BOOK REVIEW:

WHY GOD ALLOWS US TO SUFFER:
The Definitive Solution to the Problem of Pain and the Problem of Evil

by
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First, a word from God, who is referenced in the title of this book: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). We'll come back to this apostolic admonition.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this book, from its hubristic title to its concluding unphilosophical postscript-ing of Soren Kierkegaard, ought to be ruled inadmissible to the discussion of the Problem of Evil. It is not serious. It is not philosophical. It is not theological.

1.

Not many of us should presume to write on the Problem of Evil. Let me put this in philosophic terms and in the words of the philosopher D.Z. Phillips.

> Philosophizing about the problem of evil has become commonplace. Theories, theodicies and defenses abound, all seeking either to render intelligible, or to justify, God's ways to human beings. Such writing should be done in fear: fear that in our philosophizings we will betray the evils people have suffered, and, in that way, sin against them. Betrayal occurs every time explanations and justifications of evils are offered which are simplistic, insensitive, incredible or obscene.[1]

[1] D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), page xi, Introduction: On Telling the Problem of Evil.

Now, the logic of *Why God Allows Us to Suffer* does not rise to the level of the theodicies and defenses that Phillips identifies as "simplistic, insensitive, incredible or obscene"; notwithstanding, the content of the book is a transgression, as is its title. We have to agree that there is a minimum requirement of intellectual seriousness for anyone of us who presume to teach in the classroom or preach from the pulpit or go into print regarding the Problem of Evil. Why? Because it is human beings who suffer. It is obscene to deploy real-life examples in the service of an incoherent "final solution" to the Problem of Evil and Suffering – the book's final solution to the Problem of Evil, as far as I can make sense of it, is that "experiences of friendship-love" outweigh pain, suffering and death – as this book does, for example, in a chapter headed "God is All Wise":

> Is the experience of love so valuable that it outweighs our experience of pain, injustice, fear and death? … Consider the following example. A double amputee who lost his legs in combat asserts that he would not exchange his experiences of wartime friendship for the ability to undo the terrible suffering that he has endured as a result of his battlefield injuries (47).

It is not just those of us who minister to our injured veterans, but injured veterans themselves, including those who are men and women of faith, who find such a quasi-real-life anecdote obscene and unbelievably simplistic. For a real-life and deeply meditative and philosophical book on soldiers and their comradery and honesty in light of death, pain and suffering, there is J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. The present book offers no solution to our honored veterans' pain and suffering and questions about evil and suffering. No comfort whatever.

2.

When you have a look for yourself (which I am not necessarily recommending), you will recognize that this book reads like nothing so much as a hand-me-down PowerPoint presentation

of what is, to be sure, a central, perhaps even *the* central (agonizing and transgenerational) Problem for philosophy and theology. For example, the author lists the propositions that he believes constitute the logical structure of the Problem in his Introduction. But his list is an inexplicably idiosyncratic three-point outline. His augmented outline of the logic of the Problem is even more oddly skewed. His logical outlines are skewed toward his notion that pain is a necessary condition, allowed by God and also somehow generated by our "sinful form" of life, for us to be in a loving friendship with God. Inexplicably, his reasoning does not include the standard proposition about God's goodness; only His raw power (5).

The author does not seem to recognize the jarring effect of his idiosyncratic logical outlines up against even the brief, brief quotes from Hume and Epicurus included in this book. Although the back cover of his book claims that he "spent years of studying the works of thinkers who claimed to have insights into the reasons why God allows us to suffer …" there is no evidence that the author is aware of the contributions these philosophers actually made (helpful or not) to our handling of the Problem. Although, according to his title, his introduction, and the back cover of his book, he means to present "the definitive solution" over and against theirs, he has neither accounted for their reasoning nor put forward a coherent, much less a philosophically superior, line of reasoning himself. He does not seem to be aware that the "God" of Epicurus text is not the God of the Bible, but a placeholder for a sort of deistic norm advanced by Stoic philosophers, leaving us to wonder whether he was reading the philosophers he evokes during the years he spent studying the Problem that he tells us he alone has solved.

