

“If there is a God, and if God is good, then how can God allow suffering and injustice?’ Perhaps no other question so urgently occupies young people struggling with religious commitment. But it cannot be avoided if one is to lay claim to honest and mature Christian faith. In her superb book *If God Is for Us*, Gloria Schaab probes various options and offers a way forward that takes both Christian belief and the reality of suffering seriously. She does not seek to offer final ‘answers,’ which would ultimately prove inadequate, but rather to offer approaches to the question that will yield deeper insights.”

—Dave Gentry-Akin  
Saint Mary’s College of California

“In *If God Is for Us*, Gloria Schaab leads readers through a panoply of contexts, classical and contemporary, out of which theologians have engaged the existential questions that suffering evokes. Schaab’s careful definition of terms, attention to social analysis, and deft representation of theologians from antiquity to the present combine with her own theological contribution to make this an invaluable resource. Comprehensive and compact, *If God Is For Us* will be treasured in theology courses concerned with how to ‘speak rightly of God’ in the midst of suffering.”

—Kathleen McManus, OP  
University of Portland

“Gloria Schaab’s well-researched and insightful book, *If God Is for Us: Christian Perspectives on God and Suffering*, analyzes a wide range of experiences of suffering in the world, interspersing personal testimonies from people who have struggled to find meaning in those experiences. She expounds a rich diversity of classical and contextual theological approaches to the mystery of suffering and leads her readers through an examination of these approaches in a way that enables them to grasp their meaning and relevance. Schaab’s book is a valuable resource on the ever-present reality of suffering in the world.”

—Robin Ryan  
Catholic Theological Union

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# If God Is for Us

Christian Perspectives on God and Suffering

Gloria L. Schaab

  
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To

**Margie Thompson, SSJ**

dearest friend, confidante, and Sister

■

artist, teacher, spiritual director

■

whose own experience of God in suffering  
has brought insight and consolation to many others



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# Introduction

A gunman walks into an elementary school on a crisp December morning; within eleven minutes, he shoots and kills twenty first-graders and six adults. A “superstorm” named Sandy marches its way from Kingston, Jamaica, up the eastern coast of the United States, leaving \$68 billion of destruction in its wake. A megalomaniac in Germany orchestrates the persecution and murder of more than six million Jews and other persons deemed “racially inferior” while most of the world’s peoples and leaders turn a blind eye. An undersea megathrust earthquake with a magnitude of more than 9.1 sets off tsunamis causing more than 230,000 deaths in fourteen countries and shaking most of the planet. An outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa infects more than 17,000 people and results in more than 6,400 deaths, prompting the World Health Organization to call it the most “severe public health emergency of modern times.”<sup>1</sup>

These represent but a few of the instances of suffering and death that garnered national and international attention in the last hundred years. These examples barely scratch the surface of the history of human tragedy. Moreover, these large-scale events mirror the billions of individual instances of suffering and death that occur on a daily basis. In addition to the personal and social cost of such experiences, the pervasiveness of pain, suffering, and death provokes profound existential questions, especially for those who profess belief in God. How does one speak rightly about God in the midst of such suffering and death? Moreover, *if* God is for us and *if* God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving—as most believers deem God to be—how can God cause or allow such egregious misery?

The answer to such questions is profound mystery—the mystery of God, the mystery of suffering, and the mystery of the relationship between the two. Although each of these is essentially mystery, none fully eludes understanding. Indeed, those willing to enter into the depths of God and human experience through study and prayer find inexhaustible insights into these mysteries. This book offers a means by which to venture into those depths by exploring the depth, breadth, and diversity of ways in which theologians have responded to the question of God and suffering throughout the centuries. No one theology has all

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1. World Health Organization, “Experimental Therapies: Growing Interest in the Use of Whole Blood or Plasma from Recovered Ebola Patients (Convalescent Therapies),” World Health Organization, Media Centre, September 26, 2014, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/ebola/26-september-2014/en/>.

the answers; each bears possibilities and problems, has strengths and limitations, for those who seek to speak rightly about God in the midst of suffering.

As this text shows, Christian theologians have tried to plumb the mystery of God and suffering using two broad theological approaches: the classical and the contextual. Theologians using the first approach respond to the question of God and suffering through the lens of classical theism. Conceived within the worldview of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, the God of classical theism is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, as well as unchangeable and unaffected by the experiences and events of history.<sup>2</sup> Holding such attributes of God inviolable, classical theologians interpret the relation between God and suffering in ways consistent with those divine attributes.

In recent years, however, many Christian theologians have shifted from this classical approach to use a contextual approach to the question of God and suffering.<sup>3</sup> They focus on God within the context of specific historical events or contexts that have caused or perpetrated suffering. Holding the suffering in history paramount, contextual theologians interpret the relation between God and suffering in ways that respond to the miseries associated with a particular historical context.

Recognizing the validity of each approach, this book engages both classical and contextual Christian interpretations of the relationship between God and suffering. Part I engages classical interpretations of this mystery, while Part II investigates contextual interpretations. In so doing, the text seeks to preserve the integrity of particular theological interpretations by presenting each in its own context, in its own voice, and on its own merits without critique. Nonetheless, each chapter poses questions for reflection and discussion through which to discern and analyze the possibilities and problems each theology holds. To facilitate this analysis, each chapter concludes with a “Case in Point,” drawn from literary sources or from the life experiences of notable individuals, in order to “flesh out” the concepts and consequences of the theologies of suffering examined in that chapter. In addition, each chapter includes suggestions for further reading as well as audio and video resources to promote deeper engagement.

The first chapter begins the journey into the mystery of God and suffering by clarifying the terms of the investigation and outlining the key questions to be explored in later chapters. It distinguishes the phenomenon of suffering from that of evil and explores the various sources of each. The chapter then examines

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2. In classical terms, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, as well as immutable and impassible.

3. It is important to note that even “classical” theologies are in fact “contextual.” They arose at a particular moment of history and derive from a specific worldview. Nonetheless, they envision their outcomes as universal in scope, rather than as identifiable with a distinct historical event or period. Chapters 6–10 exemplify and expand on this distinction.

the traditional defense of the God of classical theism, a defense which is called theodicy, and surveys the challenges to this defense that atheism proposes.

Because questions about God and suffering often begin with presumptions about the nature of God, chapter 2 investigates the language used to describe God. It begins with a review of Thomas Aquinas's description of how names and attributes are applied to God. Aquinas's descriptions are important to note when discussing the mystery of God and suffering. They remind the reader that human words can never encompass the totality of God. This understanding provides an important precaution for all the language used about God in this text, including some of the most time-honored classical attributes that Christianity has applied to God.

Chapters 3 sifts and weighs the variety of ways the Christian Scriptures have interpreted the relation between God and suffering. Recognizing that the life, ministry, and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ have shaped the way Christians think about the presence of God in the midst of suffering and death, chapter 3 investigates the words and actions of Jesus in response to suffering in dialogue with the writings of Paul in the epistles. It does so in three contexts: suffering and the reign of God, the suffering and death of Jesus, and suffering and discipleship.

