goes against quite strong moral intuitions, e.g. justifying what seems an injustice to one person or to one group because this is outweighed by an increase in happiness for the large majority.

⁹ A variant on utilitarianism, "rule utilitarianism," comes closer to the deontological position. It contends that overall good cannot be judged just by the calculated consequences of individual actions. The reason is that violating a moral rule—even if by itself this violation advances overall good—can result in undermining the keeping of that rule. For example, if telling a lie is viewed as morally acceptable whenever it is deemed to advance the overall good, and if many people make such exceptions, then the confidence one can have that others are telling the truth will be eroded.

Hence, for rule utilitarianism, what needs justification in terms of the consequences is the selection of rules, not individual actions. Because of the emphasis on adhering to rules, rule utilitarianism is much closer to the deontological position than is standard utilitarianism. However, the rule utilitarian is still a utilitarian for (a) a rule is right or wrong, not because the behavior in question is intrinsically right or wrong, but because adherence to it is thought to advance the long-term good of the society, and (b) one can still be justified in breaking the rule if the damage to the general observance of the rule is small compared to the good achieved by breaking it.

¹⁰ Indeed, Rowe's argument, as stated, comes close to implying that if an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing God exists, then what we have in the world must be an optimal amount and distribution of suffering. Rowe's argument does not explicitly address whether an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing would bring about an increase in suffering if it resulted in a greater good, but, with this slight change in the argument, the argument would imply that such a being would see to it that the exact amount and distribution of suffering would be optimal. Put another way, the implication of such a being existing would be that this world of ours must be the best of all possible worlds, at least with respect to the amount and distribution of suffering and evil.

I had the opportunity in a personal conversation with William Rowe to ask him if his argument presumed a utilitarian approach to ethics. His reply was that it did not. He suggested that some actions might be viewed as intrinsically right or wrong, and this independently of the consequences. However, he went on to add that if the consequences are great enough (sufficiently bad or sufficiently good), the intrinsic rightness or wrongness can and should be outweighed by the consequences. In short, his reply was that one can be deontological in granting some intrinsic merit or demerit to given kinds of actions (thoughts, etc.) but that the deontological outlook must ultimately give way to a utilitarian outlook once the consequences are great enough. This is a question to which I shall return, but the present point is that Rowe's argument presumes ultimately a utilitarian outlook even if one grants that intrinsic moral value can attach to certain moral rules.

If one takes seriously a deontological perspective on ethics, it presents one with the following possibility:

The reason, at least in part, why God allows so much evil and suffering is not because allowing it achieves a greater good (or avoids a greater evil); rather it is because, in many if not most instances, it would be unjust to prevent or diminish it.

A Response Based on the Character of God

In the earlier apologetics note the contention was made that God cannot act contrary to his character. Whether or not one thinks it logically possible that God could do so, there is no possible way in which God would in fact act contrary to his character. Beings act as they are motivated to act, and if their motivations line up fully behind one course of action and fully against a contrary course of action, then the only way in which the being could take the contrary course of action would be for it to do so accidentally, or in a state of confusion, or through being tricked or manipulated into doing so, or in some other way doing so involuntarily. But none of these possibilities can arise for God, at least not the God that the Bible describes. Hence there is no possible way or circumstance where God would act contrary to his character.

In the earlier essay I also suggested that, not only is it the case that God cannot do anything that is evil¹¹, he also cannot do anything that is unjust.¹² This is because not only is God wholly good, he is also wholly just. Indeed, part of God being wholly good is that he is wholly just.

That God will never do what is unjust rarely gets considered in discussions of the problem of evil, but it constitutes a possible direction in which the explanation may lie as to why God allows so much evil and suffering, an explanation that does not require there to be greater goods achieved thereby (or greater evils avoided).¹³

Part of the reason why justice in the character of God is often ignored is that contemporary preaching (and some contemporary theology) often portrays God as motivated only by love. According to such preaching, love is the sole governing principle in God, and everything God does or allows is an expression of his love. Thus, when God allows (or directly brings about) suffering as punishment, the punishment is viewed as always being redemptive in intent, e.g., as when a loving parent disciplines her child.

