

Dissatisfaction Theodicy and Punishment: A Reply to Webb

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1. Webb's Argument

In his paper, "An Empirical Challenge to Dissatisfaction Theodicy," Mark Webb offers a clever and empirically-minded argument against a common strand of theodicy found in the work of Peter van Inwagen, Eleonore Stump, and C.S. Lewis. These three apologists suggest that one reason God has for allowing us to suffer is that our suffering may result in our recognizing that our life apart from fellowship with God is fundamentally dysfunctional, empty, and wrong. Our suffering can lead us to consider the mess we have made (both individually and corporately), and to see our need of divine love, forgiveness, and guidance. Webb calls this sort of explanation, "Dissatisfaction Theodicy."

Webb offers a seven-step argument against the success of the Dissatisfaction Theodicy, to wit:

1. Punishment (in the psychological sense) is not the most effective way to condition a person.
2. If the dissatisfaction theodicy is correct, then God is using punishment to condition people.
3. If God is omniscient, he knows that punishment is not the most effective way to condition people.
4. If God is good, he uses (all other things being equal) the most effective means to his ends.
5. God is both omniscient and good.
6. All other things are equal (the *ceteris paribus* clause of 4 is satisfied).

Therefore,

7. The dissatisfaction theodicy is not correct.¹

The basic idea is that if the Dissatisfaction Theodicy is true, then God uses a method of punishment (where "punishment" is defined according to psychological theory rather than common usage) that is known to be generally ineffective. But God wouldn't use ineffective means to an ends. So the consequent of the conditional ("God uses a method of punishment known to be generally ineffective") is false, and therefore the antecedent ("The Dissatisfaction Theodicy is true") is false too.

Webb recognizes that the claim that God wouldn't use an ineffective

means to an end is the point at which his argument is most vulnerable. For this premise is true only if "all else is equal" by which Webb means that "God has no particular reason to use a behavior-modification strategy that is not the most effective available."²

2. A Minor Weakness in the Argument

My first critical point concerns the claim that "all else is equal." Webb grants that showing that God has no reason for preferring a less effective behavior modification strategy is a difficult business. But he apparently takes the fact that he can think of no good answer to the question "What could be God's overriding reason for using a less effective means here?" as an adequate reason for thinking there isn't one. But there is an issue here as to what the end is to which suffering is the means. If the end is simple behavioral modification, then there is little doubt that there are more effective means for God to whip us into shape. For example, a searing pain like a dentist's drill in the cavity of an un-anaesthetized tooth whenever we did something selfish would probably produce an increase in acts of charity. But, as Webb acknowledges, God might want to give us more of a role in our own rehabilitation, and so want to avoid using the divine cattle prod to produce reflexive good works. So if the end that God seeks to bring about is our *freely* deciding to act in ways more consistent with God's will, then perhaps causing in us a general dissatisfaction that sometimes manifests itself in acute suffering might be more efficient. However, I take it that as long as there isn't some kind of positive correlation between our level of dissatisfaction on the one hand, and our misbehaving on the other, then God's methods might be thought to be inefficient even for the more nuanced goal of bringing about our cooperatively-realized rehabilitation.

3. A Major Weakness in the Argument

This brings me to my primary objection to Webb's argument. I do not believe that we can reasonably construe the Dissatisfaction Theodicy as entailing that God is *punishing* the sufferer in order to alter her behavior. I confess that despite Webb's repeated warning that what he has in mind by "punishment" is only what the behavioral psychologist has in mind, my first reaction in reading the paper was that the Dissatisfaction Theorist was not claiming that God is punishing at all. I was thinking that punishment is essentially tied to desert, and that the sufferer's deserving her trials was at most an inessential part of the Dissatisfaction Theodicy. But after a more careful reading, I came to see that the term 'punishment' is being used in a

Webb's "An Empirical Challenge to Dissatisfaction Theodicy"

technical sense, a sense in which the notion of *desert* is not an essential ingredient. As long as God is attempting to alter our behavior by associating our disobedience or separation from God with "unpleasant stimuli," then it follows that God is "punishing" in the relevant sense.