Having examined the Christian biblical responses to the question of God and suffering, the focus of the text turns to insights from Christian theological traditions. Chapter 4 attends to the proposals of three of the most significant theologians from the classical tradition: Augustine, Aquinas, and Irenaeus. Their writings bring philosophical reason to bear on biblical faith and their claims have influenced the way many theologians and people of faith have understood the relation between God and suffering for centuries. Representing Christian theology from a Western philosophical worldview, these theologians accept and defend classical theism's understanding of God, which greatly influences their conclusions about the relationship of God, evil, and suffering. Two main themes emerge from the writings of these theologians: evil as privation of good and evil as alienation.

In the last hundred years or so, however, theologians have increasingly criticized the approach of classical theism. Their critiques have focused primarily on the presumption of the universality of theological claims. Many scholars point out that few theological interpretations—even those of classical theology—have universal applicability. All are influenced by their historical and cultural *context*, a term that refers to the personal, social, and religious influences and worldviews a theologian brings to interpretation. As a result of their historical or cultural context, specific theologies have inherent limitations. While this does not limit God's self-revelation *to* a particular experience or event, it does recognize that the living God reveals Godself *through* particular experiences and events. Therefore, it is incumbent upon those who seek God in the midst of suffering

to attend to the unique historical and cultural contexts in which suffering has emerged. It is this kind of attention to context that the theologians noted in the second part of this text have undertaken. Each chapter in this section includes a description of the context of suffering and death in which each theologian reflects on the revelation of God. The diverse images of God and of Christ that derive from these contexts demonstrate the breadth and depth of God's response to those afflicted by so many forms of suffering.

In chapter 5, theologians directly confront the mystery of God in the context of horrific suffering during the twentieth century—namely, the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the civil war in El Salvador, and the ecological crisis facing the planet and its inhabitants. In ways unique to the context in which they write, each affirms that “only the suffering God can help,” the God who is “pushed out of the world on to the cross.”<sup>4</sup> Feminist theologians in chapter 6 point to the absence of women's voices and experiences in speaking about God as part of the silencing and suffering experienced by women as a result of sexism. This suffering is manifest not only in theology but also in economic, educational, and political life, resulting in hostility and violence against women, from which they frequently have little or no legal or religious recourse. In response, feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians describe how God sustains and energizes the lives of marginalized women from basic survival through full flourishing.

From the world stage, chapter 7 moves to the suffering and fear experienced by oppressed people in the United States. It explores the phenomenon of xenophobia—the fear and hatred of anything perceived as foreign or different—not only as ethnic prejudice and discrimination but also as racist and heterosexist oppression. These institutionalized forms of prejudice spread beyond an individual's fears or biases and infect national policies and practices. In response, black, Hispanic, and gay theologians offer transformative theologies based on the God of the Exodus and the crucified and Risen Christ in order to inspire people who were once voiceless and powerless to confront injustice and marginalization and to proclaim dignity and liberation.

Focusing on a pervasive yet often misinterpreted locus of human suffering, chapter 8 explores theologies written from the context of disabilities. It underscores that most theology assumes an able-bodied human experience. The near absence of persons with disabilities in theology has marginalized and misrepresented their lives not only in theological discourse but also in church and society. Theologies of disabilities point out that the suffering experienced by those with disabilities is not so much caused by their physical or mental impairments as by social, cultural, and religious assumptions that prevent people with impairments from meaningful participation in society. As a result, these theologians see new

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4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 479.

theological perspectives as necessary to alleviate the suffering of those with disabilities as well as to effect a transformation in society and in the church.

The final chapter broadens the scope of suffering beyond the personal and societal to the question of suffering in an evolving cosmos. In dialogue with the sciences, it engages the problem of suffering stemming from evolution and nature, which seems to involve too much suffering and death to be the intent of a loving and provident God. With two other theologians, I present my own theological response to the mystery of God and suffering in this chapter, a response that I develop more fully in two of my previous books, *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God* (Oxford, 2007) and *Trinity in Relation: Creation, Incarnation and Grace in an Evolving Cosmos* (Anselm, 2012). Because my contribution is one of three responses in that chapter, I refer to myself in the third person to lend the same objectivity to my proposal as is given to those preceding mine. While doing so felt a bit strange, it enabled me to remain objective, to clarify my thinking at several points along the way, and to see my own theological proposals with new eyes.

Traversing the terrain of so many different Christian perspectives and respecting the differences among them, this book does not argue for one theological perspective on God and suffering over another. Rather, it leads readers through a variety of approaches grounded in scripture, tradition, and human experience, which readers can then study and evaluate within their own experience. As stated earlier, no one theology has all the answers; each bears possibilities and problems. Nonetheless, my hope is that those who venture into the mystery of God and suffering through the words of this book, who dare the subjunctive “If God is for us,” will discover a way forward.



## Part I

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# Classical Theologies of Suffering

The problem of evil does not attach itself as a threat to any and every concept of deity. It arises only for a religion which insists that the object of its worship is at once perfectly good and unlimitedly powerful.

—JOHN HICK, *EVIL AND THE GOD OF LOVE*





# Setting the Stage, Raising the Questions

At the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises the question: why? It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning. Not only does it accompany human suffering, but it seems even to determine its human content, what makes suffering precisely human suffering.

JOHN PAUL II, *SALVIFICI DOLORIS*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The reality of suffering has persistently provoked theological debate. How may one speak of God in the midst of suffering? To prepare for theological responses to such debate, this opening chapter pursues tasks critical to formulating theologies of suffering. Chapter 1 clarifies key terms and introduces crucial questions explored in later chapters. It demonstrates that the existence of suffering in this world provokes not only theistic responses but also non-theistic and a-theistic explanations that eschew any possibility that suffering and evil could coexist with the one whom believers call God. Finally, this chapter contends that the question of suffering cannot and must not be ignored by those who believe in God.

## Terms of the Investigation

Throughout this text, two terms appear many times in isolation and in combination: *suffering* and *evil*. While few would contest associating the two concepts, the nature of this association is often tainted by an inadequate understanding of the difference and the relationship between suffering and evil. For example,

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1. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, 1984), no. 9; available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html).

some actions or events are deemed evil because they cause suffering. However, this view is problematic, since some well-intended human actions, such as treatments for disease, also cause suffering, and few would call them “evil.” In addition, certain weather events like hurricanes or tornadoes are often considered natural evils because of their harmful effects on life and property. Nonetheless, such events are expected occurrences in the natural world. Hence it is critical at the outset to clarify what suffering and evil mean and how the two both differ and relate.

