

Why Does God Allow Suffering?:

An Exemplarist Way Forward

Good morning everyone,

Thank you so much for having me here today. It's a genuine privilege to stand before you all. When I look out and see so many bright, eager faces, I'm filled with hope and excitement for the future. You are the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and changemakers, and this is a pivotal moment in your lives—a time when you're beginning to form the worldviews and convictions that will guide you through the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As you navigate this complex journey, among the most profound questions you'll encounter is one that has perplexed humanity for millennia: the problem of suffering. Why is there so much pain and anguish in our world? How can we reconcile the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God with the reality of profound, seemingly senseless suffering? These are not just abstract philosophical inquiries; they're deeply personal questions that touch the core of our human experience.

In the 4th century, Augustine of Hippo grappled with these very questions. He struggled to understand how a benevolent God could allow events like the sack of Rome—a city considered the heart of the civilised world at the time—and the brutal torture of the faithful. Augustine's reflections were not mere intellectual exercises; they were earnest attempts to make sense of a world that often seemed at odds with the divine goodness he believed in.

Fast forward to the 17th century, and we find Gottfried Leibniz coining the term 'theodicy,' derived from the Greek words for 'God' and 'justice'. Leibniz sought to vindicate God's goodness and justice in the face of evil and suffering. He proposed that our world, despite its flaws, is the 'best of all possible worlds' because it allows for the existence of free will and the opportunity for humans to choose good over evil.

Yet, despite these historical attempts to address the problem, the scale and intensity of suffering in our own time can feel overwhelming. We live in an age where information is at our fingertips, where news of tragedy and hardship from any corner of the globe reaches us in an instant. We see it in the headlines every day: wars tearing nations apart, acts of genocide that defy comprehension, natural disasters that leave communities devastated, and pandemics that affect every aspect of our lives.

But suffering isn't just something that happens 'out there' in distant lands or to other people. We encounter it in our own lives and communities. It's in the quiet anguish of a friend battling depression, feeling isolated despite being surrounded by people. It's in the heartbreak of a neighbour who has lost a child, a grief that seems insurmountable. It's in our own dark nights of the soul, when we question our purpose, our worth, and even our very existence.

The Philosopher William Rowe provides important examples to illustrate this problem of suffering. The first is the fictional case of Bambi—a young fawn trapped in a forest fire, enduring excruciating burns for days before finally succumbing to her injuries. This image of innocent wildlife suffering due to natural causes challenges our understanding of a just and benevolent universe.

The second example is tragically real: the case of Sue, a five-year-old girl who was brutally beaten, sexually assaulted, and strangled by her mother's boyfriend. Such acts of unimaginable cruelty force us to confront the darkest aspects of human nature. They provoke moral outrage and existential anguish, compelling us to ask: If God exists and is both all-good and all-powerful, why would He allow such horrors to befall the innocent?

Throughout history, many answers have been proposed to this agonising question. The free will defense suggests that God allows suffering as a necessary consequence of granting humans meaningful freedom. Without the ability to choose evil, our capacity to choose good would be meaningless. This perspective values human autonomy highly but can seem inadequate when faced with extreme evil.

Another approach is the soul-making theodicy, which posits that suffering plays an essential role in developing virtue and spiritual growth. The idea is that challenges and hardships can forge character, much like steel is tempered in fire. Now, while there is truth in the notion that adversity can lead to personal growth, this explanation often feels insufficient when we consider the scale of some suffering. Can we really say that the torture of a child serves a greater purpose?

These traditional theodicies offer insights worth pondering, yet they often struggle to fully account for the most extreme forms of evil and anguish. It's difficult to accept that every instance of profound suffering is justified by the development of virtue or the preservation of free will.

A crucial aspect to consider in evaluating theodicies is their ability to provide a greater good that evil necessarily brings about. A greater good, in this context, refers to a positive outcome or state that is of such significant value that it justifies or outweighs the existence of evil and suffering. The most compelling theodicy would demonstrate how evil and suffering are not just permitted, but are essential in bringing about this greater good—a good that could not be achieved through any other means.

