7. What about suffering?

Sunday, March 10, 2013, 10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor
Leader: David Monyak

St. John in the Wilderness
“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

- 1 Peter 3:15-16 (NSRV)
Reference


Series Outline
On Guard. Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision

- **Week 1: Feb 17**
  - 1. What is apologetics?
  - 2. What difference does it make if God exists?

- **Week 2: Feb 24**
  - 3. Why does anything at all exist?
  - 4. Why did the universe begin?
  - 5. Why is the universe fine-tuned for life?

- **Week 3: Mar 3**
  - 6. Can we be good without God?
Series Outline

On Guard. Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision

- **Week 4: Mar 10**
  - 7. What about suffering?

- **Week 5: Mar 17**
  - 8. Who was Jesus?

- **Week 6: Mar 24**
  - 9. Did Jesus rise from the dead?

- **Not covered:**
  - 10. Is Jesus the only way to God?
Blessed are all your Saints, O God and King, who have travelled over the tempestuous sea of this mortal life, and have made the harbor of peace and felicity. Watch over us who are still in our dangerous voyage; and remember such as lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptations. Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide; but as in your mercy you have set our course, so steer the vessel of our life toward the everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at length to the quiet haven of our heart’s desire, where you, O our God, are blessed, and lives and reigns for ever and ever.

St Augustine, 354-430
Introduction
Introduction

Four Arguments for God

- **Cosmological Arguments for God:** God as “First Explanation” or “First Cause”
  - Leibniz’s version.
  - Al-Ghazali’s *Kalam* version.

- **Design or Teleological Argument for God:** God as Designer.

- **Moral Argument for God:** God as the Ultimate Source of all moral values and duties
Introduction
Cosmological Argument - Leibniz’s Version

- **Premises:**
  1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
  2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
  3. The universe exists.

- **Conclusion. Therefore:**
  4. The universe has an explanation of its existence.
  5. The explanation of the universe’s existence is God.
Introduction

Cosmological Argument -- *Kalam* Version

**Premises:**
- 1. Whatever begins to exist has a *cause*.
- 2. If the universe has a *cause* of its existence, that *cause* is God.
- 3. The universe began to exist.

**Conclusion. Therefore:**
- 4. The universe has a *cause*.
- 5. The *cause* of the universe’s existence is God
Introduction
Teleological or Design Argument

- **Premises:**
  - 1. The fine-tuning of the universe is due to either physical necessity, chance, or design.
  - 2. If the universe has a designer, that designer is God.
  - 3. The fine-tuning is not due to physical necessity or chance.

- **Conclusion. Therefore:**
  - 4. The fine-tuning of the universe is due to design.
  - 5. God is the designer of the universe.
Introduction

Moral Argument

- **Premises:**
  - 1. If God *does not* exist, objective moral values and duties *do not* exist
  - 2. Objective moral values and duties *do* exist

- **Conclusion. Therefore:**
Introduction

An Argument Against God’s Existence

- The most potent argument against the existence of an All-Powerful, All-Loving God is the Problem of Evil and Suffering.
- Doesn’t the sheer amount of suffering and evil we see in the world make it impossible, or at least unlikely, that it could have been created by an All-Powerful, All-Loving God?
- This is an argument against the existence of God – that is, an argument for atheism.
- Can we defend against this argument? Can we “justify” God against all the suffering and evil we see in this world?
Job, seeking to understand the mystery of suffering, argued with God and with his ‘comforters’. Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding … Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? … Will you even put me in the wrong … that you may be justified? …”

Job 38: 1, 4; 40: 2, 8
The Problem of Evil and Suffering
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Versions of the Problem

- Problem of Evil and Suffering
  - Intellectual Problem
    - Logical Version
  - Emotional Problem
    - Evidential or Probabilistic Version
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Versions of the Problem

- **Intellectual Problem**: is it plausible to think that God and suffering can co-exist?
- **Emotional Problem**: the emotional dislike for a God who would permit evil and suffering. The emotional aversion to a God who would allow them or others to suffer terribly.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Versions of the Problem

- Problem of Evil and Suffering
  - Intellectual Problem
  - Emotional Problem

- Answers to the Intellectual Problem often appear dry and uncaring to someone struggling with the Emotional Problem.
- Answers to the Emotional Problem often appear superficial and weak to someone struggling with the Intellectual Problem.
There are two versions of the “Intellectual” Problem of Evil and Suffering:

- **Logical Version:** the coexistence of God and suffering is *logically impossible*.
- **Evidential or Probabilistic Version:** the coexistence of God and suffering is logically possible, but *highly improbable*. 
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Logical Version

- It is claimed the following two statements are logically inconsistent:
  - An All All-Loving, All-Powerful God exists.
  - Suffering exists.

- Now, there is no explicit logical inconsistency here.
The atheists is making some additional hidden assumptions.

