



GOD AND SUFFERING



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By Peter Kreeft

All good people are appalled by the sufferings of the innocent.

When an innocent person is struck by a painful disease, or tortured, or murdered, we naturally feel sadness and helplessness, and often rage. Many people have claimed that such suffering is a proof that God does not exist. Their argument goes like this: God is all good and all powerful. Such a God would not permit unnecessary suffering. Yet we constantly observe unjust suffering. Therefore, at least one of the premises about God must be false. Either God is not all good, or He is not all powerful, or he just doesn't exist. What's wrong with this argument?

First, let's examine what we mean when we say that God would not permit unjust suffering. There are two categories of suffering: suffering caused by human beings, which we call moral evils, and suffering caused by nature, for instance, earthquakes or cancer. Free will explains how God could be good and allow moral evil. Because God has given people free will, they are free to behave against God's will. The fact that they do evil does not prove that God is not good.

In addition, if there were no God, there would be no absolute standard of good. Every judgment presupposes a standard, and that's true of our moral judgments, too. What is our standard for judging evil to be evil? The most we could say about evil if there were no God was that we, in our subjective tastes, didn't like it when people did certain things to other people. We wouldn't have a basis for saying an act was bad—only that we didn't like it. So the problem of human evil exists only if God exists.

As for natural suffering: that poses what appears to be a more difficult question. We see an innocent child suffer, say, from an incurable disease. We complain. Understandable. We don't like it. Understandable. We feel it is wrong, unfair, and shouldn't happen. Understandable. But illogical, unless you believe in God. For if you do not believe in God, your subjective feelings are the only basis upon which you can object to natural suffering. Okay, you don't like it. But how is your not liking something evidence for God not existing? Think about it. It's just the opposite. Our judgments of good and evil, natural as well as human, presuppose God as the standard. If there's no God, there's neither good nor evil; there's just nature doing what it does. If nature is all there is, there is absolutely no need to explain why one person suffers and another doesn't. Unjust suffering is a problem only because we have a sense of what is just and unjust.

But where does this sense come from? Certainly not from nature. There's nothing just about nature; nature is only about survival. What, in other words, does it mean for suffering to be unnecessary or wrong? How is that determined? Against what standard? Your private standard means nothing. My private standard means nothing. We can talk meaningfully about suffering being unnecessary or wrong only if we have an underlying belief that a standard of right and wrong objectively exists. And if that standard really exists, that means there is a God.

Moreover, the believer in God has an incomparably easier time than the atheist psychologically, as well as logically, in dealing with the problem of natural suffering. If you accept that a good God exists, it is possible to also believe that this God somehow sets things right—if not in this world, then in the next. For the atheist, on the other hand, no suffering is ever set right. There is no ultimate justice. The bad win, and the good suffer. Earthquakes and cancers kill—end of story, literally. If nature is all there is, how can a sensitive person remain sane in a world in which tsunamis wipe out whole towns, evil men torture and murder innocent victims, and disease attacks people indiscriminately? The answer is: it's not possible. Is that how you want to live?

Peter Kreeft. "God and Suffering." Prager University (October 14, 2013): <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/god-and-suffering.html>.