

Naturalistic and Theistic Explanations of the Distribution of Suffering

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Suffering is a deep and pervasive feature of our experience of the world; nonetheless, suffering is not evenly distributed. The distribution of suffering requires explanation beyond the kind or degree. Whether or not the distribution of suffering can be *explained* by a hypothesis can be distinguished from whether the distribution of suffering is *evidence* for or against that hypothesis. In this section, naturalism and theism are contrasted for their respective ability to explain the distribution of suffering, while the evidential role of suffering is set aside.

On naturalism, the explanation of suffering is a job for the cognitive and social sciences, perhaps in conjunction with political philosophy and philosophy of mind—not a job for philosophy of religion or for theologians. The distribution of suffering tracks socioeconomic and biological facts. Those who suffer are not typically morally worse than those who flourish. There is no grand, cosmic justice, nor guarantee that things will work out in the end. Nonetheless, naturalism does not commit us to nihilism; many naturalists endorse objective moral facts. For politically or ethically concerned naturalists, suffering provides powerful reasons for action because no supernatural beings can be relied upon to make the world aright. To be sure, instances of suffering may be implicated in broader antinaturalist arguments. Naturalists may have difficulty explaining suffering qualia or the existence of anything, including suffering, at all. Nonetheless, naturalistic theories of qualia,

consciousness, and cosmology have been offered. Their evaluation is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The nature, distribution, and causes of suffering does pose a special explanatory problem for theism. Let's pump the relevant intuitions. Parasitic flies gestate within the flesh of other animals, painfully bursting from their hosts. Cats instinctively toy with their wounded prey for extended periods of time. People who suffer often do not deserve to suffer. Theists believe that God desires our well-being, and knows how to and can bring it about, because God is perfectly loving, perfectly good, all knowing, and all-powerful. Nonetheless, suffering exists. Theists have developed two strategies to reconcile our world's spectacle of fear and pain with God's goodness and lovingness:

1. *The story strategy*. Some theists offer putatively probable stories (theodicies) in which God allows some instances of suffering. Other theists offer epistemically possible stories (defenses) where God and suffering coexist.
2. *The skeptical strategy*. In this strategy, theists justify rationally maintaining their theism without explaining suffering.

Various stories have been offered. Perhaps God allows Greg to suffer so that Anne can demonstrate moral bravery and fortitude in saving him. Perhaps God desires for her creatures to have freedom of the will, because freedom of the will is a great good, but freedom of the will could not exist if we did not have the ability to cause each other to suffer. So God allows us to inflict suffering on each other in order that we may have

freedom of the will. Perhaps some suffering is necessary for moral development. No single story is presently thought to explain all suffering; instead, insofar as theists can explain suffering, different kinds of stories are expected to explain different kinds of suffering.

Nonetheless, most theists endorse the skeptical strategy because we can easily identify instances of suffering for which no plausible story has been constructed. Consider a fawn who is trapped under a log in a forest fire. (This example is from Rowe 1979.) The fawn slowly and agonizingly burns to death over the course of several hours. No traces of the fawn are left. No one will know the fawn's suffering. We cannot see a purpose for the fawn's suffering. There was no opportunity to demonstrate moral fortitude in saving the fawn. The fawn was deprived of freedom—if fawns have freedom—when she became trapped. No one could exercise freedom in rescuing the fawn, for that would require knowledge of the fawn. The fawn died, so the fawn was not able to grow in virtue (if fawns do grow in virtue) through the experience. No one else grew in virtue, either.

The distribution of suffering can also seem to lack God-justifying reasons. Consider the following eminently plausible moral principle:

Equality: A just society treats person A equivalently to person B, unless A and B differ in some morally relevant way. (See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1130b–1132b; Gosepath 2011.)

Equality explains why racially segregated seating on buses is unjust: race is not a relevant characteristic for deciding seating. The principle finds support from diverse ethical theories

(utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics). Political philosophers, across the spectrum, support equality, though they widely diverge on equality's implications. The principle is sometimes understood to follow from necessary principles of rationality (Berlin 1956); if so, equality will not be overturned in future ethical inquiry.

Equality does not entail that societies afford all persons the same (or equivalent) material possessions. One way persons can be equivalently treated involves affording them equivalent opportunities. Applying this principle to the theological domain yields:

Divine Equality: Because God is just, God would ensure that persons A and B have equivalent opportunities to obtain goods or evils, or to avoid evils, unless there are morally relevant differences between A and B, or unless some factor overrides the demands of equality. (See Linford and Patterson 2015, 191–192.)

The opportunities to obtain goods or evils, or to avoid evils, are not distributed according to morally relevant characteristics. Amelioration is often not possible for those who suffer the most or for those who are the most vulnerable. People who have the misfortune to have been born into underprivileged families suffer disproportionately. Moral progress is made when we recognize that opportunities for obtaining goods or avoiding evils are unfairly distributed in our world. Those who mistakenly believe opportunities for obtaining goods or evils or avoiding evils are fairly distributed are guilty of the *just world fallacy*: they blame victims—Sue must have done something horrible to deserve what happened to her—and praise evildoers—Jake's actions must have been good, because otherwise he wouldn't be so

rich. The just world fallacy motivates morally repugnant theology. If the history of the suffering of people of color is interpreted as just, then it is difficult to avoid the racist conclusion that “God favored the white race” (Baker 2011, 168; see also Jones 1973). Likewise, the prosperity gospel is wrong to interpret wealth accumulation as God’s blessing on the virtuous. (Similar considerations for gender are offered in Overall 2011, 242–243.)