## Suffering

Suffering is a complex experience. Sometimes it involves a conscious choice to endure pain or distress; at other times, it consists of a disruption of inner harmony caused by a physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual force. Unlike pain, which is primarily a *physical* sensation caused by damaging stimuli and “associated with actual or potential tissue damage,”<sup>2</sup> *suffering* in this text refers to a constellation of mental, emotional, or spiritual sensations experienced in response to internal and external conditions. Moreover, according to philosopher Ulrich Diehl, “When people suffer they always suffer as a whole human being. The emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering of human beings cannot be completely separated from all other kinds of suffering, such as from harmful natural, ecological, political, economic and social conditions.”<sup>3</sup>

Consider, for example, those burdened by unemployment, especially in uncertain economic times. Their suffering is not only financial but also emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical. As one person described it, “Unemployment is terrifying. It feels like the world is caving in on you slowly and quickly at the same time. The financial pressure mounts and mounts and you stare God in the face, realizing that apart from faith, there is no real security in life. Faith is great, but security is equally great—and faith won’t pay the bills.”<sup>4</sup> People living in parts of the world plagued by natural disasters or domestic terrorism, economic depression or inadequate health care experience higher levels of emotional and even spiritual distress. As these levels of distress increase, the capacity to confront and overcome such conditions decreases.<sup>5</sup> This dynamic results in a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle of suffering. Furthermore, not every person within a particular condition of suffering reacts in the same way:

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2. “Pain,” International Association for the Study of Pain, <http://www.iasp-pain.org/Taxonomy?navItemNumber=576#Pain>.

3. Ulrich Diehl, “Human Suffering as a Challenge for the Meaning of Life,” *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts* 4 (Fall 2009), available at [www.bu.edu/paideia/existenz/volumes/Vol.4-2Diehl.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/paideia/existenz/volumes/Vol.4-2Diehl.pdf).

4. “Learning the Hard Way What Matters Most,” *About.com*, available at <http://jobsearch.about.com/u/sty/unemployment/unemployedstory/Learning-the-Hard-Way-What-Matters-Most.htm>.

5. Diehl, “Human Suffering,” 38.

Individual people can cope, react and act in different, various and individual ways when confronted with the same harmful conditions. . . . For example, some may react . . . with frustration, passivity, and depression; others may react with vigilance, activity, and responsibility. For this reason there is a certain individuality and subjectivity . . . of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual suffering with respect to . . . outer sources or harmful conditions.<sup>6</sup>

In his essay “Human Suffering as a Challenge for the Meaning of Life,” Diehl discusses two conditions of suffering. The first he terms “external conditions of human suffering” and the second “personal conditions of human suffering.”<sup>7</sup> While clearly affirming the capacity for suffering in other living beings, Diehl argues for a “special quality of human suffering” that stems from the human capacity to experience, reflect upon, make judgments, and evaluate the suffering of self and of others.<sup>8</sup>

### **External Conditions of Human Suffering**

Diehl highlights eight external conditions of human suffering: (1) natural, (2) ecological, (3) political, (4) economic, (5) social, (6) emotional, (7) cognitive/spiritual, and (8) meaninglessness. *Natural conditions* include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, mudslides, and other extreme situations, which Diehl distinguishes from *ecological conditions*, such as chemical contamination of food or water supplies or biological contaminations causing epidemics. Under *political conditions*, Diehl lists dictatorship, anarchy, war, or terrorism, while *economic conditions* encompass such situations as unemployment, inflation, and globalization. *Social conditions* refer to the inadequate fulfillment of human needs for food, shelter, clothing, and personal security. As *emotional conditions*, Diehl includes the inability to satisfy the human need for belonging, acceptance, meaningful work, self-respect, and self-determination, and *cognitive/spiritual conditions* focus on the incapacity to negotiate the natural and social world or to understand the unique position of humans in the world created by language, communication, community, cooperation, and self-transcendence. Finally, inspired by the work of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl,<sup>9</sup> Diehl includes the condition of *meaninglessness*, an inability to find fulfillment and worth under the concrete and contingent circumstances of one’s

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 37–40.

8. Ibid., 41–42.

9. Cf. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), first published in German in 1946 under the title *Ein Psycholog Erlebt das Konzentrationslager*. Based on Frankl’s life in Nazi death camps between 1942 and 1945, the memoir argues that one cannot avoid suffering but can choose how to cope with it, find meaning in it, and move forward with renewed purpose.

life. These conditions influence each other as well as the theological responses explored in later chapters of this text.

### Reflect and Discuss

Are there types of suffering in your experience that do not reflect one or more of these conditions? What are they? What is their source?

### **Personal Conditions of Human Suffering**

Personal conditions of suffering explored by Diehl include those originating within a given human being. This category includes (1) physical, (2) emotional, (3) cognitive, (4) spiritual, and (5) reflective sources. *Physical conditions* affect the body through aches, pains, and wounds. *Emotional conditions* stem from positive and negative stress, mourning or grief, guilt or shame, fear or depression, whereas *cognitive conditions* derive from loss of memory, concentration, flexibility, or judgment. Suffering may also result from *spiritual conditions*. These originate from anxiety concerning questions about identity, values, principles, goals, norms, and beliefs. Finally, Diehl identifies suffering that arises from an awareness of the suffering experienced by others. As he describes it,

This is not only a quantitative difference or additional factor among the various ways of human suffering (especially when compared with higher mammals). The human capacity to be aware of, to focus on and to reflect on (thinking, understanding and explaining) their own human suffering and the suffering of other human beings is changing the very quality of human suffering in many different ways.<sup>10</sup>

It is this reflective awareness of suffering that leads to Diehl's proposal that the capacity to focus and reflect on one's own suffering and that of others "is an essential element . . . of being human within the world."<sup>11</sup> In other words, the very capacity that humans have to reflect upon their own and others' suffering distinguishes them and makes them unique among all creatures "as far as we know and understand them." In comparison to human beings, there are physical entities (e.g., matter and energy) that are unable to suffer, and living entities (e.g., plants) that cannot feel pain. Furthermore, some creatures do feel pain but, unlike humans, do not have reflective awareness of their own suffering and cannot reflectively explain their own suffering during or after its occurrence. Ultimately, human beings possess the unique capacity to reflect upon and

10. Diehl, "Human Suffering," 40.

11. *Ibid.*, 41.

change their attitudes toward the suffering of others, as well as to choose how they approach and evaluate their own and others' suffering. Diehl admits that the uniqueness of the human response to suffering seems a dubious advantage at best. However, even in this, humanity has the capacity to reflect, choose, and evaluate whether to embrace or reject this uniqueness.<sup>12</sup>

### Reflect and Discuss

Do you agree with Diehl's description of the uniqueness of human suffering? Why or why not? What examples can you give to support your position?

A story of one such choice—and the difference that choice made—is that of former New Orleans Saints safety Steve Gleason. In 2011, Gleason revealed his battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS is a debilitating disease characterized by progressive weakness and muscle atrophy. In the face of suffering, Gleason made a decision concerning his human condition.