It is, of course, true that the Bible speaks of God disciplining those he loves (Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6,10), and the Bible speaks of God "not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Peter 3:9). It is also true biblically that suffering (either inflicted or allowed) can be an expression of mercy. Thus, God's allowing suffering can be for the purpose of helping us see our need for God and turn to him (Psalm 107). The Bible also says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). But this statement does not imply that

¹¹ If God is wholly good, although he may permit suffering and even bring about suffering, it must be that it is justified. God cannot, or will not, do what is genuinely evil.

¹² What is just and unjust for God is not necessarily identical to what is just and unjust for us, but the present contention is that there is an order of justice in the very character of God and he will not act contrary to it. In other words, God may allow something that seems to us to be unjust, but if it were truly contrary to justice as it pertains to God, God could not, or at least would not, do it. The suggestion here is not that there is an order of justice independent of God and to which even God must submit, but rather that the order of justice is part of the very character of God.

¹³ It is worth noting here that if carrying out justice is a part of God's goodness, then one might argue that this carrying out of justice is the greater good that explains why God would allow the suffering and evil that he allows. If one were to take this tact, then the thesis of this essay could rightly be understood as an attack on premise #1 in Rowe's argument. The rebuttal to Rowe would then be that the plausibility of premise #1 rests in thinking that the greater goods achieved (or greater evils avoided) consist in outcomes. But I am opting *not* to treat the carrying out of justice as a greater good, and this for two reasons. First, almost always, when people talk of greater goods (or avoidance of greater evils), what they have in mind are possible outcomes. Second, discussion about greater goods (or avoidance of greater evils) almost always presumes a comparative weighing of the positive vs. the negative, and hence the appeal to a greater good is made with the presumption that it *outweighs* the negative. But it will become apparent as this essay unfolds that, if the argument succeeds, it does so precisely because it challenges that idea of such a scale. To say that doing what is just may *outweigh* the suffering allowed makes it sound as if the scale could tip the other way.

God is *only* love.¹⁴ If all that God does or permits is an expression of God's love, then one is left with the difficulty of explaining the doctrine of hell. God irrevocably consigning the unrepentant to eternal separation from himself hardly seems like an expression of love.¹⁵ There is also the problem that many of the passages that speak of the wrath of God and of God's judgment do not seem exclusively redemptive in intent. Consider the many times when God judges Israel. That judgment is aimed at purging Israel of evil and of turning Jews back to God, but there are those who do not repent, and they simply face the judgment of God.

I will not here argue the case further, but the biblical perspective seems to be that God's perfect goodness (or one might say, his righteousness or holiness) is the central characteristic of God. This goodness manifests itself in justice (in God's role as the perfect judge) and also manifests itself in love and mercy. God's goodness includes his love, but God's goodness is more than just love. God is both the loving father and the judge of all the earth.

A human illustration may help here. Suppose that a mother has a 20-year-old son who is charged with murder. Suppose that he is guilty and the evidence clearly indicates this. Next, suppose that the mother is also a court judge, and suppose that there are no conflict-of-interest rules that prevent her son from being tried in her court. Finally, suppose that she is obliged to preside in the murder trial. Being both mother and judge, she is not free simply to ask, what would a loving mother do? She must fulfill her role as the judge and uphold justice. One can think of the carrying out of justice, the issuing of a just sentence, as being a good thing—and it is—but the sentence is not made right because of greater goods that may or may not arise from it (e.g. reformation of the son, protection for society, or the deterring of others from committing murder). It is right because it is what the son justly deserves.¹⁶ Often when the problem of suffering and evil is raised, appeal is made to what a loving parent would do (an appeal made by both theists and atheists). But God is not just a loving parent; he is the judge before whom all people will one day stand. He is the source of justice as well as love.¹⁷

What potential difference does this make with regard to the problem of suffering and evil? It means that in addition to asking, what would a loving God do or allow, one must ask, what would a just God do or allow? One can then ask, might this

¹⁴ In the very same letter that states "God is love" is the statement "God is light" (1 Jn. 1:5). Light can be a source of life, but the context here is that of God's holiness, his moral purity, which is incompatible with "darkness," incompatible with anything that is not morally pure.