The most plausible story-response involves an appeal to freedom of the will. Consider the case that, for example, disenfranchised ethnic groups appear to be singled out for suffering. Much of their suffering is the result of unjust social institutions freely formed by human beings. God recognizes the good of freedom of the will and would not contravene the will of her creatures. This response is implausible. First, unjust social institutions are formed through the collective actions of individuals, but no single individual is wholly responsible for the institutions within which they participate. (Some might be responsible for, e.g., furthering the agenda of an unjust institution, however.) Many members of oppressive classes participate in unjust social institutions though they desire not to. Many lack the power to end the oppression and ameliorate conditions. And many societies inherit unjust social institutions from their ancestors, so that, for example, racial inequality persists even if racial prejudice dies out. Therefore present unjust social institutions should not be understood as an expression of freedom of the will.

Second, the autonomy of oppressive groups often suppresses the autonomy of the oppressed. Again, the opportunity for amelioration is often not afforded to the world’s most vulnerable people. If God does recognize the goodness of freedom of the will, why wouldn’t

God ensure the freedom of the will of oppressed classes? Why would God prize the freedom of the will of Nazis and slave owners above those whom they oppress?

Third, the conditions antecedent to the construction of unjust social conditions often require widespread misconceptions, or outright fabrications, concerning the oppressed classes, for example, the anti-Semite's fantastical claim that Jews eat babies, the horrific white supremacist claim that people of color are civilized through slavery, or the dehumanizing patriarchal claim that the place of women is in the home. When God designed our world, God could have ensured that misconceptions of that sort never arose.

Some entire regions, inhabited by economically vulnerable peoples, or others who lack adequate resources, are susceptible to plagues, natural disasters, and starvation. Theists invoke freedom of the will in another way to explain these cases: perhaps a group A living in impoverished conditions experiences natural evils so that another group B can demonstrate a morally excellent choice in helping A. This response is implausible for two reasons. First, most ethicists recognize supererogatory actions, that is, those good actions that rise above our moral duties. Some utilitarian views are criticized because they do not seem to allow for supererogation or are otherwise overly demanding (for a recent discussion, see McElwee 2016). Many regard Peter Singer's view—that those who are better-off have a duty to donate as much of their money as they can, without sacrificing something of equal or greater moral significance, to those worse off—as implausible (1972). If B does not help A, then God's purpose in A's suffering was not met. And if God's purpose was not met, A's suffering would have been for nothing. Therefore, B probably has a duty to help A. If ethicists have been rightly skeptical of Singer's view, then we should be skeptical that the world's most

vulnerable peoples suffer so that the better-off may help them. Second, consider the plausible principle that one ought always to treat others as ends unto themselves and never as mere means. If A is made to suffer for the sake of B's ability to demonstrate moral excellence, then A has been used as a mere means for A's betterment. God would have failed to recognize A's humanity. But God is perfectly good, loving, and knowing; God could not fail to recognize A's humanity. Accounts according to which A suffers so that B can grow in, for example, moral or spiritual maturity fail for similar reasons, for they likewise treat the world's most vulnerable peoples as instruments for the betterment of others. Importantly, if theists affirm that the world's worst off are worse off for the betterment of the best off, then they have not plausibly avoided the charge that God favors the world's best off or disfavors the worst off (see the closely related argument in Jones 1973, 79–97).

In response, theists should not endorse the story strategy, for known stories lead to the just world fallacy. Instead, they should concede that opportunities for obtaining goods and evils are not fairly distributed in our world, while resisting the charge that God favors some groups of people over others. According to the definition of Divine Equality, if theism is true and opportunities are distributed unfairly, the distribution must be due to some reason overriding the moral demands of equality. If so, the distribution of opportunities seems to lack God-justifying reasons only because the overriding reasons have yet to be successfully identified.

Most theists have turned to adopting the skeptical strategy. The most popular skeptical strategy is *skeptical theism* (Wykstra 1984, 1986; Draper 1996, 2013; Bergmann 2001; Almeida and Oppy 2003; McBrayer n.d.; Dougherty 2008, 2011, 2012, 2016).

Roughly, skeptical theism is the conjunction of two claims: (i) theism and (ii) that our knowledge of the moral facts, and the entailment relations between the moral facts, is not representative of all the moral facts that there are. William Rowe (1979) provides a useful distinction. *Inscrutable suffering* is suffering for which we cannot see justifying reasons, such as the fawn's; similarly, an *inscrutable distribution of opportunity* is a distribution of opportunities for goods and evils for which we cannot see justifying reasons. *Gratuitous suffering* is suffering for which there are no justifying reasons; again, similarly, a *gratuitous maldistribution of opportunity* is a distribution of opportunities for obtaining goods or evils for which there are no justifying reasons. Skeptical theists argue that, given (ii), we are not epistemically positioned to judge whether an instance of inscrutable suffering is probably an instance of gratuitous suffering. Likewise, skeptical theists should say we are not epistemically positioned to judge whether any instance of the inscrutable distribution of opportunity is an instance of the gratuitous maldistribution of opportunity.

Presently, we are concerned with whether successful theistic explanations of the distribution of suffering can be offered and not whether suffering provides a good argument against theism. The two strategies for explaining suffering suggest theists cannot explain suffering. Most theists have moved to skeptical theism because they have little hope for the story strategy's global explanatory success. On the other hand, if skeptical theism is true, theistic explanations for inscrutable suffering or for the inscrutable distribution of opportunity are beyond our epistemic abilities.

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