I have been diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). It's a terminal disease with an average lifespan of two to five years post-diagnosis. . . . So, how does a person react when he or she learns there are two to five years left with which to live? Denial. Frustration. Anger. Despair. But at some point, I understood that acceptance of this diagnosis was not admitting defeat. That was critical for me personally . . . because it makes you focus on the things and people you truly love. After that realization, I started to dig in, to look forward to what might be in my future. . . . Still, I can't deny that it's a struggle. . . . As humans, we are able to conjure and attach meaning to almost any circumstance or development. When handed what feels like a terminal diagnosis, it's human nature to ask, Why did this happen to me?! or What does this mean?! . . . We cannot measure, verify or confirm meaning. We, as humans, create and apply meaning. When something happens to us, we become the author of meaning. The best philosophy I have adopted is to apply a useful and productive meaning . . . regardless of the circumstances in my life.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Ibid., 42.

13. To read the story of Steve Gleason's decision in his own words, see, inter alia, "Guest MMQB: Steve Gleason on His Life with ALS, Mission for a Cure," *SI.Com*, available at [www.si.com/nfl/2013/06/17/steve-gleason-monday-morning-quarterback](http://www.si.com/nfl/2013/06/17/steve-gleason-monday-morning-quarterback).

## Evil

Like suffering, evil is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon that has been defined by scholars in a variety of ways throughout history. Some define it in terms of what they consider good. Augustine and Aquinas thought of evil as the privation or negation of the good; the Manichaeans viewed evil as a force in a continuous struggle with the power of good. “By *good*,” philosopher Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza proposed, “I understand that which we certainly know is useful to us. By *evil*, on the contrary, I understand that which we certainly know hinders us from possessing anything that is good.”<sup>14</sup>

Other sources define evil in terms of the suffering it causes. The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, for example, proposes that “Evil, in a large sense, may be described as the sum of the opposition, which experience shows to exist in the universe, to the desires and needs of individuals; whence arises, among human beings at least, the sufferings in which life abounds.”<sup>15</sup> In his three-part series of articles, “An Analysis of the Problem of Evil,” Episcopal priest and professor R. Franklin Terry offered the following definition:

Evil may be defined as any object, event, influence, occurrence, act, experience, or combination of these, be the source human or extra-human, which thwarts, disrupts, threatens, frustrates, or destroys the life of a human being or group of human beings, or jeopardizes what is valued or cherished by human beings.<sup>16</sup>

Philosopher of religion John Hick succinctly defines evil according to its manifestations. Hick writes,

Rather than attempt to define “evil” in terms of some . . . theory, it seems better to define it ostensively, by indicating that to which the word refers. It refers to physical pain, mental suffering, and moral wickedness. The last is one of the causes of the first two, for an enormous amount of human pain arises from people’s inhumanity.<sup>17</sup>

### Reflect and Discuss

How would you define evil?

14. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV, “Of Human Bondage or the Strength of the Emotions,” definitions 1 and 2, available at <http://capone.mtsu.edu/rbombarb/RB/Spinoza/ethica4.html>.

15. “Evil,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at [www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm).

16. R. Franklin Terry, “An Analysis of the Problem of Evil: Part Two: Theoretical Dimensions,” *Iliiff Review* 23 (1966): 15–25, at 15. Terry acknowledges that his definition is “intentionally man-centered” and explicitly excludes other animate and inanimate beings.

17. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 39.

Despite commonalities among various definitions, understanding evil either in terms of the good it prevents or the suffering it causes proves problematic. First, to judge evil in terms of “good” presumes a clear and even universal conception of what constitutes “good” per se. Thus, “good” becomes no less relative a concept than “evil.” Second, to designate as “evil” that which causes suffering runs the risk of indicting something as *necessarily* evil rather than *contingently* so because of its deleterious effects on life and property. If a hurricane spins east off the coast of Africa and twists northward into the mid-Atlantic without impact on life or land, one can hardly consider that an evil event. Particular medical treatments, especially those for cancer, damage cells in the human organs and nervous system, yet most would not judge chemotherapy as evil. Therefore, differentiating between what is necessarily evil in and of itself, regardless of circumstances, and what is contingently evil because of its circumstances or results proves crucial. To do so is to differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic evil.

### ***Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Evils***

Christian moral theology recognizes “that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature ‘incapable of being ordered’ to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image.” Such acts are termed *intrinsic evil* because “on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances,” they are contrary to reason, to nature, and to God.<sup>18</sup> The “intrinsically evil” action is judged neither by its intention nor its effects. Rather, the act is considered evil “in itself” or “for its own sake” or “as such” or “in its own right.” Such acts include homicide or genocide; mutilation, physical and mental torture; subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, and human trafficking—“all these and the like are a disgrace, and . . . a negation of the honor due to the Creator.”<sup>19</sup> In contrast to these intrinsic evils, an act is considered an *extrinsic evil* when the intention or circumstances surrounding it result in outcomes harmful to life and well-being. Hence the *nature* of the act or event is not evil in itself, but only its circumstances or results.

Why is the discussion about intrinsic and extrinsic evil important? First, it highlights that what is truly evil is often moral in character. This means that calling something “evil” is most appropriate when it stems from an action that is voluntary and when it impedes the ability of a creature to develop and flourish. Second, it cautions against ascribing evil to the involuntary or organic processes of the cosmos. While these processes can wreak havoc on creation and inflict

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18. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*, 1993), no. 80, available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).

19. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965), no. 27, available at [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

suffering and even death on its creatures, they are not necessarily contrary to reason, to nature, or to God. Finally, the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic evil impacts thought and speech about God, evil, and suffering. Is God, as Creator of heaven and earth, the maker of evil as well? Is the source of evil in the intention of God or in the voluntary exercise of human freedom? If aspects of God's creation are evil in and of themselves, what does that say about the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence of God? Theologians propose different answers to such questions. However, one thing remains certain:

The problem of evil is one of our oldest intellectual conundrums. Volumes have been written attempting to define evil, to catalog its horrors, to account for its persistence, to explain its appeal, to confront its consequences. The moment we begin to ask questions about the nature of evil, however, we begin to understand how difficult it is to answer them. One way to start the discussion is to narrow the focus.<sup>20</sup>

This chapter now narrows the focus, moving from attempts to define the *nature* of evil to the task of identifying the conditions and sources of evil that call for human and divine response.