¹⁵ Of course, there are Christians who deny that anyone will be consigned to eternal separation from God, but Jesus in his parables and teaching repeatedly warns of such judgment. Jesus' teaching on hell is found even in those passages that survive the hyper-skeptical scalpel of people like those involved in the Jesus Seminar.

¹⁶ In an essay by C.S. Lewis entitled, "The Humanitarian Theory of Justice" (reprinted in the anthology *God in the Dock*) Lewis argues for a retributive theory of punishment over against what he calls "the humanitarian theory" and. Retributive punishment is punishing a person because he deserves it. The "humanitarian theory" maintains that punishing a person is justifiable only if some good comes from it. If, say, you put a person in prison, it needs to be for one of the following reasons: to reform the individual, to prevent the person from doing further crimes (i.e., to protect society), or to deter others from committing a similar crime. If no such good comes from punishing the person, say, by incarcerating the individual, then it is simply an act of revenge, a motivation unworthy of civilized people—or so the "humanitarian" theory maintains.

Lewis, first, argues that this approach to punishment does not imply that the criminal is treated any better. Indeed for the sake of reformation, protection, and deterrence a person may be incarcerated longer than what he deserves (on the old notion that a punishment is deserved). By contrast, on a retributive view of punishment, the person committing a crime would at least know what kind of punishment to expect, and it would be a punishment that is deemed by society as a fit punishment.

Second, and more importantly, he argues that to abandon the idea of retributive punishment is to lose the notion of *desert*, namely that any particular treatment is *deserved*. And if one loses the notion of desert, then one has lost any notion of justice. Justice is treating persons as they deserve to be treated. If punishment, or lack thereof, is disconnected from what the person deserves, then the concept of justice is lost. Further, if this notion of justice is lost with respect to negative treatment, it is also lost with regard to positive treatment. If how a person ought to be treated is disconnected from what the person deserves, then neither rewards nor punishments have any connection with justice. Justice is something that nearly everyone believes is important, but if one does away with the notion of desert, then there is no justice.

For Christians, justice and desert are not simply invented by human convention; they are rooted in the very character of God and in the order of his creation. Some ways of behaving are appropriate given how we have been created and certain ways of behaving are inappropriate. Of course, for many actions (and attitudes) one needs a stronger word than "appropriate," but the idea is that certain ways of behaving and certain kinds of attitudes are right or fitting, and others are not, and that such standards are rooted in the character of God and, then, in the world God has created.

¹⁷ There is an objection which many may raise at this point, one which parallels an objection that is sometimes called "The Euthyphro Dilemma." In the Platonic dialogue, "Euthyphro," Socrates asks his friend, Euthyphro whether the gods will what is right because it is right, or whether it is their will that makes something right. The dilemma, or supposed dilemma, is that if one tries to found right and wrong on what the gods (or God) wills then saying that God wills what is right is reduced to the statement that God wills what he wills. Hence if saying that God wills what is right is to mean anything, there must be some understanding of the content of right and wrong which is independent of what God wills. But if this is so, or so the argument goes, ethics is not rooted in the will of God. If one replaces "right" with "just," one has a parallel objection to supposing that God is the ground of justice. In a future apologetics note I will address this issue. Here, however, it will suffice to point out that if one's knowledge of what is right and wrong, just and unjust, is at least in part derived from some other source than observing what God does or wills—say, through conscience—the affirmation of God being good or just can have genuine content, and it can still be the case that God is the metaphysical grounding of goodness and of justice.

help account for why God allows so much suffering and evil in the world? To begin to answer these questions it is important to ask whether there is good biblical reason to believe that justice in the character of God does play, or has played, an important role in accounting for God's actions.

Justice and Final Judgment

One that has already been mentioned is the day of final judgment, when everyone will stand before God and be judged by him. Again, if the judgment from God at that time cannot be explained as an expression of love, and if one is to say that it is good, it seems most reasonable to see it as an expression of justice.

Justice and the Cross

God's justice also plays a crucial role at the heart of what Christians call "the gospel," the good news that through Christ's death, forgiveness for sins and reconciliation with God is made possible.

