

Chapter 30  
**An Argument that God Does Not Exist**

Our world is marked by much pain and sorrow. Does that fact supply us with a cogent reason to think no god exists?

Consider the following two claims: 1) There exists a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly loving and just; 2) The world is marked by much pain and sorrow. Are these two claims consistent with each other? One argument we will examine in this chapter says no, they are not. A further argument is this: It is clear that the world is marked by much pain and sorrow; since that fact is incompatible with the existence of God, God does not exist.

*1) Sources of pain and sorrow.* Pain and sorrow arise from causes of various sorts. One source of pain and sorrow is nature itself, considered entirely apart from human beings. Nature brings floods and droughts and famines, fires and earthquakes and landslides and predation. Nature is a source of disease and injury and painful death to humans and other animals alike.

Shouldn't God have made nature less violent and perilous, and our bodies tougher and more vigorous?

Another source is the emotional side of humans and other animals, our feelings and patterns of emotional reaction. Much pain is emotional pain. We are taunted or shunned by others, or we lose our jobs or people that matter to us die, and we feel hurt or lonely or lost. We experience despair and feelings of worthlessness.

Shouldn't God have made us more thick-skinned emotionally, more stoic, and more emotionally resilient?

Another source of pain and sorrow lies in the active side of our human nature, our tendencies toward insensitivity, indifference, selfishness, cowardice, greed, callousness, cruelty, even malevolence. We make other people and other animals suffer as we go about our business. Sometimes we do so accidentally and unawares, sometimes our business is precisely that others suffer.

Shouldn't God have made us better people, concerned not to harm others and quick to help them?

“For the theist, in believing in God, believes both that God created the world and that much that is in the world is deeply deficient by the very standards that God himself embodies.” So writes Terrence Penelhum, a philosopher of religion and practicing Christian.

*2) An argument that God does not exist.* An omniscient being would know the extent and nature of the pain and sorrow in the world, for an omniscient being knows everything. That is, an omniscient being would know that this world is a world of much suffering and sorrow. Moreover, an omniscient being would know how to end suffering and sorrow. Perhaps more to the point, an omniscient being would have known how to organize the world so that it lacked pain and sorrow right from the beginning.

Now if an omniscient being is also omnipotent, not only would that being know what is needed for a world to be free from pain and sorrow. He would also have the power to create that world. He would have the knowledge and the power sufficient to create a world free of pain and sorrow.

Finally, if that omniscient, omnipotent being is also perfectly loving and just, he would have wanted to create a world without pain or sorrow, if in his goodness he would want to create any world.

We can conclude from these reflections that if there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and just being, then that being would not himself have created a world marked by pain and suffering. As well, he would not have allowed any other supernatural being to bring such a world into existence. And yet, we note, this world, our world, exists, this world marked by much pain and sorrow. Therefore, ends this argument, there exists no omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and just being. In other words, God does not exist.

3) *First response: Pain and sorrow are necessary for the overall good.* Plucky, inquisitive, sensitive, courageous, generous, sympathetic people, we might agree, are better than indolent, self-satisfied, uncaring people. That is, we ourselves admire pluck and the rest in a person while we don't think well of their opposites. We would rather ourselves be the former sort of person than the latter and we try our best not to be indolent, self-satisfied, and uncaring. But pluck and inquisitiveness make sense only as responses to adversity, as part of the resourcefulness necessary to overcome adversity. And sensitivity, sympathy, generosity, and courage are called for only in response to one's appreciation of the adversity others face. Those qualities that we admire, that is to say, have their origin and their point in pain and sorrow.

Without pain and sorrow, we have reasoned, people would be indolent, self-satisfied, and uncaring, and really they would be no worse as people for being so, as generosity and the rest would be entirely pointless, having no object and making no difference to anything. That, then, implies that pain and sorrow, both on one's own part and on the part of others, are necessary if anyone is to develop a character worthy of admiration and respect.

Importantly, the point that these certain character traits have their origin in and take their significance from pain and sorrow is a logical point. It is not a point about what as a matter of fact happens to cause people to become plucky, generous, and the rest. People, goes this response, could not as a matter of the concepts of pluck and generosity acquire these traits of character nor employ them admirably except through the route of pain and sorrow. God could not simply have made people plucky and generous; these are traits that have to be acquired. That God could not simply have made people plucky and generous is no limitation on God's power, for the idea of being admirably plucky just by nature makes no sense. One plucky by nature would not have earned their worth and, so, would not be *admirably* plucky. There are, it turns out, some qualities of character that one cannot just have (that God cannot just give one), but that by their nature must be acquired through exposure to specific types of circumstance. This means that whatever pain and sorrow is necessary to create admirable people and give their existence point is not inconsistent with God's goodness, for that pain and sorrow has a role to play in God's good plan that nothing else could play.