The hidden assumptions are:

- If God is All-Powerful, He can create any world He wants.
- If God is All-Loving, He prefers a world without suffering.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Logical Version

- The following statements are logically inconsistent:

  - An All-Loving, All-Powerful God Exists.
    - If God is All-Powerful, He can create any world that He wants.
    - If God is All Loving, He prefers a world without suffering.
  - Suffering exists in the world.
If God is All-Powerful, He can create any world that He wants.

- Is this necessarily true?
- It is NOT true if God creates a world where people have free will.
- God cannot create a world where:
  - Everyone has choices of what to do.
  - Everyone does what God wants.
  - Everyone has free will to do what they want.
If God is All-Powerful, He can create any world that He wants.

It is logically impossible to \textit{force} someone do something \textit{freely} – as logically impossible as a “round square” or a “married bachelor.”
Problem of Evil and Suffering

**Intellectual Problem: Logical Version**

- If God is All Loving, He prefers a world without suffering.
- Is this necessarily true?
- Might God not have some reasons for allowing suffering in the world?
- We all know situations in which we permit suffering in order to bring about a greater good.
If God is All Loving, He prefers a world without suffering.

- C. S. Lewis, in his book *A Grief Observed*, asked:
  - What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good’? Have they never even been to a dentist?”
The logical version of the atheist’s argument against God fails because the atheist cannot show:

- If God is All-Powerful, He can create any world that He wants.
- If God is All Loving, He prefers a world without suffering.

The burden of proof is too heavy for the atheist to sustain their claim.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

**Intellectual Problem: Logical Version**

- Christians can in fact assert, and make a good case for the following statement:
  - **God could not have created another world with as much good as, but less suffering than, this world, and God has good reasons for permitting the suffering that exists.**

- If this statement is even *possibly true*, then it is possible God and suffering *both* exist, and the logical version of the problem of suffering fails.
After centuries of discussion, both Atheist and Christian Philosophers both agree today that the **logical version of the problem of suffering** fails to disprove the existence of an All-Loving, All-Powerful God.
However, the Evidential or Probabilistic version of the problem of suffering is still being hotly debated.

The atheist claims that although the co-existence of an All-Powerful, All-Loving God and suffering is logically possible, it is highly improbable.

Surely God could have reduced the amount of suffering in the world without reducing the world’s overall goodness.
There are three points we can make against this Evidential or Probabilistic version of the Problem of Suffering:

1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.
2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence is probable.
3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
From our point of view, much of the suffering in the world *seems* unjustified. It *seems* pointless and unnecessary.

The atheist here is arguing that because the suffering *seems* unjustified, it *really is* unjustified.

But are we really in a position to make such a judgment with any confidence?

1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.

- As finite persons, we are severely limited in space and time, intelligence and insight.

- God however can view creation from beyond space and time, with an unbounded intelligence and insight.

- What seems pointless within our limited framework may be justified from God’s far wider framework.
1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.

An illustration from science:
- **Chaos Theory (= The “Butterfly Effect”)** tells us that many phenomenon in the world are extraordinarily sensitive to initial conditions.
  - The slight changes in the “initial conditions” caused by a butterfly flapping its wings in East Africa can change the weather patterns over the North Atlantic a few weeks later.
- **Chaos Theory (= The “Butterfly Effect”)** tells us *scientifically* we are in no position to know how a *seemingly insignificant event* can radically alter the world.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.

- An illustration from pop culture:
  - Movie *Sliding Doors*, 1998 presents us two possible versions of a woman’s life:
    - One version when she just catches a subway train before the doors slide shut
    - A second version when she just misses the subway train.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

1. We’re not in a position to say it’s improbable that God lacks good reasons for permitting suffering in the world.

- An illustration from pop culture:
  - Movie *Sliding Doors*, 1998
  - In one life she encounters failure, misery, unhappiness; in the other she is enormously successful, prosperous, and happy.
  - All because of a split-second difference in getting through subway doors!

- Given the dizzying complexity of life, we are simply in *no position* to judge whether God has no good reason for permitting some instance of suffering to afflict our lives.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- If we are going to estimate probabilities, we must ask, “improbable relative to what”?
  - What is the background information we are looking at?
  - Are we just narrowing our focus on the presence of evil and suffering in the world?
- We need to include all the background information we have to estimate probabilities.

2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence is probable.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence is probable.
- In particular, we must remember the four arguments we have already made for God:
  - **Cosmological Arguments for God:** God as “First Explanation” or “First Cause”
    - Leibniz’s version.
    - Al-Ghazali’s *Kalam* version.
  - **Design or Teleological Argument for God:** God as Designer.
  - **Moral Argument for God:** God as the Ultimate Source of all moral values and duties.
Although we might concede that God’s existence seems *improbable* relative to the suffering in the world alone, that “improbability” is outweighed by the other arguments for God’s existence.

- 2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence is probable.
3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.

- Certain Christian doctrines make it easier to deal with the problem of suffering than if one is working from a “bare-bones” concept of God:
  - 3-1. The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God.
  - 3-2. Human beings are in a state of rebellion against God and God’s purpose.
  - 3-3. God’s purpose is not restricted to this life, but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life.
  - 3-4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable good.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
   3-1. The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God.