The imagery used to describe what Christ accomplished for us on the cross is rich and varied and taps into a number of Old Testament themes. What is important to note here that most, if not all, of these descriptions imply that what was accomplished on the cross was necessary for forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. The New Testament declares that Jesus "died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3), "gave his life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45), is "our Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7), "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24), became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), was made by God "to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21), is "the atoning sacrifice (propitiation) for our sins" (1 John 2:2; 4:10; Rom. 3:25), came "to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26), is "the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and "freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5). Through Jesus' death God "rescued us from the dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13). "Once you were alienated from God ... But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death ..." (Col 1:21-22). "By his wounds we have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24; Isaiah 53:5). Through the blood of Christ God will "purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9), and "cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death" (Heb. 9:14).

But why was Christ's death necessary? Many presume that if God is omnipotent, then he can do anything that is logically possible; he can do anything that does not involve a logical contradiction. But there seems to be no logical contradiction in the idea of God simply forgiving us. Instead of God sending Christ to the cross, couldn't God simply have forgiven us? The biblical answer seems clearly to be "no." From the various things said in the New Testament, it appears that something like justice in the very character of God required it. According to biblical teaching, we all deserve death—"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23)—and that Christ's death was needed to free us from this fate. Even though God is all-powerful, he could not simply forgive us. To do so may be logically possible, but it would violate justice in the character of God. In the cross, therefore, one sees both the great love that God has for us as well as his justice. As has sometimes been said, justice and love meet in the cross.¹⁸

The cross is the most important illustration of the role that justice has in accounting for God allowing suffering, but there are other hints in the Bible that justice in God's character may be a significant factor in why God allows the suffering and evil that exists in our world.

Justice and Satan's Role in a Fallen World¹⁹

The Bible indicates that Satan (the Devil, "the evil one") has an influence for evil in the world. Why would God permit this of Satan? One could postulate a greater-goods explanation, suggesting, say, that the influence of Satan and the demons in this world is beneficial to our spiritual growth. Perhaps it would be beneficial for us to have to struggle with the ploys of Satan as well as with our own fallen desires and self-centeredness. Alternatively, perhaps it makes our helplessness all that more evident and would encourage us to turn to the only one, God, who is able to deliver us from the great adversary. The Bible, however, does not speak of Satan as being around for our good. God does at times bring about good through even Satan's actions (e.g. Paul's "thorn in my flesh" intended by Satan "to torment me" but which Paul viewed as serving "to keep me from becoming conceited" [2 Cor. 12:7]). Also the New Testament speaks of our need to be delivered "from the power of Satan" (Acts 26:18) But nowhere does it suggest that our being under the power of Satan is for our ultimate good.

¹⁸ There are a host of questions that may be raised as to how this works: E.g., why should the sin of Adam and Eve have had the consequence of breaking their relationship with God? Why would it affect his descendants, including ourselves? Why is it that death is the consequence deserved? Why is it that being relatively good is not enough to bring us back into relationship with God? Why all the emphasis on the need for purity? How it can be just for one person's death to suffice spare all who trust in him? Could the death of any sinless person have sufficed, rather than it being the Son of God incarnate? These are all good questions, but they will not be addressed here. In a future apologetics note I will elaborate more fully on the significance of Christ's death and resurrection and attempt to address some of these questions.

¹⁹ "Fallen world" refers the state of this world in the aftermath of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, an event which not only affected all of their descendants but also has negative ramifications in the world in which we live.

An alternative explanation is suggested in the biblical narrative and teaching. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they were prompted to do so by Satan. Their rebellion towards God appears therefore also to have been a siding with Satan. It is possible therefore that Satan legitimately has some influence upon them and their descendants. This finds confirmation in the language used to describe Satan's relationship to this world. Jesus refers to Satan (here "the Devil") as "the ruler of this world" (John 14:30) and when Jesus speaks of Satan's demise in conjunction with what he, Christ, would accomplish on the cross, Jesus says, "now the prince of this world will be driven out" (John. 12:31). Such language of a limited reign that God has given to Satan comports with the idea that such influence is his just due (given our having turned away from God in the garden and having aligned with Satan). If this is correct, then the limited power that Satan has been granted is not to be explained via some supposed greater good that is achieved, but rather because it was what Satan justly deserved.²⁰