### **Conditions and Sources of Evil**

Like suffering, evil has been described in relation to external conditions of nature and society, as well as to internal conditions of human freedom and finitude. Most scholars recognize two broad classifications of evil that subsume these internal and external conditions—natural evil and moral evil. Moral evil generally refers to evils perpetrated through the free and deliberate choices of human beings, while natural evil is associated with the activities of nonhuman creation and its creatures. Nonetheless, the complexity of evil calls for a more careful distinction of its various sources. R. Franklin Terry delineates five forms of evil that plague human and nonhuman beings—natural evil, physical evil, moral evil, social and cultural evil, and the evils of finitude.<sup>21</sup>

**Natural Sources of Evil.** While the grandeur of the natural world has inspired art, poetry, and praise of God, it also demonstrates indiscriminate savagery and force, leading to instances of *natural evil*. As John Stuart Mill so aptly describes this propensity of nature,

Nature impales [creatures] . . . starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of [its]

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20. Alan Wolfe, "Evildoers and Us," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2011, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/EvildoersUs/128910/>.

21. R. Franklin Terry, "An Analysis of the Problem of Evil, Part One: The Reality of Evil," *Iliff Review* 21 (1964): 11.



exhalations . . . with the most supercilious disregard both of mercy and of justice . . . upon the best and noblest indifferently with the meanest and worst; upon those who are engaged in the highest and worthiest enterprise, and often as a direct consequence of the noble acts . . . [and] with as little compunction as those whose death is a relief to themselves, or a blessings to those under their noxious influence.<sup>22</sup>

Some theologians and philosophers, especially those in dialogue with the sciences, question the attribution of “evil” to events like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and the like, which involve seemingly pointless suffering and tragedy, as well as loss of human health and life. These scholars point out that the evolutionary emergence of life often takes place through these very kinds of occurrences. Because of this, they argue that such events of nature must be regarded as aspects of the free processes of evolution rather than as manifestations of evil.

A final category related to natural sources of evil is that of *evils of finitude*. The concept of finitude usually refers to the state of creatures as dependent and contingent beings, physically and temporally limited. However, in Terry’s schema, it refers not to physical or temporal limitations, but to the psychological dimensions experienced by humans that derive from these limitations. Dependence and contingency, for example, often arouse anxiety and fear in human beings; physical limitations sometimes bring about feelings of loneliness, isolation, or despair. Although “some would deny the anxious moment, or would be unable or unwilling to recall moments of sudden or irrational fear,”<sup>23</sup> most view the psychological effects of finitude as universal.

**Moral Sources of Evil.** *Moral evil* results from the exercise of human freedom. The conundrum concerning natural sources of evil does not surface when considering moral sources of evil because “nature can hardly assume the attributes of freedom in [its] wrongdoing. We do not impugn nature for murder, nor does [nature] suffer remorse for [its] cruelties.”<sup>24</sup> While the consequences of human moral freedom stem from both conscious and unconscious wrongdoing,<sup>25</sup> the harmful outcome remains, regardless of the volition or intention involved. The list of moral evils is extensive; it includes murder, lying, stealing, cheating, adultery, slander, blasphemy, pollution, and abuse. Whether willful or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, moral evil is perpetrated by humans acting in ways harmful to creation or failing to prevent such harm.

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22. John Stuart Mill, “Nature,” in James Eli Adams, “Philosophical Forgetfulness: John Stuart Mill’s ‘Nature,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (July–September, 1992): 437.

23. Terry, “The Reality of Evil,” 14.

24. *Ibid.*, 12.

25. The issue dealt with here is not one of moral culpability but rather the source of or condition that results from human moral choice.

Issues of moral freedom and wrongdoing permeate religious traditions. The Jewish and Christian traditions refer to moral wrongdoing as “sin.” Religious traditions identify various kinds of sin, some of which refer to individual acts and others to more pervasive realities. Examples of the first are termed personal sins, while the second refer to original, social, or systemic sins. Terry categorizes these latter sins as *social and cultural evil*.

Social and cultural evil is “an extension of moral evil into the larger nexus of human groups.”<sup>26</sup> It results from attitudes, values, or beliefs in society that diminish human dignity by perpetuating oppression, marginalization, or exploitation. Such attitudes include racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, consumerism, materialism, environmental despoliation, or combinations of these. When these attitudes become institutionalized in legal, economic, or political policies, they may be termed systemic or structural evil. In the United States alone, violence and blight afflict urban areas, sexist discrimination impacts hiring practices and fair wages, and ethnic and racial profiling oppress and marginalize citizen and immigrants. Moreover, because so many persons are unwittingly complicit in social and cultural evil, it is notoriously difficult to address. Nonetheless, “encounter with evil on this level is imperative for those . . . who are sensitive to these conditions.” This rings especially true for people of faith who realize that religious traditions cannot shrink from their “mission isolated from the world”<sup>27</sup> when the encounter with evil creates the problem of reconciling the suffering it causes with the existence of God.

## The Problem of God, Suffering, and Evil

While the demand for a reasonable theological response to the question of how to speak about God amidst suffering is a centuries-old endeavor, it was not until 1710 that the term *theodicy* came into currency to describe it. The term was coined by German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in his work, *Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la Liberté de l’Homme et l’Origine du Mal* (*Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*) and derived from the Greek words *theos* (“God”) and *dike* (“judgment”). A theodicy attempts to justify or defend God in the face of suffering and evil. “For,” as R. Franklin Terry explains, “to the extent that *God is believed to be absolutely powerful and benevolent*, to that same extent the burden of vindicating God is felt.”<sup>28</sup>

So, although the term *theodicy* is frequently used in a generic sense to refer to the attempt to interpret suffering and evil in dialogue with *any* conception

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26. Terry, “The Reality of Evil,” 13.

27. *Ibid.*, 14.

28. R. Franklin Terry, “An Analysis of the Problem of Evil, Part Two: Theoretical Dimensions,” *Iltiff Review* 23 (1966): 21, emphasis added.

of God, it technically refers to the effort to “reinterpret the nature of evil *leaving intact the other major presuppositions concerning the nature of God and his creation.*”<sup>29</sup> Theodicy in this sense presupposes divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, as well as the existence of evil in creation. Thus, the classical form of the problem can be summarized in three propositions that appear logically incompatible: (1) God is omnipotent, (2) God is totally good, and (3) evil exists.<sup>30</sup> The following expanded form of the argument reveals both its assumptions and inferences:

1. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.
  - a. Because God is omnipotent, God has the power to do any and all things.
  - b. Because God is omniscient, God knows any and all things.
  - c. Because God is omnibenevolent, God is all-loving and infinitely good.
2. The universe exists in an ongoing relationship to God.
  - a. The universe was created by God.
  - b. The universe is sustained by God.
  - c. God acts in/interacts with the universe.
3. Nonetheless, evil exists in the universe.

The burden of theodicy, therefore, consists of defending this specific understanding of God in light of the reality of evil and suffering. The conundrum of doing so was aptly stated by the philosopher Epicurus in the fourth century BCE:

God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If he is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore is not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?<sup>31</sup>

Philosopher David Hume expresses the issue in more contemporary form: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where

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29. Ibid.

30. This formulation is attributed to J. L. Mackie in his essay “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–212.