At other times, the book reads like the product of an online keyword search for quotes by philosophers. But the quotes are never unpacked and the philosophers are often are – not misrepresented, exactly, but – never actually presented at all. For example, Alvin Plantinga's

freewill defense is mentioned disparagingly, apparently (the reader cannot tell). The author adverts to it by opining, "[A] more common reason why many people fail to understand the seriousness of the problem of pain is a false belief that a comprehensive solution has been provided by the so-called 'free-will' argument" (7). Plantinga is neither named nor cited. There is no evidence that the author has read him, or even caught the fact that Plantinga's writing does not present his free-will defense as an answer to the Problem, but as a defense of the relative reasonableness of God's visitations of suffering. Had the author read Plantinga – on whom he nonetheless seems to rely for his passing references to free-will in his book – Plantinga could have spared us all, author and readers alike, some grief. This self-proclaimed subtitle promises us readers *The Definitive Solution to the Problem of Pain and the Problem of Evil*, remember. But Plantinga carefully and helpfully teaches us, after explaining the difference between a Free Will Theodicy (that would be a philosophical way of justifying God in the face of evil) and a Free Will Defense (Plantinga's more modest project of showing that the existence of evil is not inconsistent with God's goodness), this pearl of wisdom in regard to the Problem:

> [In] the present context [that is, the context of investigating the consistency of God's goodness with the existence of evil] the latter [that is, a Free Will Defense] is all that's needed. *Neither a defense or a theodicy, of course, gives any hint to what God's reason for some specific evil – the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example –* might *be. And there is still another function – a sort of pastoral function – in the neighborhood that neither serves.*"[2]

In other words, the Problem may be treated not logically or philosophically, but pastorally, with the Word of Christ and the means of grace to comfort people in the midst of their suffering.

One more point regarding the author's regular use of terms such as *human free-will* in the course of his alleged "definitive solution to the Problem," and his manifest failure to read the

[2] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), see Part 3. Can we Show that there is No Inconsistency Here? The bracketed interpolations and the italics are mine.

major philosophers that he spent years studying. The assumption that human freewill is essentially our human exercise of free choice is itself a relatively newfangled understanding of *freewill* that comes from Kant and the European Enlightenment. To read this understanding of freewill as autonomy vis-à-vis God, assuming that it is the God of the Bible who is at issue in *Why God Allows Us to Suffer*, is a significant matter of chauvinistic anachronism, a reading of a modernist notion back onto God and His Word. A reader of Augustine would be aware of the traditional Western understanding that the human will is free only to the extent that it harmonizes with God's will. Otherwise, as Augustine explains, for example, in his *On Free Choice of the Will*, the will is enslaved, either to oneself or to the devil and the world. Again, the problem is that this author footnotes Augustine, to be sure, but treats the philosopher's writings in a pro forma manner. The author does not provide us any evidence that he has in fact been reading Augustine in the course of formulating "the definitive solution to the Problem."[3]

So, on the one hand, *Why God Allows Us to Suffer*, is philosophically superficial – which is to say that it is not philosophical – in its approach to this deeply human Problem. On the other hand, this book is theologically trivial – or, better, it is not theological in the least. Think again of James 3:1. Next, notice the title of the book under review. I honestly cannot discern an argument leading to his conclusion that God allows us to suffer, except that the author seems to feel that, just as friends depend on suffering in order to trust each other, so we ought to trust God, who is "All Powerful," "All Loving," "All Wise," and "All Just," yet who is the One that allows us to

[3] At a minimum, those who write about *free will* in regard to the Problem of Evil owe their readers clear definitions. This is why I have introduced the recognition that there are two competing definitions of *free will*. The options here are (1) the biblical, Augustinian and classic or pre-modern understanding of *free will as a will in harmony with God's will* and (2) the post-Kantian, modern understanding of *free will as individual autonomy*. C.S. Lewis's 1940 book, *The Problem of Pain*, is sometimes referred to as "the classic free will argument." However, while it may be fair to refer to it as "the classic 20th-century argument," Lewis's working understanding of free will is not the classic, traditional, pre-modern Augustinian view. Rather, it is the post-Kantian modernist view. The assumption that free will is essentially a matter of individual autonomy, although it is our default definition today, is only two centuries old and is not at all biblically-informed but is a product of the Enlightenment project.

suffer. Somehow, this is supposed to be *the* solution to the problem of why we suffer. Here and there the author also asserts that we certainly should not blame God for our suffering because all pain and suffering derives from the sinful form (whatever exactly this means) of life in this world.[4]

3.

Just as there is no philosophical substance to this book that nevertheless claims in its subtitle to provide *The Definitive Solution to the Problem of Pain and the Problem of Evil*, there is no theological content at all. Despite an afterthought of a few Bible references in the book's meandering Conclusion (99-112) and an offhanded reference or three to our Lord's Name, *there is no there there*. No philosophical thinking, no theological substance, no authentic understanding of our actual suffering, no Christ in evidence. What are we to do with such a book that announces itself to provide us with *The Definitive Solution to the Problem of Pain and the Problem of Evil*?