Justice and the Role of Faith in a Fallen World

Another question is why God should principally rely on working through people to accomplish his purposes. When people need assistance and suffer without it, why should God, at least on most occasions, rely on human beings to give the assistance that is needed? And even more important, if the salvation of people typically comes through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:13-15), why would God leave such an important task to human beings? Those who profess faith in Christ so often fail to follow Christ's example and are so often seemingly indifferent when it comes to the proclamation of the gospel. God does sometimes speak directly to people in dreams and visions, but it seems that, for the most part, God seeks to work through human beings and especially through those who trust in him. There are, of course, goods that result from God's working through people (e.g., the good of learning to take responsibility and, with this, the good of our finding our work significant), but do these goods outweigh the suffering and loss resulting from people not doing all that they should? And, of course, some suffering, is beyond what other human beings are able to alleviate.

That another explanation is possible is suggested by some of what is said about the role of prayer and the importance of faith. The promises Jesus gives about prayer are often connected with having faith. And when Jesus healed people there is usually reference to the presence of faith, either on the part of the person being healed or by someone else close to that person (e.g., Mark 2:5). Further, the healing sometimes is explicitly said to be a consequence of that faith. E.g., "Take heart, daughter, ... your faith has healed you" (Matt. 9:22); "According to your faith it will be done to you" (Matt. 9:29); "Your faith has healed you" (Mark 10:52). What's more, we are told in Mark that Jesus could not do many miracles in his hometown of Nazareth because of their lack of faith.

Matt. 13:58: And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Mark 6:5: He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

The question this raises is what is meant by "could not"? The Mark passage seems to indicate something stronger than just that he "did not." Is it simply that, given their lack of faith, he chose not to do so? Or is faith, at least frequently, a requisite condition for the manifestation of God's miraculous work in a fallen world? There are enough instances of God acting where there is no obvious reference to faith that it seems unlikely that faith is always required, but there are plenty of indications that it plays a significant role. The broader question is whether there is something about justice in the character of God that enters into the question as to how, why and when God acts as he does in a fallen world. That, for the most part, God works through people who have faith in him—rather than acting directly—may be due not simply to greater-goods considerations but may be due to this being a fallen world—a world described as under the (limited) reign of Satan—and the just constraints on God's actions that follow from this.²¹ If so, then the importance of faith connects with this being a fallen world and God's just relation to such a world.

Justice and a Reflection on Moral Freedom

Finally, there may be a just connection between our having moral freedom and our living with the consequences of our exercise of that freedom. When God gave us significant moral freedom, it is possible that a just corollary of this freedom is living with the consequences of our actions. If this is so, then God will not (or at least, in general, will not) manipulate the outcomes of our actions so as to optimize the results. This is not an idea explicitly found in the Bible, but it accords with biblical teaching.²²

²⁰ Something very similar to this suggestion appears in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The White Witch (Satan) has been defeated by Aslan (God/Christ), but tells Aslan that the human boy, Edmond, belongs to her by virtue of the order from the beginning of time. (Edmond had in effect sold his soul to her in betraying the other human children.) Aslan agrees but frees Edmond by allowing her to take his own life, Aslan's life, this being possible because of the principle (in the order from before the beginning of time) that if the innocent one gives his life on behalf of the guilty, the guilty shall be set free.

²¹ "Constraints" here does not imply a limit on God's power or something external to God constraining him (and constraining Jesus); rather it indicates the constraint that God himself shows in refusing to act in any manner that would be unjust, where the norms of justice are part of God's very character and will.

²² Amongst Christians there is considerable debate as to what freedom of the will human beings actually have. The reformed tradition in

Consider the following example. Suppose I were to pull out a gun and fire it point-blank at the chest of a person in front of me. If it were incumbent on an all-good God to make sure that no intense suffering occurs unless it is for a greater good (or the avoidance of a greater evil), then if God allows me to kill the person, it must be because, despite appearances, it was for a greater good (or the avoidance of a greater evil). Now, if God both values human freedom and values our learning that actions have consequences, it seems that God could do the following. He could turn the bullet into rubber in mid-flight. When it hits the person, the impact would hurt, but the person wouldn't be killed or permanently injured. The person might then come over and clobber me, which could have the effect of encouraging me to behave better next time. If God always does what he does and allows what he allows because greater good results (or greater evils avoided), then it seems that God would frequently manipulate events in ways like this. Obviously, however, he does not. It is logically possible that a greater-goods explanation exists which explains why God typically doesn't do such things, but, at minimum, it is difficult for us to see how most instances of murder actually bring about a greater good or avoid a greater evil.