Today, I'd like to introduce a different perspective on the problem of suffering—one I refer to as the 'Exemplarist Theodicy'. This approach is in the tradition of soul-making theories; however, it more importantly inspired by the moral theory of Exemplarism, which shifts the foundation of moral goodness from abstract principles to the concrete lives of moral exemplars.

Exemplarism suggests that we understand what is good by looking at those who embody goodness in exceptional ways. Think of figures like Martin Luther King Jr., who faced imprisonment, death threats, and relentless harassment yet remained steadfast in his commitment to nonviolent activism and racial equality. His courage and moral clarity galvanised a nation and continue to inspire movements for justice worldwide.

Consider also Malala Yousafzai, who, despite being shot in the head by the Taliban for advocating for girls' education, emerged stronger and more determined. Her unwavering commitment to education and equality has made her a global symbol of resilience and hope.

According to Exemplarism, virtues like courage, compassion, and empathy are not just abstract concepts but are made real and tangible through the lives of such individuals. Their stories provide us with powerful narratives that illuminate the depths of human goodness and inspire us to strive toward those ideals ourselves. In short, exemplars ground and what it means to be good within reality.

Building on this idea, the Exemplarist Theodicy argues that suffering, even in its most acute forms, can serve the greater good of transforming individuals into moral exemplars. It's often in the face of immense adversity that the potential for radical moral transformation emerges. When we're pushed to our absolute limits—beyond what we thought we could endure—we may tap into reservoirs of strength and virtue we didn't know we possessed.

Take, for example, Sophie Scholl, a young German student and a member of the White Rose resistance movement during World War II. Despite knowing the grave risks, she distributed anti-Nazi leaflets, speaking out against tyranny and injustice. Even when arrested and facing execution, she remained unyielding in her convictions, saying, 'Somebody, after all, had to make a start'.

Or consider Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest imprisoned in Auschwitz. When a fellow prisoner—selected to die by starvation as a punishment for an escape attempt—cried out for his family, Father Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He sacrificed his life so another might live, embodying the ultimate act of selfless love.

On the Exemplarist view, this is part of why God allows suffering - because it creates the conditions for this most profound form of character development. The exemplars who emerge from great adversity have a unique capacity to awaken and deepen the moral consciousness of others. Their example inspires us to live with greater compassion and resilience, and to emulate their virtues in our own lives.

As more people are moved to emulate exemplars, they too undergo a transformative journey. They begin to cultivate the same qualities that made the original exemplar so admirable - courage in the face of adversity, compassion for the suffering, a commitment to what is good and just. In time, these people become exemplars themselves, embodying the virtues that can light the way for others.

And so the process continues, with each new generation of exemplars inspiring the next. The influence of these moral heroes spreads like ripples in a pond, touching more and more lives. Slowly, painfully, a world of suffering is transformed into something kinder and more beautiful as the example of exemplars creates a chain reaction of moral awakening and transformation.

This, the Exemplarist Theodicy suggests, is how God works to make the world good. Not by waving a magic wand and eliminating all suffering, but by using that suffering to create exemplars. These exemplars then serve as the catalyst for others to transform, becoming exemplars themselves and perpetuating the cycle.

As more people are moved to emulate exemplars, the world starts to change. Compassion spreads, resilience grows, and goodness takes deeper root. Slowly, painfully, a world of suffering is transformed into something kinder and more beautiful as the influence of moral heroes permeates society.

In this view, God's ultimate goal is a world filled with such moral beauty—a world where goodness has triumphed not through supreme divine fiat, but through the free choices of humans inspired by the example of the exemplars before them. A world permeated by the love and wisdom born of suffering, where even the scars of the past have been transmuted into something glorious.

Thus, the Exemplarist Theodicy frames God's allowance of suffering as a means to an end - the end being a world perfected through the ripple effect of moral transformation. By creating the conditions for exemplars, God sets in motion a process by which more and more people can become beacons of light in the darkness. The suffering of the world becomes the context in which a truly good world is forged, one transformed life at a time.