4) *Difficulties with this response.* The idea that certain admirable qualities are ones that must be acquired through the experience of suffering and sorrow might well be true. Even so, as a defence of the thought that the suffering and sorrow we find in this world is entirely compatible with the existence of God, it runs into some difficulties. For one, it is silent on the suffering non-human animals experience at the hands of nature. This suffering cannot be understood as character building. Many of its victims have no character to build. For another, much of the suffering people endure is gratuitous from the point of view of character building; much suffering, that is, provides no opportunity for character building. Certainly some is too extreme to be in any way useful to those who suffer it.

For a third, we could have been constructed so as to make better use of the opportunities with which suffering presents us; we could have been constructed so as to respond to adversity more readily with pluck and courage and compassion, and less often with despair, resignation, cowardice, and indifference. The qualities of character at issue might themselves be available only to those who experience pain, but that doesn't imply that God could not have given us directly whatever physiological qualities underlie people's ability to find courage through adversity.

The idea we are discussing is that since pain and sorrow are necessary for character building, that our world is marked by much pain and sorrow is no reason to doubt God's existence, for character building is a part of God's good plan for the world. Another difficulty arises if one notes that the highest qualities of character are love and respect for others. The difficulty is that these qualities are not brought out by suffering and sorrow. On the contrary: we need a certain level of comfort and ease if we are to develop the ability to love and respect others. Likely we first need to be objects of love and respect, and to be loved and respected is not itself to suffer adversity. So, perhaps, suffering and sorrow get in the way of our becoming the best people we could be, even if they are necessary for us to acquire certain good traits of character.

A final difficulty with this defence of the compatibility of the idea that God exists with the knowledge that our world is one of suffering and sorrow is that this defence implies that God burdens some people in order that the characters of others might be improved. It is your plight that stirs me to courageous and generous action, action that forms me as an admirably courageous and generous person. That's good for me and, by itself, redounds to God's glory. But your plight was not something you earned through your own bad choices and actions. So you were burdened in order that I might benefit. But both justice and love require one not to impose burdens on the innocent. Imposing a burden on Betty to benefit Albert is both unfair to Betty and a sign of favouritism toward Albert. A supernatural being who treats people both lovingly and fairly would not cause you hardship as a means of improving me.

How might one respond to these difficulties? We have been examining the character-building defence of the idea that one can reasonably think God exists even while acknowledging the extent and nature of the suffering and sorrow in our world ought not end here. Our thinking on this topic ought not end with our discussion here. There are interesting ways to respond to at least a few of these difficulties. What those responses are, though, will be left to you.

5) *Second response: Much pain and suffering comes as the result of freely taken human decisions and actions.* This response is called the free will defence of God's existence. It begins with the claim that a world populated with beings possessing free will is a better world than one lacking such beings. Consider two worlds, alike as one can imagine them. But imagine that while the people in one of these worlds have the ability to choose according to their own free will, the people in the other world don't. They go about their business as we imagine automatons do. They follow a program, say. Whatever—in any case, they do not possess free will. According to this first claim, the first world is a better world than the second, just in virtue of the fact that the people in it are capable of acting freely.

The second claim in this argument is that beings possessing free will will necessarily create much pain and suffering through their decisions and actions. That is, creatures possessing free will will inevitably make bad decisions now and again. Indeed, even when they make good decisions, in that their decisions are based on good reasoning from full information, sometimes those decisions will lead to bad outcomes. We might, that is, reasonably conclude from our diligent study of geological reports that a house built on this spot will not be destroyed in an earthquake, but yet find one day that the house we built there has been destroyed in an earthquake. Free will might be a wonderful thing to have, runs this claim, something we would not choose to be without, and yet free will inevitably now and again trail pain and suffering behind it.

From these two claims—that free will is a tremendous good and that creatures possessed of free will will through their choices inevitably cause pain and sorrow—we are invited to conclude that pain and sorrow, though not themselves part of the good, will necessarily be present in any good world.

The existence of suffering and sorrow in the world is no bar to believing clear-headedly that God exists, then, for at least some pain and suffering will mark any world in which people are able to act freely, and a world in which people are able to act freely is better than a world in which they are not. God, of course, would not create a world less good than another he could create, and so he would create a world in which people can act freely, a world like ours.

6. *Difficulties with this response.* That much suffering and sorrow is the result of decisions freely taken or actions freely performed leaves out of account a huge chunk of the suffering non-human animals endure. Of course a great amount of suffering among non-human animals is indeed the result of human actions—suffering caused by deforestation and loss of habitat, by poisons from industry and agriculture, by climate change, by farming livestock and poultry. And yet an amount of suffering among non-human animals as great or greater than all that has nothing at all to do with human activities; indeed, animals were suffering for at least a couple billion years before creatures capable of acting freely appeared on the planet. The free-will response to the existence of pain, then, is totally silent on a great part of the suffering found in our world.

Recall that the character-building response was also silent on much of the suffering of non-human animals. Neither response to the claim that the existence and nature of the suffering in this world is consistent with the existence of God seems capable of handling the fact that non-human animals suffer regularly and suffer terribly.

Another difficulty with this response lies in the claim that free will as a good overbalances the great suffering that it creates. This claim needs to be defended by argument. On the other hand, the claim that free will is not worth the suffering it causes also needs to be defended by argument. It's hard to see how either of these arguments would go.