If, however, a just consequent of having moral freedom is (in general) living with the consequences—this could be a major factor in accounting for why God allows as much suffering as he does. Consider the Holocaust. Perhaps God allowed six million Jews (and others) to die, not because greater goods somehow would come out of it, but because he justly allows us to live with the consequences of our actions, even when those consequences are as horrific as the consequences of Hitler's actions.²³

If this speculation is correct, does it imply that God never intervenes to ameliorate the consequences of bad actions? No, it need not imply this, but it does imply that when God does intervene there are special circumstances or reasons which justly permit such intervention. The presence of faith may be one such factor, but it need not be the only one.²⁴

If the above speculation is correct, it is important to note that mystery remains, but the problem has shifted. The Bible does not give us a clear map as to why and when God intervenes or acts as he does, nor as to what circumstances need be present when God acts in ways that go beyond the natural unfolding of events.²⁵ Thus, we are still left with considerable mystery concerning why God does what he does and allows what he allows, but the mystery is significantly different from what it would be if we thought that every instance of suffering needed to result in a greater consequent good or result in the avoidance of a greater evil. No longer is there the pressure to suppose that, despite appearances, everything that happens is for the best. Put another way, we are not pushed to suppose that this is the best of all possible worlds—a consequence that seems to follow from saying that everything that happens is for the best.

Justice and Living with Suffering in a Fallen World

The Bible does not teach us that this is the best of all possible worlds. It does not teach us that every instance of suffering or intense suffering is needed to bring about a greater good (or avoid a greater evil). In fact, it tells us that this is world, a world where even "creation groans" (metaphorically speaking) for redemption (Rom. 8:22). It is true the Bible affirms that in many ways this world reflects the goodness of its creator and also that human beings, in part, still reflect the image of God (due

theology emphasizes the sovereignty of God over all that happens and our inability (after the fall) in our own resources to do what is right. Any good that people may perform and any turning of their hearts towards God is due to God's grace in their lives. I am in agreement with this, but unless one is prepared to say that God is the author of evil and that he makes people do what is wrong, one must grant that much of what people do is genuinely displeasing to God and is not what God wants. Much that is said in the Bible implies that we are genuinely responsible for our actions and are not merely puppets manipulated by God. I cannot explore this issue further here, but it seems that if one is to embrace all that the Bible teaches on this topic, one must both acknowledge that nothing happens independently of God's sovereign will and at the same time acknowledge that we are genuine causal agents capable of acting in ways that run counter to what God desires. Things can be part of God's sovereign will that are not pleasing to God. Thus, when one asks of any human action, why it happened, there are two sides to the explanation, God's sovereign will, and human will. Both play a genuine causal efficacy and neither unilaterally dictates the other. There is mystery here, but I suggest that biblical teaching pushes one towards a *both/and* perspective on the relationship between human will and divine will, not an *either/or* dichotomy. (In a future apologetics note I will address the question as to how it is possible for us to have at least some degree of genuine freedom of the will and for God to know what we will do before we do it.)

²³ Does this mean that God is pleased with what Hitler did? Not at all! Indeed, the teaching of the Bible is that God is opposed to all evil, and that his heart goes out to all who unjustly suffer. Nor does this mean that God wants us to sit idly by in the face of human evil. Our relationship to this fallen world and to others within it is different from God's relationship to it and to us. Indeed, far from standing by and doing nothing, we are called by God to oppose injustice and evil. We are commanded: "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). As does God, we are to "hate evil and love good" (Amos 5:15).

²⁴ An aside: As significant as faith may be, having faith in God does not entail that God will give to the Christian that for which he is praying. There are times in the Bible where God enables a person to know what he, God, will do and the person then in faith declares what is about to happen before it happens, but this is quite different from thinking that having enough "faith" (psychological confidence) guarantees that God will give what the person is asking.