31. Epicurus, in Lactantius, “On the Anger of God,” chap. 13, in *The Writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. William Fletcher, available at [www.ecmarsh.com/fathers/anf/ANF-07/anf07-13.htm#P3322\\_1348266](http://www.ecmarsh.com/fathers/anf/ANF-07/anf07-13.htm#P3322_1348266).

does evil come from ?”<sup>32</sup> Hence, to the extent that one understands God solely in terms of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, to that extent the problem of God and suffering looms large.

## Leibniz and the Problem of Evil

In the essay “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil,” philosophers Michael Murray and Sean Greenberg point out that, during the medieval period in which Leibniz worked, philosophers as a whole accepted the arguments for the existence of God based on reason and experience alone.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the philosopher Leibniz wrestled with the problem of the *coexistence* of God and evil. He did so by addressing two arguments: the blot on divine holiness and the flaw in divine creativity.

Since God is the Creator of the world, the existence of evil seems to be a blot on divine holiness. In divine holiness, and as the primary cause of all that exists, God is worthy of worship, awe, and reverence. However, some would argue that, as the cause of existence, God is also the cause of evil and thus unworthy of devotion and love. In response to this, some theologians had contended that evil is a privation of the good, a “no-thing” instead of a something. In this view,

evil has no more reality than the hole in the center of a donut. Making a donut does not require putting together two components, the cake and the hole: the cake is all that there is to the donut, and the hole is just the “privation of cake.” It therefore would be silly to say that making the donut requires causing both the cake and the hole to exist. Causing the cake to exist causes the hole as a “by-product” of causing a particular kind of cake to exist. Thus, we need not assume any additional cause for the hole beyond that assumed for the causing of the cake.<sup>34</sup>

Leibniz rejected both this “donut and hole” reasoning and the definition of evil as the privation of good. In his essay “The Author of Sin,” he contends that if God is responsible for creating the positive forms in the universe, then God must be the creator of its negative manifestations as well. Leibniz asks, “What if a painter created two works of art, the second simply a smaller version of the first?” It would be ludicrous, Leibniz states,

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32. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 44, available at [www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf](http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf).

33. Michael Murray and Sean Greenberg, “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 edition), available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/leibniz-evil/>. Arguments from natural theology for the existence of God rest principally on reason rather than revelation. Two classic examples are the *ontological argument* of eleventh-century Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (see Paul Halsall, “Medieval Sourcebook: Anselm [1033–1109]: *Proslogium*,” chap. 2, available at <https://legacy.fordham.edu/balsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp>) and the *Quinque viae* (*Five Ways*) of theologian Thomas Aquinas (see Halsall, “Medieval Sourcebook: *Thomas Aquinas: Reasons in Proof of the Existence of God, 1270*,” available at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/balsall/source/aquinas3.asp>).

34. Murray and Greenberg, “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil.”

to say that the painter is the author of all that is real in the two paintings, without however being the author of what is lacking or the disproportion between the larger and the smaller painting. . . . In effect, what is lacking is nothing more than a simple result of an infallible consequence of that which is positive, without any need for a distinct author.<sup>35</sup>

In response to the problem of divine holiness, Leibniz proposes that while God wills the good as *decretory*—that is, fixed by decree or decision—God’s will is only *permissive* of evil. In other words, God explicitly intends and produces the good; however, God only allows evil to exist if it furthers God’s intention to create the best of all possible worlds.

### Reflect and Discuss

What is your response to Leibniz’s contention that God is the author of evil as well as good? Does his conclusion that God wills evil only permissively influence your thinking on this matter?

This notion of “the best of all possible worlds” informs Leibniz’s response to the second charge of flawed divine creativity. Leibniz asserts that because of divine omnipotence and omniscience, nothing can impede God from creating the best of all possible worlds. Moreover, because of divine omnibenevolence, God desires to create nothing other than the best of all possible worlds as a consequence of divine nature itself. However, while Leibniz argued that this is the best of all possible worlds, one could ask whether this really is best in view of the reality of evil. In light of the shootings at Columbine, Aurora, and Sandy Hook Elementary; the bombings in Oklahoma City and the Boston Marathon; the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and aboard Flight 93; and other recent examples of evil in the United States, one could argue, “Surely a world without that event would be better than the actual world. And there is no reason why God couldn’t have created the world without that event. Thus, this is not the best possible world.”<sup>36</sup>

In disputing this conclusion, Leibniz first challenges the capacity of human beings to determine that this is not the best of all possible worlds because of certain events. As finite beings, humans have neither the knowledge of any world other than this nor the awareness of how one event connects to another. While particular occurrences may strike individuals as world-shattering, they are but

35. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 6.3.151, in Murray and Greenberg, “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil.”

36. Murray and Greenberg, “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil.”

temporal, isolated episodes in an infinite sequence, and there is no way to know whether altering a specific situation would result in a better or worse world on the whole. As Leibniz explains,

it might be said that the whole sequence of things to infinity may be the best possible, although what exists all through the universe in each portion of time be not the best. It might be therefore that the universe became even better and better, if the nature of things were such that it was not permitted to attain to the best all at once. But these are problems of which it is hard for us to judge.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, Leibniz asserts, it is not only imprudent to assess the whole on the merits of one part but also ill-advised to presume that God employs the same standards as human beings in judging what constitutes the best possible world. This led Leibniz to the following conclusion:

With God, it is plain that his understanding contains the ideas of all possible things, and that is how everything is in him in a transcendent manner. These ideas represent to him the good and evil, the perfection and imperfection, the order and disorder, the congruity and incongruity of possibles; and his superabundant goodness makes him choose the most advantageous. God therefore determines himself by himself; his will acts by virtue of his goodness, but it is particularized and directed in action by understanding filled with wisdom. And since his understanding is perfect, since his thoughts are always clear, his inclinations always good, he never fails to do the best; whereas we may be deceived by the mere semblances of truth and goodness. . . . There was therefore in him a reason anterior to the resolution; and, as I have said so many times, it was neither by chance nor without cause, nor even by necessity, that God created this world, but rather as a result of his inclination, which always prompts him to the best.<sup>38</sup>

### Reflect and Discuss

What do you think of the idea that this is “the best of all possible worlds” according to Leibniz? Is his argument compelling? Would you dispute it? If so, how?

37. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, no. 202, p. 254, Project Gutenberg eBook, available at [www.gutenberg.org/files/17147/17147-h/17147-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17147/17147-h/17147-h.htm).

38. *Ibid.*, 429.

