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# WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT FEELING BAD?

Michael P. Smith

Professor Stump attempts to show how the resources of traditional Christianity allow for a more satisfactory resolution of the problem of evil than those of bare theism. In particular, she attempts to show how, according to Christian doctrine, there is a morally sufficient reason for God to allow evil in the world. The result is a complicated tapestry of philosophy and theology, exegesis and argument, speculation and demonstration. I shall limit myself to a few remarks—fewer that the paper deserves—on the general design of the tapestry, and point out a few places where the weaver's hand may have slipped. I shall close with some observations on the peculiar difficulty of the problem of evil for Christians.

Stump's solution combines two of the standard defenses: the freewill approach, and the reconstrual of evils as instrumental goods. The latter account provides the basis for her solution: human suffering is an instrument of divine therapy, by which our fallen natures might be restored. The constraints on God's power imposed by human free will are added to the basic account at two points: first, in explaining why God allowed humanity to fall in the first place; and second, in explaining why God does not employ some other, less painful, mode of correction. The constraints imposed seem to be moral in the first case—it is better for God to respect a person's free choices—and logical in the second—God simply cannot restore our wills to their original state of freely choosing the good by direct intervention.

There is difficulty in reconciling an account of evil in which God is respecting our free choices with one in which he is using these evils as goads or cures. Stump seems to accept, in her discussion of the suffering of children, that the evils befalling one must, on her account, benefit one personally in the long run. Yet this condition cannot be guaranteed regarding moral evil, since God, on Stump's account, cannot morally prevent its free election or execution, or even shield the innocent from its consequences, since to do so would be to treat us as pets rather than persons. The therapeutic account requires a measure of control which the free-will account precludes, at least for moral evils.

In any case, the person/pet dichotomy seems a false one. As Stump views it, if I give some money to a man who has squandered his, or turn the beach umbrella to prevent my sleeping wife from being further sunburned, or drive a drunk friend home despite her protests, I am treating them as pets rather than


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persons. The New Testament emphasizes another category: we are God's children.[1] Imagine a parent, seeing his child about to wander into the path of the speeding truck, resignedly remarking to a neighbor, "If I've told him once, I've told him a thousand times: stay out of the street!" Stump attempts to explain God's silence during the murder of Abel by suggesting that in fact every one was better off. But The Fall, if it is to justify all subsequent evils as corrective therapy, must have been the worst thing that could have happened to Adam, Eve, and the rest of us. Would he not have been treating us as beloved children, and not mere pets, in preventing it?

Stump's account depends on a more literal construal of the story of The Fall than many Christians would find comfortable. Not only are we asked to believe in The Fall as a datable event in human history, but also in a quasi-biological interpretation of original sin. Stump adopts an Anselmian position that the chief legacy of The Fall is a misalignment of the faculties of reason, desire, and the will, so that humans are no longer inclined, as they were originally, to will as they ought, but instead are inclined to will as they ought not. The inheritability of this arrangement, avers Stump, is compatible with the theory of evolution. Whose theory? The difficulty does not lie, as Stump seems to think, in the conjunction of 8′b and 8′c, but rather in taking 8′c together with 8′a. It matters not *how* people were changed as a result of the Fall, but that Adam and Eve and their descendants were changed *in the same way*. Biologically construed, then, original sin is the inheritance of an acquired trait, and so a biological reading of the Fall follows Lamarkian, rather than Darwinian lines.

Cultural evolution is Lamarkian, of course, and it is common in current Christian theology to treat original sin as a cultural rather than a biological inheritance. Were Stump to take this tack, however, she would have to abandon her argument that, since post-fall people "have defective wills from the very beginning of their existence...if God intervenes to remove the defect in the wills of post-fall persons, he brings about a change in their wills: and this, I think, he cannot do if their wills are to remain free." The limitations, like the potentialities of our cultural inheritance, are not with us from the womb; we are shaped by it throughout our lives. But this argument has deeper problems than a commitment to crypto-biology.