²⁵ Since the Bible speaks of God as sustaining the universe moment by moment (Acts 17:28; Heb. 1:3), "the natural unfolding of events" is itself not independent of God. Hence, God is active both in the natural course of event and in what seem to be special acts of divine ordering.

to God's "common grace"²⁶). Also it is true that God is able to bring some good out of every situation for those who trust him (Rom. 8:28), but this does not mean that every situation is itself good or that it is in the long run for the best. Indeed, the Bible portrays this world as being far from the world that God desires it to be. Indeed, the short explanation—and a biblical one—as to why there is so much evil and suffering in the world is that this is a fallen world.

An illustration that may be helpful comes from the *Star Trek* television serials (from *Next Generation*, onward). The space ship has a "holodeck," a part of the ship that generates a virtual reality that feels real as well as looking real. One can do combat drills with opponents who can hit you, even knock you over; and when you get hit, it can hurt. Nonetheless, the holodeck has "safety protocols" that prevent one from being seriously injured or hurt. Upon occasion, however, something happens and the safety protocols get turned off, exposing the crew to serious injury or death.

The holodeck illustration does not match either the separation from God that resulted in the Fall nor the inner change that took place in Adam and Eve when they rebelled against God, but it can be an image of what can happen when the protection of God is removed. In the garden, Adam and Eve were in close communion with God and were under his protection. When they chose to disobey God and their relationship with God was broken, they were thrust out of the garden and into a world where they were no longer under God's complete protection. They found themselves in a dangerous world, one where tsunamis, earthquakes, etc. do take place. For the human race, it is as though "the safety protocols had been turned off." In this world disease and injury do occur, and death will indeed come to all of us.

A second illustration that may be helpful: I once heard a TV news reporter interviewing a 10-year Christian boy who was dying of cancer. The reporter asked the boy, "Don't you ever ask, 'Why me?'" The boy's rather amazing response was, "Why not me?" I am not sure what lay behind his comment, but it is the kind of response that I hope that I would make if I were to find myself in his position. We live in a fallen world where things like cancer can take our lives. God gives general promises to care for and bless his people if they are faithful to him (e.g. Psalm 1)—and I believe that this is true as a general rule and also true of God's ultimate care for us—but this does not mean that Christians are exempt from such things as disease and natural calamities. God does not exempt Christians from the dangers of this fallen world, and my hope would be that if God permitted my acquiring terminal cancer that I would be able to say, "Why not me?" After all, I know a God who is able to carry me through to that final day when—for those who trust in him—suffering and tears will be no more. Prior to his death Jesus said to his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This was a statement about opposition that Christians would face from other human beings, but Christians have the promise that even death is not the last world, thanks to Christ's victory over death (1 Cor. 15:35-57).

Returning to William Rowe

What of William Rowe's contention that, even if some actions are intrinsically right or wrong, just or unjust, a wholly good being would, if he could, override these considerations if the consequences were sufficiently bad. I will say just a couple things about this.

One is that people are sometimes inclined to think that justice is at root a social contract, a community deciding to embrace certain standards of fairness because they will result in a society which they, or at least most them, find desirable. I don't know if William Rowe takes this kind of approach to understanding justice, but if one does, then it certainly seems that Rowe would be right in thinking that the "good" or "right" norm should be overridden if the consequences of keeping to the rule or norm were sufficiently bad.

But the idea that what a person deserves is simply a matter of social contract or legislation is at best problematic. If ideas of justice vary from one society to another and if justice is just a matter of social contract or legislation, then, where societies differ, there can, objectively speaking, be no right or wrong. Deserving a particular treatment is then just what the society decides a person "deserves." But Christians are not alone in thinking that there is an objectivity to justice, that it is not defined by social consensus. (Indeed, I would argue that this presumed objectivity is part of the conventions of the proper use of both the language of justice and the language of moral obligation. But that is not something I will pursue further here.)