But suppose that we can make good sense of the idea that free will is such a good thing that its existence in a world overbalances whatever pain and sorrow might result from it. Suppose we even accept that idea. Still, we might wonder why the existence of free will in a world must lead to terrible suffering and sorrow in that world. Had we been constructed so as to be more reasonable, more circumspect, and farther sighted than we are, we would be able to make better judgements and, thereby, to avoid inadvertently causing pain and suffering. Moreover, had we been constructed so as to be more caring and concerned for others—indeed, more caring and concerned for our own best interests—we would be more inclined to look unfavourably on actions that cause harm than we are. Had we been better people than we are, we would bring less suffering and sorrow into the world, and there's no reason to think that as better people we would have been any less free in our decisions and actions. Intelligent, sensitive, and caring people are still capable of doing harm, in any sense of "capable" required by free will; thus, they are no less free in their choices and actions than stupid, insensitive, or selfish people. Good people, that is, are not restricted by their goodness from choosing bad paths. They simply don't take them, and they don't take them of their own free will. God could have made us better people than we are without, thereby, making us any less free.

The most radical criticism of the free will response to claim that the existence of suffering and sorrow in our world is an insuperable barrier to rational belief in God is that we don't in fact possess free will. Perhaps the world is a mechanistic system of cause and effect, and that fact about it rules out the possibility of choosing freely; or perhaps the very concept of free will is internally inconsistent. If any case, if we do not possess free will, then no matter whether the existence of free will would overbalance the existence of suffering and sorrow or not, it doesn't in this world. This criticism, though, will appeal only to those who deny that we possess free will.

7. *A revised argument.* Is the existence of any sort or any degree of suffering or sorrow inconsistent with the existence of God? Perhaps. Perhaps, that is, we have reason to think that if God exists and wishes to create a world, He would create a perfect world. A perfect world would lack all suffering and sorrow.

A different thought is that the existence of suffering and sorrow is not in itself inconsistent with God's existence. Suffering and sorrow might be necessary ingredients of God's good purpose in creating the world. It's not suffering and sorrow themselves that inconsistent with God's existence, then. Rather, what is inconsistent with the existence of God is meaningless or unredeemed suffering or sorrow.

That it is only meaningless or unredeemed suffering that God would not allow is the central idea behind the two responses—the soul building and the free will responses—to our argument that God does not exist. Each response challenges the flat-out claim that God would not allow suffering and sorrow. Each response says that God actually would allow certain sorts of suffering; He would allow instances of suffering that are, overall, required by his good plan, and he would allow any instance of sorrow appropriate to an instance of suffering. Still,

though, the existence of meaningless or unredeemed suffering, suffering not necessary to a good plan, is suffering that God, in his perfect love and justice, would not allow.

And so the question whether God exists becomes the question whether there is reason to think that our world is marked by no more pain and sorrow than is necessitated by love and justice.

Here, then, is an improved argument that God does not exist, one that explicitly acknowledges the point that the existence of suffering and sorrow per se are not inconsistent with God's existence, only unmerited or pointless suffering or sorrow are. (This point is still controversial for us, of course. We haven't been given an argument that a perfect being would create anything other than perfect worlds, if He went in for creating at all.)

If God exists, then the only suffering in excess of that required for soul-building would be suffering brought about through the free decisions of smart, tough, and kind people trying to make lives for themselves. So runs the first premise of this argument. It is constructed so as to take care of the suffering and sorrow needed to make innately good people admirable people and the suffering and sorrow that enters the world through their freely-taken decisions. But, notes the second premise, there is much suffering in excess of that needed for soul-building, much of which didn't enter the world through the freely-taken decisions of smart, tough, and kind people. Therefore, God does not exist.

The second premise, according to which the world is marked by suffering and sorrow in excess of that consistent with there being a good purpose behind the universe, can be defended from many directions. Much suffering, we said earlier, is due to disease and other causes beyond human decisions and involves non-human animals or otherwise does not offer anyone opportunity for soul building. Moreover, much of the suffering caused by free decisions was not caused by smart, tough, and kind people going about their ethically sound business, but by the partiality, greed, callousness, indifference, and malevolence of ordinary and evil people. This is excess suffering as it wouldn't have occurred in a world featuring people better than we are.

One might object to this argument that we in the world are neither smart enough nor well enough placed to discern the point and necessity of what appears to us to be pointless suffering. God, though, knows its point. If we accept that everything happens for a sufficient reason within God's good plan for the world, we will see that the existence of pain and sorrow is not a bar to epistemically sound belief in God. We should, of course, humbly acknowledge that the scope of our ignorance is vast and we might very well be wrong that what strikes us as pointless suffering really is pointless.

Notice, though, that this response to our second argument that God doesn't exist is a piece of circular reasoning. We can believe that God exists, for no person or animal suffers meaninglessly; and we can believe that nothing suffers meaninglessly, for God exists. But a circular reason for believing a proposition is no reason for believing it at all.