## Engaging the Problem of Theodicy

In view of its complexity, addressing the problem of theodicy in philosophy and theology has taken several forms. One deals with the problem of God and suffering as a *logical problem* as it proceeds “to *think through* the contradiction that stands between the goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence of God, on the one hand, and the massive misery and undeserved suffering that characterize God’s world, on the other.”<sup>39</sup> Thus it questions whether coupling the existence of evil with the proposition of the Divine as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent leads to the rational conclusion that God exists. Using deduction, a thinker would follow this logical sequence that generally arrives at the nonexistence of God: (1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. (2) As omnipotent, no limits exist to God’s abilities. (3) As omnibenevolent, God will always eliminate evil. (4) However, evil exists. (5) Therefore, God must not exist. In response, theists sometimes attempt to resolve the incongruity between God’s attributes and the existence of evil by abandoning or rejecting certain postulates in order to preserve others. So a theist might dispute the deduction that an omnibenevolent being always eliminates evil and amend it by asserting that God will always eliminate evil *unless* God in divine omniscience and wisdom has a good reason for allowing that evil to exist. The logician, however, would contend that nothing justifies God’s permitting evil and therefore would once again conclude that God does not exist.

A second way theodicy addresses suffering and evil is as an *evidential problem*. While the existence of God and of evil may not be logically reconcilable, some would argue that the scope and kinds of evil in history provide evidence that militates against the nature of God that theodicy defends.

Approaching the problem in this way raises questions like the following: Could God have eliminated evil and still have accomplished the divine purpose? Is all suffering and evil truly connected to divine purposes? How can God’s purposes be served when some suffer so much more often and greatly than others? Can any divine goal justify horrors like the Holocaust, the Black Death plague, or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? And even if one could answer yes to all these questions, the core issue lingers still: Is a God who accomplishes divine purposes in this way worthy of love and worship? The theodicyist may justify God by pointing out that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:25), or may proclaim, “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Rom. 11:33), or hear the divine declaration, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8). Nonetheless, the ultimate concern persists: can such a God lay claim to human love and praise?

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39. Ralph C. Wood, “Ivan Karamazov’s Mistake,” *First Things* (December 2002), available at [www.firstthings.com/article/2002/12/ivan-karamazovs-mistake](http://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/12/ivan-karamazovs-mistake), emphasis in the original.



A third approach considers suffering and evil as an *existential problem*. Rather than focusing on the theological questions of why God allows the existence of evil or of what kind of God would do so, considering suffering and evil as an existential problem focuses on a religious or pastoral response to specific experiences of suffering.

Although theologians and ministers using this approach may explore the social, systemic, and structural causes of evil, they emphasize pastorally effective responses to eliminate, alleviate, or at least cope with the experience of suffering. In addition, they are concerned with how people of faith might respond and relate to God in the midst of tragedy and suffering.

### Reflect and Discuss

Which approach to the problem of God and evil seems most efficacious to you? Why? Which presents the greatest challenge to resolve? Why?

Nonetheless, the entire enterprise of theodicy at times elicits protests from some religious thinkers who claim that efforts to vindicate God's ways are impious, irreligious, and pretentious.<sup>40</sup> Rather than judging or defending God, such critics counsel that, like Job, people ought to abandon the search for “things too wonderful for [them]” and simply “despise [themselves] . . . and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 6). Nonetheless, most scholars contend that the theological investigation of the problem of God and suffering can be approached “with the utmost humility and sincerity of spirit and from a standpoint of firm Christian commitment.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than presuming to justify God in response to the problem of evil, theologians delve into these realities to understand the mystery of God and suffering in terms of how it relates to humanity, which is the goal of all theological investigation. As John Hick explains, for those who suffer, “Evil is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be encountered and lived through.” However, it also presents “an intellectual problem, which invites rational reflection . . . distinct from the experienced mystery.” Thus the “obligation to grapple with” the reality of God and suffering—whether conceived as problem or mystery—is not “in any degree lessened.”<sup>42</sup>

40. See, for example, Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (London: SCM Press, 1952), 365, and Henry L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought* (London: John Murray, 1859), 13.

41. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 7.

42. *Ibid.*, 10.



### Reflect and Discuss

In your opinion, is it impious, irreligious, or pretentious to question God about the existence of and reason for evil? Why or why not?

The theologians discussed in the upcoming chapters offer theologies of suffering based in biblical, religious, and theological traditions as well as in the social and biological sciences. Some who affirm the coexistence of God, evil, and suffering offer theistic responses to the reality of suffering and evil. These responses assert the agency of human free will, the effect of suffering on character development, the promise of eschatological hope, the theology of the cross, and the suffering of God along with the afflicted in order to reconcile a particular image of God with the existence of evil. However, some who look upon the travail of the world and its creatures conclude that there is no God or at least no God who can lay claim to being all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing, and all-just. This conclusion frequently provides a philosophical starting point for the argument of atheism.

## The Challenge of Atheism

From a philosophical viewpoint, there are more arguments for atheism than those rooted in the existence of suffering and evil,<sup>43</sup> and there are more non-theistic than atheistic responses to the existence of suffering and evil.<sup>44</sup> In either case, suffering and evil remain enigmatic because the question of why they exist and how they impact the order and meaningfulness of the world remains. This is because “the problem of evil is a *human* problem, not exclusively a *religious* one.”

43. The case for atheism has been made on a variety of bases. Arguments include the incompatibility of free will and omniscience, the conflicting revelations of different religious traditions, the imperfect design of created life-forms, the incongruity between the notion of hell and the omnibenevolence of God, and the principle of parsimony, related to Occam's razor, which maintains that, among competing hypotheses, the hypothesis with the fewest assumptions should be selected. Consistent with the principle of parsimony are also those atheistic responses deriving from the rejection of God or the “supernatural hypothesis” on the basis of science and its “natural hypotheses.” Recent works on such topics include Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2007); Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007); and Lewis Wolpert, *Six Impossible Things before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).

44. R. Franklin Terry lists the following nontheistic responses to the problem of evil: agnosticism, existentialism, nihilism, and positivism. His discussion appears in “An Analysis of the Problem of Evil, Part Two: Theoretical Dimensions,” 15–25.

All people, regardless of their religious convictions or lack thereof, require conceptual categories to deal with evil, whether this is human authored or “natural” evil such as hurricanes or earthquakes. It is not only the theist who must give an account of her God in the face of evil; the atheist must give an account of his moral outrage at the evil in the world as well.<sup>45</sup>

Because of its focus on suffering, this text centers only on the form of atheism that responds to the existence of suffering and evil, commonly referred to as protest atheism. It does so by examining the argument for atheism constructed by philosopher William L. Rowe. Rowe approaches the problem of God and suffering as both a logical and an evidential problem.