A second thing to note is that because individual persons are not the embodiment of the law, it is possible for us to choose to go against the law, be it "law" in the civil sense or in the moral sense. Even in the illustration mentioned earlier of the mother who is also a judge, although she has an obligation to execute justice, she could choose to abrogate her responsibility to carry out justice. Although she is a judge, she could choose to disregard her duties. What makes it possible for people to defy or "override" a law is that they are not the law. But if justice is rooted in the very character God, then God is not separate from the fundamental principles of justice. If it is in his character always to will do what is right and just, then he cannot (or will

²⁶ "Common grace" is the term used in reformed theology to refer to the grace that God gives to all human beings regardless of their behavior. This is reflected in such things as God sending rain and sunshine on the evil and the good alike (Matt. 5:45).

not) choose to do what is unjust. If it were part of the mother's character that she always does what is just, then she would never act unjustly (or at least not intentionally).

Of course, one can object that if the consequences of doing what is just is sufficiently bad, then surely the right thing to do would be to override it. Isn't the insistence on abiding by the rule really an expression of legalism, of insisting on rules when love seemingly dictates that the rule be broken? Wasn't Jesus himself strongly critical of the Pharisees for such a rigid adherence to rules, e.g., refusing to help a person in need on the Sabbath because the rule prohibited work on the Sabbath? Yes this is true, but the error of the Pharisees was rigid adherence to specific rules while ignoring "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Mt. 23:23). If God's always doing what justice demands is a matter of those deeper, more fundamental, principles in the character of God, it does not follow that God should, or could, override such principles when the outcomes of adhering to them seem particularly severe.²⁷

This brings us to a third and final comment. Whether God could or would ever choose to allow sufficiently negative consequences to override fundamental principles of justice is not a question that we can with any confidence answer for God. We are not God and God in many ways God is not like us. We can make conjectures as to what God could or should do, but given the differences between God and ourselves, such conjectures will be problematic. The best procedure to follow, if indeed it is possible, is to glean what we can from what God has revealed of himself and of his relations to us and to the world. The non-Christian will probably not believe that God has revealed himself to us in the Bible, but if one has come to conclusion that God inspired the human authors of the Bible, it is a quite reasonable to turn to the Bible for insight into this matter. The thesis of this essay has been that there is good biblical grounds for thinking that God's carrying through on what is just will not be compromised even when it may seem to some of us that he should.²⁸

Final Thoughts

The speculations above might be mistaken. One of the lessons from the story of Job is that we should not expect to understand all of God's ways. Our understanding is limited. Nonetheless the thesis developed above is consistent with what has been revealed to us in the Bible. It is certainly not the full answer, but it does offer a direction in which at least a significant piece of the answer may lie. The case against Christian theism from the problem of evil and suffering is strongest if the atheist is able to contend, "Not only do you not have an answer to the problem, you are not able to come up with even a direction in which an adequate solution may lie." Explanations in terms of goods that are connected with or potentially result from suffering and evil—the usual explanations offered by Christians—can help in understanding why God allows some suffering and some evil, but it is much harder to account for the amount and distribution of suffering and evil. The thesis advanced here provides a direction in which a more satisfying answer may lie. Why does God allow so much suffering and evil? Beyond what greater-goods explanations can provide, a significant part of the answer may lie in justice in God, in the fact that this is a fallen world, and in the just consequences of God giving us significant moral freedom. The biblical claim is that God does care about human suffering and human evil, and he is doing something about it. Indeed, the message of the gospel is the message of God's plan to make right a world that has gone woefully awry.

²⁷ A person who takes a deontological outlook on ethics need not be a "wooden" deontologist. Not all moral rules are of equal importance. Jesus said that "all the law and the prophets hang on these two commands": "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-40). But this does not imply that all justice and all right and wrong is simply a matter of doing the loving thing. Even on a human level, e.g., in the courts, upholding justice does not simply equate with doing the loving thing. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem because he foresaw the judgment that would come upon it (a judgment that would take place in AD 70 at the hand of the Romans), he clearly was expressing his love for the people of Jerusalem, but there is no hint that this love ought to, or could, override the coming judgment (Luke 19:41-44).

²⁸ Some will notice that what I have said in this essay applies principally to human suffering and human evil. It may well be asked, what of animal suffering and animal death? This is an important question and one that I hope to address on a future occasion, but it will not be addressed here.