However, it's crucial to recognise that exemplars are not just distant, world-historical figures. They are ordinary people in our own communities whose response to suffering inspires us to live with more wisdom and compassion.

Consider the cancer patient who starts a support group, providing comfort and advocating for research. Or the mother who channels her grief over a lost child into fighting for safer streets. Or the recovering addict who becomes a sponsor, offering hard-won wisdom and hope.

In ways big and small, these everyday exemplars prove the transformative power of suffering. They show us how pain can be alchemized into purpose, brokenness into beauty. And they remind us that we all have the potential for such growth.

Even in this room, each of you will face trials that could be crucibles for profound development. A serious illness. A painful breakup. The loss of a loved one. In those moments, you'll have the opportunity to become an exemplar yourself.

By responding to adversity with courage, channelling anguish into compassion, and letting your scars make you not smaller but softer, you can be a light in the darkness for others. You can model the hard-won wisdom that transmutes suffering into strength.

So as you grapple with the problem of evil, remember this: exemplars are all around us and within us. Forged in the fire of suffering, they show us the heights of what we can endure and overcome. Let their example give you hope, and strive to be that hope for others.

But then one can ask: what about instances of suffering that seem utterly senseless—situations where no moral exemplar emerges, and no apparent good results? This is where the Exemplarist Theodicy extends its reach. It posits that even the most apparently gratuitous (that means pointless) suffering can indirectly contribute to a world of greater justice, compassion, and nobility.

In revisiting Rowe's examples of Bambi and Sue, while their individual suffering is heart-breaking, their stories can serve as catalysts for collective moral awakening. Recent research suggests that many animals possess the cognitive abilities necessary for moral behaviour, indicating that they are already exemplars in their own right. Bambi's plight, therefore, provides an opportunity for other deer to express their inherent exemplarity through acts of compassion and care.

Imagine Bambi's fellow deer comforting her in her agony, nuzzling her and staying by her side. Their display of sympathy and solidarity, which is often thought reserved for humans, serves as a powerful example of the moral potential within the animal kingdom. Bambi's suffering thus becomes a catalyst not just for human moral reflection, but for the expression of exemplarity and virtue among her fellow creatures.

And Sue's tragic experience, similarly, can galvanize efforts to protect vulnerable children, reform social services, and enact laws that prevent such atrocities. Her story can awaken us to the stark reality of child abuse and inspire us to become fierce advocates for the voiceless. In standing up for children like Sue, we express our own potential for exemplary compassion and justice.

Thus, while the suffering of Bambi and Sue is undeniably terrible, the Exemplarist Theodicy suggests that even such harrowing experiences can contribute to the greater good by providing opportunities for the expression of moral excellence. Whether it's deer comforting one of their own, or humans fighting for the protection of the innocent, such acts of exemplarity have the potential to inspire goodness in every corner of creation. That is, for every instance of child or animal suffering, there is the opportunity for the greater good of these individuals to express their inherent exemplarity or for them to provide other humans or animals with the opportunity to become or express their exemplarity in light of this.

In this view, no suffering is ultimately pointless if it prompts even one person to live with greater wisdom and compassion. The reason why God allows suffering, then, is to bring about

the greater good of enabling an individual to (express) or transform into an exemplar or providing others with the opportunities to make this expression or transformation. God is thus ultimately working towards the goal of a world filled with individuals who embody the highest ideals of goodness, compassion, and heroism.

Yet, acknowledging this can feel like cold comfort. It may seem like a cosmic system where some benefit at the expense of others' torment. And so, in recognising this tension, the Exemplarist Theodicy suggests that God does something more. For every sufferer whose anguish enables another's transformation into an exemplar, he provides eternal compensation—an infinite good that outweighs even the deepest affliction.

Specifically, this means granting them an intimate, healing communion with the Divine and with those their suffering helped transform. As God empathises perfectly with their pain, fully appreciating the horror they endured, God establishes intimate connections with them throughout their life. And so in eternity, they are surrounded by the appreciative love of both God and the community of exemplars whose character was shaped, in part, by their suffering. Their scars become symbols not just of pain but of a transcendent beauty forged through adversity.