People often assume that if God exists, his purpose for human life is happiness in this life, his role to provide a comfortable environment for his “human pets.”

This is NOT the Christian view:
   - We are not God’s pets.
   - The goal of human life is to bring us freely to the knowledge of God, which in the end will bring true and everlasting human fulfillment.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
  - 3-1. The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God.

- History must be viewed and judged from the perspective of the **Kingdom of God**. God’s purpose is to *freely* draw as many people as possible into God’s everlasting kingdom.
- This purpose may at times “trump” human happiness in this life.
- Comfort and immediate pleasure can make it easy for us to forget our deep dependency upon God, whereas hardship and suffering can provide occasions allowing us to more clearly see and appreciate our deep dependency upon God.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
   - 3-2. Human beings are in a state of rebellion against God and God’s purpose.

- Human beings seem beset by an “original sin,” a tendency to rebel against God, alienating themselves from God, immersing themselves in a spiritual darkness, expending their energies in the pursuit of false gods of their own making.
- The Christian thus is not surprised at the moral evil in the world; he expects it.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
  - 3-3. God’s purpose is not restricted to this life, but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life.

- For the Christian, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer opening up into the great hall of God’s eternity.

- If God asks his children to bear suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond all comprehension.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
  - 3-3. God’s purpose is not restricted to this life, but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life.

- St. Paul writes in his second letter to the Christian community in Corinth:
  - … we do not lose heart. … For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (NRSV)
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
  - 3-3. God’s purpose is not restricted to this life, but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life.

- The longer we spend in eternity, the more the sufferings of this life will shrink by comparison, towards an infinitesimal moment.
  - Hence St. Paul’s references to this life’s “slight momentary affliction.”
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem: Evidential Version

- 3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering.
  - 3-4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable good.

- To know God, the locus of infinite goodness and love, is an incomparable good, the fulfillment of human existence. The sufferings of this life cannot be compared to it.

- Thus a person who knows God, no matter what he suffers, can still truly say, “God is good to me!” by virtue of knowing God, an incommensurable good.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Versions of the Problem

- Problem of Evil and Suffering
  - Intellectual Problem
    - Logical Version
  - Emotional Problem
    - Evidential or Probabilistic Version
The “Emotional Problem” of Suffering refers to the emotional dislike for a God who would permit evil and suffering, the sense of alienation and even anger towards a God who would allow them or others to suffer terribly.

To try to address such feelings, we might think about:
- the paradox of such feelings
- How God is With Us in our sufferings
- What God went through for us in the Incarnation and the Crucifixion
Problem of Evil and Suffering

The Emotional Problem

A paradox:
- When we look upon an ongoing tragedy, at the ongoing suffering of another person, of the Other, and
- out of compassion and love of the Other,
- ask what kind of God, what kind of “Supreme Being” could possibly let such suffering continue,
- what sort of “heart” could such a God, really have, to just sit idly by, apparently doing nothing,
Problem of Evil and Suffering

The Emotional Problem

- A paradox:
  - and in our compassion and love of the Other,
  - feel anger and alienation towards such an apparently impotent God;
  - we should remember
  - the compassion and love of the Other that moves us to that anger and alienation towards God
  - is itself part of the image and likeness of God within us;
  - it is a mere dull version of the far more radiant compassion and love within God.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

The Emotional Problem

- God With Us
  - As Christians we believe that God is not insensitive to our own sufferings or the sufferings of others, but is a Loving Father who feels and shares our sufferings with us.
  - We vicariously feel and share the sufferings of those we love.
  - God is far more intimately connected to those we love: God feels and shares the sufferings of those we love far more intensely and vividly.
  - And God is similarly feeling and sharing the suffering of every human being.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

The Emotional Problem

- God With Us
  - Whatever reason God may have had for creating our world with its burden of evil and suffering, we may be sure that God did so knowing God would have to feel and share intimately the sufferings in every human life God created.
The Emotional Problem

Problem of Evil and Suffering

- The Incarnation and Crucifixion.
  - As Christians we believe that God, out of love “for us,” and “for our salvation,”
  - “emptied” God’s self and took on our humanity,
  - and as the person of Jesus accepted the limitations, travails and sufferings of a human life for some 30+ years,
  - and “for our sake” died the horrific death of a Roman crucifixion.
Problem of Evil and Suffering

The Emotional Problem

- The Incarnation and Crucifixion.
  - For us and for our salvation, Jesus experienced on the cross the worse possible effect of sin and evil (though he was himself sinless) – the complete absence of communion with God – without losing confidence in the love of his Father.
  - For us and for our salvation, that suffering and endurance of Jesus on the cross is now eternally a part of the inner life of God, eternally present to God.
Discussion
Problem of Evil and Suffering

Versions of the Problem

Problem of Evil and Suffering

Intellectual Problem

Logical Version

Emotional Problem

Evidential or Probabilistic Version