In his classic essay, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” Rowe restates the premises of the atheistic argument concerning God and evil in this way:

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.
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.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>46</sup>

In his statement of the problem, Rowe concedes the possibility that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being *could* permit suffering if *not doing so* resulted in the loss of a greater good or in the occurrence of an equally bad or worse evil. In so doing, Rowe acknowledges that

if the intense suffering leads to some greater good, a good we could not have obtained without undergoing the suffering in question, we might conclude that the suffering is justified, but it remains an evil nevertheless. . . . In such a case, while remaining an evil in itself, the intense human or animal suffering is, nevertheless, an evil which someone might be morally justified in permitting.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Ryan Dueck, “Angry at the God Who Isn’t There: The New Atheism as Theodicy,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 3–16, available at [www.directionjournal.org/40/1/angry-at-god-who-isnt-there-new-atheism.html](http://www.directionjournal.org/40/1/angry-at-god-who-isnt-there-new-atheism.html), emphasis added.

46. William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (October 1979): 336.

47. *Ibid.*, 335.

This acknowledgment adds a critical element to most arguments for atheism that ordinarily offer no such concessions. Conceding the possibility of gaining a greater good or avoiding a worse evil to legitimize suffering suggests that the existence of intense suffering does not necessarily negate the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God.

Rowe offers the hypothetical situation of a fawn trapped in a forest fire ignited by a lightning strike, detailing how the fawn is “horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.” In so doing, he exemplifies the classic argument of protest atheism: in view of the scope and the intensity of suffering in creation and its creatures, belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God is logically and evidentially indefensible.

So far as we can see, the fawn’s intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn’s suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. . . . Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented the fawn’s apparently pointless suffering? The answer is obvious. . . . Since the fawn’s intense suffering was preventable and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn’t it appear that . . . there do 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.<sup>48</sup>

This conclusion serves as the crux of the protest atheist’s challenge. Even if one were to acknowledge that some experiences of suffering may be justifiable to obtain a greater good or to prevent a worse evil, the protest atheist points to the innumerable instances of pointless or innocent suffering that have afflicted all manner of creatures throughout history. Holding that it is unlikely that such pointless and innocent suffering is “intimately related” to greater good or worse evil, the protest atheist avers that even if it was so related, a truly omnipotent, omniscient being could have achieved those goods or avoided those evils without the need for such intense suffering. Therefore,

In light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. . . . Returning now to our argument for atheism . . . it does seem that we have *rational support* for atheism, that it is reasonable for us to believe that the theistic God does not exist.<sup>49</sup>

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48. *Ibid.*, 337.

49. *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

### Reflect and Discuss

Do you agree with Rowe's atheistic conclusions concerning God and suffering? How would you respond to Rowe's scenario?

Rowe himself offers a variety of approaches for the theist to respond to protest atheism. In one approach, the theist could delineate the goods an all-powerful and all-knowing God could achieve only by leading to suffering; in another approach, the theist may point out the spiritual and moral character development occasioned by the experience of suffering. A third way consists of the assertion that much suffering results from the free exercise of human choice; in a final tack, the theist may invoke the mystery of both God's purposes and the randomness of suffering.

### Case in Point: *The Brothers Karamazov*

*The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky is a deeply philosophical novel set in nineteenth-century Russia that debates ethical questions of God, free will, and morality. In a section entitled "Rebellion," the book offers a famous criticism of any defense that derives from theological or philosophical approaches to evil. Moved by the realization that "the earth is sodden from its crust down to the center with tears,"<sup>50</sup> the antagonist Ivan Karamazov, who identifies himself as a believer in God, laments the scandal of suffering borne by innocent children. Ivan acknowledges that the suffering of adults may be deserved because of their depravity and complicity in the sins of history, after all,

they've eaten the apple and know good and evil, and they have become "like gods." They go on eating it still. But the children haven't eaten anything, and are so far innocent. . . . If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins . . . . The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents!<sup>51</sup>

50. Luigi Pareyson, "Pointless Suffering in the Brothers Karamazov," *Cross Currents* 37 (Summer/Fall 1987): 274.

51. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1980), 260, available as a Project Gutenberg eBook at [www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-b/28054-b.html#toc83](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-b/28054-b.html#toc83).

Case in Point: *The Brothers Karamazov* (continued)

However, Ivan finds the suffering of children unconscionable. In a poignant conversation with his younger brother Alyosha, a novice in an Orthodox monastery, Ivan recounts numerous examples of abuses inflicted upon children and agonizes over two in particular. The first is a child of five abused by her mother. As Ivan tells it,

This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. . . . Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? . . . Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?<sup>52</sup>

This narrative reflects one of the ways theodiscists defend divine permission of evil: God allows evil so that humans can better understand and recognize good. This argument defends the existence of evil as part of the harmonious perfection of creation, a premise Ivan flatly rejects: "Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God!'"<sup>53</sup>

The next story Ivan tells is about "a serf-boy, a little child of eight, [who] threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favorite hound." When the general saw the injured hound and found out that the eight-year-old child was inadvertently responsible,

He was taken—taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early [the next] morning the general comes out on horseback . . . the child is brought from the lock-up. . . . The child is stripped naked. . . ." Make him run," commands the general. . . . And he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes!<sup>54</sup>

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52. *Ibid.*, 265.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 266.

Case in Point: *The Brothers Karamazov* (continued)

There can be for Ivan no morally acceptable reason for allowing such cruelty and suffering, especially one that would leave the understanding of God as omnibenevolent unchallenged. Ivan then asks his brother to put himself in God's place:

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.<sup>55</sup>

At this point, even the pious Alyosha demurs and admits he would not consent. Throughout Ivan's diatribe, like theodicians who assert the sublimity of divine wisdom, Alyosha argues that Ivan may not know and understand all things as God does. "I don't want to understand anything now," Ivan retorts, "I want to stick to the fact. . . . If I try to understand anything, I shall be false to the fact, and I have determined to stick to the fact." Moreover, Ivan rejects any pious or pastoral response to the evil and suffering inflicted on the child by the general:

If the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! And . . . if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony?<sup>56</sup>

For even if such suffering were the price to be paid for cosmic harmony, Ivan protests,

I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. . . . Too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket . . . And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept . . . only I most respectfully return him the ticket.<sup>57</sup>

55. *Ibid.*, 269.

56. *Ibid.*, 268–69.

57. *Ibid.*, 269.

### For Further Reading

- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew. New York: Bantam Classics, 1982.
- Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.
- Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Rowe, William L. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (October 1979): 335–41.
- Stewart, Matthew, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Terry, R. Franklin. "An Analysis of the Problem of Evil, Part One: The Reality of Evil." *Iiff Review* 21 (1964): 9–15.
- Terry, R. Franklin. "An Analysis of the Problem of Evil, Part Two: Theoretical Dimensions." *Iiff Review* 23 (1966): 15–25.

### Internet Resources

- Center for Christian Studies, Gordon College. "Theodicy, God and Suffering—A Debate between Dinesh D'Souza and Bart Ehrman." Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Isg6Kx-3xdI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Isg6Kx-3xdI) (time: 1:42:27).
- Center for Christian Thought, Biola University. "The Existential Problem of Evil and *The Brothers Karamazov*." Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj-sxNNDuNU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj-sxNNDuNU) (time: 0:12:39).