Yet I think that the Dissatisfaction theorist need not accept even this more minimal description of the situation. For even if moral notions like *desert* are not part of the present understanding of "punishment," I take it that if X is punishing Y by associating Y's unwanted behavior with unpleasant stimuli, then X will cease to inflict the unpleasant stimuli upon Y when Y ceases to perform the unwanted behavior. If I spank my son every night at dinner time regardless of what he has done during the past twenty-four hours, I am guilty of child abuse but not of overly severe "punishment" in the technical sense with which we are now concerned. My spanking counts as (positive) punishment only if it co-varies with bad behavior; when the child acts up he gets spanked and when he behaves, he doesn't. In general, actions count as "punishment" in the sense that now concerns us, only when they correlate with unwanted behavior: when the unwanted behavior occurs, unpleasant stimuli are administered; when such behavior doesn't occur, the unpleasant stimuli is not administered.

Now if this is right, then God is punishing in the relevant sense only if the punishing or negative stimulus (i.e., suffering) stops once a person's unwanted activity stops. Now while there may be theists who claim that when a person "gets right with God," she never suffers again, it would be unfair to claim that van Inwagen, Lewis, and Stump hold anything so naïve and empirically false. No, they will claim that suffering continues after one is reconciled to God and even after one's behavior has been (somewhat) modified. Furthermore, I see no reason to claim that the Dissatisfaction Theorist must hold that should a person become perfected—that is thoroughly sanctified and godly—and hence incapable of sinning, she would then no longer suffer. The fact that suffering is to be expected whatever one's relationship with God and however one behaves, strongly suggests that the Dissatisfaction Theorist is not thinking of suffering as punishment in the relevant sense.

As I understand it, the heart of Dissatisfaction Theodicy is (or at least can be) this: Creation is in rebellion against God. Should I be fortunate enough to have my relationship with God repaired and my behavior acceptable, I'll still be part of humanity in particular and the created order in general. God uses our pain, which is universal, to aid in helping us see that we aren't the gods we sometimes take ourselves to be. Our turning to God does not end

our suffering; but we are promised new resources for coping with our pain. That is, our turning to God is to an extent reinforced by God's comforting us and giving us strength. But lest we think that the Dissatisfaction Theorist is saying that God uses reinforcement rather than punishment as a means for correction, we should note that God sometimes grants comfort and aid to those whose behavior is not in line with divine standards, and whose will is indifferent to this fact. Christians are likely to think of this as God's being gracious rather than being simply a reinforcing behavior modifier.

The point, then, is that the Dissatisfaction Theodicy fails to suggest that God is using suffering as a punishment in the psychologist's sense of that term because punishment co-varies with misbehavior. But the Dissatisfaction Theodicy recognizes that suffering doesn't co-vary with misbehavior. Hence, her theodicy doesn't entail that God uses suffering as punishment in the relevant sense, and premise two of Webb's argument is false.

Now it might be argued that even if God hasn't used the less efficient means of punishment so construed, nevertheless if (i) our suffering is allowed (at least in part) as a means to the end of our recognizing our need for God and yet (ii) our individually recognizing our need for God is not sufficient to bring about the end of our suffering, then God is doing something unjust or inappropriate in permitting our suffering. Maybe so and maybe not. Whatever the answer, this response is misguided. The point of my objection is to defend the Dissatisfaction Theorist against Webb's objection. Webb needs the Dissatisfaction Theodicy to entail that God is using suffering as a *punishment*. This is necessary for Webb to make the *empirical* argument that punishment is less effective than reinforcement, and hence that the Dissatisfaction Theorist must claim that God is using a less-than-efficient means to the divine ends. What makes Webb's argument novel is its empirical nature: Webb wants to use evidence from the behavioral sciences to argue that the Dissatisfaction Theodicy entails that God is using a less effective means of behavior modification. But if what I have been arguing is right, the Dissatisfaction Theorist will rightly insist that, on her view, God's allowing suffering doesn't count as "punishment" in the psychologists' sense of that term, and so God is not using the less efficient means of punishment to achieve the divine ends.

Notes

¹ Mark Owen Webb, "An Empirical Challenge to Dissatisfaction Theodicy," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 21, 1, p. 200.

² *Ibid.*, p. 201.