This idea doesn't erase the reality of their suffering, nor does it trivialise their pain. Instead, it offers a framework where their experiences are acknowledged in all their complexity, and where ultimate justice and healing are realised in a realm beyond our current existence.

Now it's important to emphasise that this is not an easy or wholly emotionally satisfying answer to the problem of suffering. Innocent anguish, even if met with eternal compensation, still involves real horror and loss. The apparent realities of our world will always sit in deep tension with the existence of a perfect God.

However, the Exemplarist Theodicy provides a framework that can resolve this tension. By showing how suffering ultimately serves the good of moral transformation, it reconciles the existence of a loving God with the stark reality of pain. It acknowledges the depth of evil while still affirming a higher purpose and ultimate redemption.

In a world where suffering is inescapable, the Exemplarist Theodicy offers a way to find meaning amid the darkness. It does not negate the hurt but illuminates a path through it. While not a remedy for all experiential issues, it is a potent reconciliation of faith and lived experience. A map that can guide us through the valley of the shadow while still pointing towards the light.

The Exemplarist Theodicy provides this greater good in two key ways. First, it shows how suffering can directly lead to the transformation of individuals into moral exemplars—people whose lives embody the highest virtues and inspire others to greatness. Second, it demonstrates how even seemingly senseless suffering can provide opportunities for others to transform, either by responding with compassion or by being inspired to fight against injustice. In this

view, the greater good is a world populated by individuals of exceptional moral character, whose actions ripple outward to create a more just and compassionate society. This good could not be achieved without the reality of suffering that creates such exemplars.

By identifying these transformative outcomes, the Exemplarist Theodicy offers a solution to the problem of suffering. It reconciles the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God with the reality of suffering by showing that suffering is necessary both for the direct creation of exemplars and, for those who cannot become exemplars themselves, their suffering still serves a greater purpose by providing opportunities for others to transform into exemplars in response, with these individuals who cannot transform being compensated for their suffering and providing others with opportunities.

This framework allows us to understand how a benevolent God could allow suffering: not out of indifference or lack of power, but as an essential component in the process of transforming individuals into exemplars and creating the conditions that allow others to develop exceptional moral character in response to others' suffering.

As we reflect on these ideas, I encourage you to continue wrestling with these deep questions. Engage with the insights of philosophers and theologians who have grappled with these issues across the ages. But also look to the testimonies of exemplars throughout history and in your own lives—those who have suffered profoundly and yet have managed to wring beauty and goodness from the bitterness.

Let this struggle drive you not just toward intellectual understanding but also toward moral action. In a world as broken as ours, the call to relieve suffering, to protect and uplift the vulnerable, and to be beacons of hope is more urgent than ever. Each of us has the capacity to make a difference in our own spheres of influence, as an exemplar.

Take inspiration from the exemplars we've discussed—and others you may know personally. Strive to embody the virtues of courage, compassion, and justice in your daily lives. Remember that you don't need to be a global figure to have a significant impact. Small acts of kindness, standing up for what's right in your community, offering support to someone in need—these actions ripple outwards in ways we may never fully comprehend.

And remember that your own daily struggles and challenges, no matter how small they may seem, have the potential to transform you into an exemplar or provide others with the opportunity to become one. Every difficulty you face is a chance for growth and a catalyst for positive change, not just for yourself, but for those around you.

As you go from here, may you grapple honestly with the problem of suffering but not lose heart. May you allow yourselves to grieve the brokenness of the world but never cease to dream of wholeness. Seek truth and meaning with open hearts and minds, and remember the profound wisdom found in literature and spiritual teachings.

And remember that every experience of suffering you personally undergo in your daily life provides you with the opportunity to become an exemplar or help others to do so. And so there is meaning behind every suffering you experience.

So may you be granted with the strength to face suffering in an exemplary way – with courage, compassion, empathy and love. That is, that you may be exemplary in all that you do, even in the face of suffering.

Thank you for your time, and may your journey be one of growth, purpose, and profound compassion.