Stump appeals twice to logical limitations on God's omnipotence posed by the free will of his creatures. In addition to the argument above, she also relies more than once on the claim that "it is not logically possible for God to make human beings do anything freely." It is important to see that the two restrictions are distinct, although this is obscured by Stump's use of the phrase "change in their wills." A change of will here is not like a change of heart or mind in the ordinary sense, namely, a change in *what* one wills. It refers rather to a change in that balance of will, reason, and desire mentioned earlier. So, I shall argue,

even if God cannot make one act in a particular way and at the same time freely, he may still bring about a change in free will in Stump's sense. Later I shall maintain as well that there is no logical difficulty in God making someone act freely in the relevant sense.

It is difficult to see why God could not change the relationship between will, reason, and desire, in such a way as to leave the will free. After all, he certainly must be able to establish such a relationship originally and not undermine free will; otherwise none of us would have free will (assuming that we are entirely God's creations). Further, Stump herself is committed to the proposition that it is possible for God to change the existing arrangements without destroying individual freedom: this is what God's saving grace amounts to. But, Stump explains, God repairs our broken wills only in response to an invitation on our part to do so. "In that case," reasons Stump

> God's alteration of the will is something the person has freely chosen and God can then alter that person's will without destroying its freedom.

This way out is beset by difficulties, however.

One rough spot concerns the freedom of the request for aid itself. Recent events in international politics have underscored the difficulty in determining whether a request for aid from a superpower by a minor power within its sphere of influence is freely elected. And though, as Stump notes, there are differences within the Christian tradition over God's part in man's call for help, it certainly seems to go beyond his simply staying by the telephone. Stump's own position seems particularly uncomfortable, since a major function of evil, on her account, is to encourage this turning to God. This surely makes the invitation seem coerced through punishment and threats, rather than free.

Ultimately it does not matter how we decide this question, though, since Stump is simply mistaken in thinking that the freedom of the invitation to reform one's will is germane to the freedom of the will so reformed. The freedom of the process should not be confused with the freedom of the product. The government imposed upon Grenada by the United States might be the freest possible, even if the invitation to do so was a sham; one might grant that Afghanistan's request for Soviet assistance was freely made, without supposing in the least that the Afghans are currently free. Democracies vote in dictators; dictators decree democracy. On the individual level, a person may freely sell himself into slavery, or a slave might be freed against her will.

Whatever freedom amounts to in choices and wills, it is clear that the criteria differ in the two cases. Typically, it is how a choice is arrived at, and not what the choice is, that determines whether it is free. Whether a will is free, on the other hand, is determined by the nature of that will, and not how this nature has come about. For example, the Anselm-Stump characterization of free will, "a

will disposed to will the good and able to maintain such a disposition," refers only to the dispositions and abilities of the will, and not to its history. If God can reform a depraved will by endowing it with these dispositions and abilities, it seems clear that he can do so without the consent of the saved, much less the free cooperation.

To return now to the other supposed logical limitation on God's omnipotence: whether God can make someone freely perform a particular action. One should be careful not to read 'make' as 'compel' here; presumably God cannot compel free action, but he may yet be able to bring it about. Indeed, it is hard to see why God could not bring about free actions, unless it assumed that free actions are uncaused, or caused at most by the uncaused choices of the agent. Stump must be presupposing the falsity of compatibilism, an assumption not dictated by the definition of free will she shares with Anselm.

Even from an incompatibilist stance, though, there should be many ways in which God could bring about free actions on the part of his creatures. After all, there are many ways in which people get one another to do things of their own free will. Before resorting to force, people reason and persuade, exhort and ridicule, beg and bribe. God shows his mastery of all of these in the Old Testament. For from it being logically impossible for God to make people do things freely, God, like the rest of us, does it quite often. There may be some actions which some people cannot be brought about to undertake freely, even through God's influence. But it certainly appears that God's influence on people is much more limited than would be demanded by the laws of logic alone. It is hard to believe that he is trying as hard as he can.