Let me return to my "sermon text" for this book review. "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Since this book mentions friendship frequently, let me frame a recommendation in terms of friendship – not any hackneyed notion of friendship, but being actual friends to one another.

The author of this book, together with his editor and his publisher (although I fear that this may be all one person) should practice friendship toward one another and spend a year or

[4] Readers looking for apologetic and theological engagement with the Problem of Evil will find grist for their thinking in John Feinberg's important studies, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Crossway, 2004) and his recently published *When There Are No Easy Answers: Thinking Differently About God, Suffering and Evil, and Evil* (Kregel Publications, 2016).

two actually talking this through, with their Bibles open and fuller texts of the philosophers and theologians who have addressed the issue philosophically and theologically in play. Write some essays, share them with a few thoughtful friends outside your immediate circle. Friends don't let friends write bunk. The title of this book as well as its listing under "Religion / Christian theology / Apologetics" is unwarranted. More importantly, there is James 3:1. Those of us who preach or publish ought to be aware from the get-go that we are accountable to God and to His people, indeed toward all our listeners and readers as human beings.

4.

There is no more vitally human question for us as thinking persons or as believers in Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, who suffered for all people, who prayed Psalm 22 while dying for all people, who gave us Psalm 22 to pray with one another as we suffer. "Why?" we cry out as suffering and grieving human beings. "My God, my God, why …?" we cry out in our laments to our Father in heaven.

It is wholly inadequate and trite to teach people that "God allows us to suffer" in light of His words to us, first in the Person of His dear Son Jesus Christ and secondly in His written Word and in the Sacraments that He has instituted in that Word. Have we actually read Job, as the text stands? Then there are the psalms of lament, the words of the prophets regarding *evil*, the Gospel record of the man blind from birth, Romans 8, and more.

Philosophy can and does help us not to be trite, in much the way that Phillips describes his own aim in his philosophical writing:

> [Not to serve as] an exercise in religious apologetics, or anti-religious polemics. It does not seek to establish *the* proper response to the problem of evil. Philosophy possesses no criterion of its own by which this can be done, although it is concerned with the exposure of any conceptual confusion present in the responses that may be advocated.[5]

[5] *The Problem of Evil and The Problem of God,* xii.

This is why it is good to read the texts of philosophers who take the problem of evil seriously. I've mentioned above why it's important to read and digest Plantinga's actual text on the free will defense.

For a second example, consider the concluding lines of David Hume's *Dialogs Concerning Natural Religion*. These lines were written three days before the philosopher's death.

> A person who has a sound sense of the imperfections of natural reason will eagerly fly to revealed truth, while the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology with no help but that of philosophy, will disdain any further aid and will reject this help from the outside. To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian …[6]

In other words, after eleven chapters of dialog showing the faults and fripperies of solutions to the Problem of Evil, every thoughtful, educated person (or "man of letters") will ***learn to be skeptical of reasoning our way to a solution of any kind to the Problem of Evil and immerse himself instead in the Scriptures***, which Hume calls "revealed truth."

Speaking of immersing ourselves in the revealed truth of God's actual, written words to us, another extremely worthwhile philosophical text is Kiekegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, an extended philosophical meditation on Genesis 22 by way of John the Silent's personal engagement with the personal God.

Particular chapters in God's revealed truth for the Christian response to the Problem of Evil and Suffering (which is not a final solution of anyone's making but *Christ Himself*) are Psalm 22 and indeed all the psalms of lament, Romans 8, and the Gospels, particularly the chapters in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John on Jesus' death and resurrection.

[6] See Hume's text at *http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf*.

A concluding biblical recommendation: Psalm 6, with Luther's commentary on The Seven Penitential Psalms open, as a way to push us past the theologically vapid claim that "God allows suffering" to the reality that, as Luther writes,

> First. In all trials and affliction man should first of all run to God; he should realize and accept the fact that everything is sent by God, whether it comes from the devil or from man. This is what the prophet does here. In this psalm he mentions his trials, but first he hurries to God and accepts these trials from Him; for this is the way to learn patience and the fear of God. But he who looks to man and does not accept these things from God becomes impatient and a despiser of God.[7]

[7] Martin Luther, Jaroslav Pelikan, editor, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), Volume 14, Selected Psalms III, page 140.