After all this comment on the free-will restrictions to the basic account, a remark on evils as disguised goods at the end may provide some balance. Stump compares her account favorably with Hick's character-building explanation of evil by noting that the virtues acquired at such cost in Hick's solution are otiose or non-existent once their heavenly goal is attained. In acquiring rightness of will, on the other hand, we are starting on the heavenly state itself, according to Stump's account. The obverse of this neat economy, however, is a somewhat disturbing emphasis on the next world at the expense of this one. There is much to be learned from Stump's analysis of the story of Cain and Abel. But it is unsettling to see Abel's fate treated as an advantageous exchange of "years of a painful and spiritually perilous pilgrimage" for an immediate eternity of bliss. This recalls too clearly those hasty martyrs and outright suicides of the early church, who were all too eager to make this same advantageous exchange.

The other-worldly emphasis in Stump's account is at odds with her unusually mild version of hell. Existence in hell is better than non-existence, or even existence as (say) a pig, Stump assures us more than once. For much, perhaps most, of the human race since its exile from the garden, then, a hellish existence

would have been an improvement over their lives on earth. (I remind the reader that she is not only more comfortable than 98 percent of the current population of the planet; she is also vastly better off than virtually all of its previous inhabitants.) Those seeking to "end it all" no longer need fret over the possibility of eternal punishment, since, as Stump portrays it, hell is preferable to the non-existence they seek.

Clearly, suffering here in this life cannot be excused as necessary for the avoidance of suffering after death, if the suffering here exceeds that feared after death. On Stump's analogy with the critically ill child and the painful therapy, in many cases the cure is worse than the disease. Given her downplaying of the negative, Stump would do better to accentuate the positive in her account: it must be the rewards of heaven, and not the pains of hell, that make all the suffering on earth worthwhile after all. There is something repugnant, however, in the claim to have a single good which justifies all the evil in the history of the world.

Imagine a solution to the problem of evil which simply denied its existence. All appearances of evil in history it claims have been misleading. At the end of time, the elaborate hoax will be revealed: no one has ever suffered debilitating disease, humiliating rejection, excruciating pain. This proposal, in cases other than the first person at any rate, may turn out to be as irrefragable as solipsism, but it cannot be seriously entertained by any sensible person. Stump's stance is similar in denying the reality of evil. Although she accepts the reality of disease, humiliation, pain, and so on, she denies their status as evils. They are, in the long run, instrumental goods, as will be revealed at the end of things. Perhaps Stump will succeed in making her account, if not plausible, at least not demonstrably false. It still could not be accepted, it seems to me, by any morally sensible person. The story of all the evils in the world being justified as means to an end is not just incredible, like the first theory, but *reprehensible*. An essential part of human decency in a limit to what we will accept as a means to an end.

It might be replied that Stump's theology is no worse off, with respect to our moral sensibility, than current physics is *vis a vis* our sensuous intuition. If we can accept in physics that the world is not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we *can* imagine, surely we should do so on even firmer ground regarding divine teleology. Human senses and sensuous imagination are best suited to the psychical magnitudes characteristic of the tiny neighborhood of space and time where they grew up. Human moral psychology is doubtless more provincial yet. That we cannot picture the geometry of space and time in our mind's eye is no argument against its truth; that we cannot imagine an end justifying Auschwitz as a means is no argument against its morality.

So we may come to accept, on theoretical grounds, a God who uses Auschwitz

as a means, despite our moral sensibility. But this acceptance would have one of two effects, it seems to me, neither of which would be hoped for by any Christian. One, human moral sensibilities might change. The movement of the earth used to be as unimaginable as the negative curvature of space. But the human capacity for pity, outrage, and revulsion is blunted enough in our time; any Christian solution to the practical problem of evil must start by reinforcing, and not undermining, the strictures of moral sensibility. Two, people may come to believe that it is best all around that God constantly uses means that they find abhorrent. Perhaps people might feel a sort of gratitude towards such a God. But no decent human being could love him. We should be repelled by him, just as afterwards we should avoid the man who tortured a child, even if he did so in order to save the world.[2]

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## NOTES

1. Thanks to Gary Rosenkrantz for this point.

2. I have benefitted from the discussion at the symposium of Eleonore Stump's paper and my reply. I particularly want to acknowledge the contributions of Professor Stump, Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz. Also I thank my colleague Alfred Mele for comments leading to greater clarity.