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ANTEDILUVIAN THEODICY: STUMP ON THE FALL

Evan Fales

This paper is a discussion of Eleonore Stump's "The Problem of Evil." Stump, I argue, has attempted a theodicy with several desirable features; among them, an effort to provide a positive account of the compatibility of natural evils with God's goodness that makes use of specifically Christian doctrines. However, the doctrines Stump makes use of—and, in particular, her conception of hell and her interpretation of original sin—raise, I suggest, more problems than they solve.

In her recent treatment of the problem of evil, Eleonore Stump¹ aims to produce a theodicy with four important features that are as commendable as they are, perhaps, difficult to achieve. In this discussion note, I wish to address some issues raised by these features of Stump's paper—issues that remain, I believe, inadequately aired in the (necessarily brief) reply to Stump by Michael Smith,² and in Stump's reply³ to Smith.

Perhaps the most significant feature of Stump's essay is that it attempts to move beyond the "minimalist" defenses against the argument from evil given by, e.g., Plantinga⁴ and Wykstra.⁵ In the spirit of Swinburne's⁶ and Hick's⁷ efforts to answer the argument, Stump hopes to show, in a positive way, how many evils might actually benefit human beings and might therefore be permitted by a loving God. However—and this is the second commendable aspect of her project—Stump hopes to provide a theodicy that utilizes, in a detailed and extensive way, major doctrines that derive specifically from the Christian and Jewish religious traditions. Anything less, Stump feels, is unlikely to seem entirely satisfactory to those who adhere to these faiths. I agree.

Given these intentions, it must come as a considerable disappointment to find Stump admitting that there are certain "hard cases"—cases of evils so great and so seemingly unameliorable that Stump cannot see any "positive" response to give when faced with them. These hard cases include, in particular, the suffering and death of infants, and the Holocaust. In the first of these cases, Stump does attempt a cautious positive justification, but confronted with the second (e.g., Auschwitz), she recommends silence—and a retreat to the minimalist stance according to which it has not been shown that there could be no morally sufficient reason for God's not preventing them. But that is just Wykstra's position. Failure to do more



than this in hard cases does not undermine the great service Stump has performed in providing a Christian explanation of easier cases, but we must also remember that even *one* unexplained hard case reduces a positive theodicy, logically speaking, to a minimalist one.

At the same time, Stump's response to these two hard cases contains the other two features of her theodicy which are especially worthy of praise. First: she displays a genuine sensitivity to the magnitude of the horror embodied in such events as the Holocaust—a sensitivity which seems missing in the determinedly optimistic tone of many apologetical writers. Second, Stump accepts the principle that undeserved suffering, at least that which results from natural evils,⁸ is justified only if it leads to, or is at least a necessary condition for, the experiencing of some greater good by that sufferer (call this principle P).

Of course in accepting P—which will to many seem to be demanded by the requirements of justice—Stump makes her task more difficult than it might otherwise be. Perhaps the suffering of an infant can be of benefit to someone else. But Stump repudiates the notion that good to others, no matter how great, can outweigh undeserved suffering.

It is not clear that Stump needs to commit herself to P. For though it articulates a praiseworthy constraint on theodicy, it is not clear that P is correct. Justice is a good, and undeserved suffering is an injustice. But P requires that justice be a moral good that cannot be traded off against other goods, no matter how great. While most of us may feel strongly inclined to accept P, it is not so easy to prove the incommensurability of justice with other goods. So far as intuitions go, the following fanciful case may provide a counterexample. A child who has written a perfect exam is incorrectly given a slightly lower grade, in consequence of her teacher's having taken some medication which has the unrecognized side effect of lowering the teacher's grading ability. We shall suppose the injustice and consequent suffering to be temporary, the mistake being subsequently corrected; but also that the suffering has no redeeming virtue for the child. Finally, we suppose the drug achieves some good that could not otherwise have been brought about: the curing of a dangerous disease, or, perhaps, only some great aesthetic good—say, stimulating the teacher's mind in such a way as to inspire the composition of one of the great poems of the English language. Would not an omniscient being who foresaw all these consequences be justified in arranging that the teacher be medicated? I shall only confess here that my own intuitions are unclear. Consequently, I am not sure that P is correct, and hence that Stump cannot avail herself of the benefit an infant's suffering or death might conceivably have for others. I shall return presently to Stump's response to the case of infant death, but that requires some preparation.

I turn, therefore, to the central concern of this paper: Do the Judeo-Christian theological ideas to which Stump appeals help us provide a positive response to

the problem of evil (as Stump believes), or are they instead inadequate, or even a cross to be born by Christian theists? My main purpose, then, like Stump's, is not to defend or attack these doctrines, but to examine whether they support or tend to undermine the project of theodicy. I shall, however, comment in passing on the plausibility of certain factual assertions that Stump's project requires. The claim any theodicy has to be rationally believed is, after all, only as strong as the warrant for its factual entailments.

My discussion will concern only the particular doctrines to which Stump refers. At the same time, it is well to mark at the outset the diversity of Judeo-Christian theological systems, and to ponder how much freedom a Christian may allow himself or herself in constructing a Christian theodicy. I mention this because Stump elects to cite Dante as her authority on the nature of hell. She thereby ignores—or at any rate sets to one side—those less prolix but equally vivid descriptions of hell which the Gospel writers attribute to Jesus.⁹ Stump's theodicy, while recognizably Christian, will not easily satisfy those who prefer Scripture to Dante's literary reconstructions.

Nor will the existence of a Dantean inferno allow an easy answer to the question why sinners in hell are not allowed a "second chance" to obtain entry to heaven. For Dante's hell (or Stump's version of it) is for sinners very much a continuation, at the psychological level, of their existence on earth, an existence which involves the fearful pain of separation from God. If sinners have many chances to choose righteousness in this life, then why should they not in the next? Stump's reply is that such a choice could not be properly motivated. It would be prompted by a desire to avoid the pains of hell, rather than by a pure desire to conform one's will to God's, seeking this as an end in itself.¹⁰

But we must remind ourselves that, on Stump's view, the essential pain suffered by the damned just *is* the knowledge that they are separated from God, a knowledge they may also possess while living, when the opportunity for redemption still remains. Perhaps a special feature of hell is that it involves the knowledge that this separation is eternal; and perhaps a desire to avoid *eternal* separation constitutes an impure motive for choosing righteousness. But it is hard to see this: presumably, having a will not in conformity with God's is painful precisely because of the recognition that conformity to God's will is a supremely good thing, and the consequent existence of an intense desire for it. But then, the motives of the damned are the very motives that, among the living, regularly elicit God's help. Why then should this desire be denied satisfaction?¹¹ And, if God can use physical suffering to cure an evil will,¹² why can the sufferings of hell not serve as means to the same end?

However, perhaps the greatest difficulties for Stump's theodicy arise from the use she makes of the story of Adam's fall. According to Stump, it is possible to construct a version of this story that is not demonstrably false, and that helps

to explain the existence of a wide variety of evils. The essential elements of the story, for Stump's purposes, are these:

- (a) at some time in the past as a result of their own choices human beings altered their nature for the worse,
- (b) the alteration involved what we perceive and describe as a change in the nature of human free will, and
- (c) the changed nature of the will was inheritable.¹³

Stump goes on to explain that freedom of the will consists in a disposition to will what one ought; the original sinner(s)—whom we shall call 'Adam'—performed some act(s) whose consequence was an inheritable diminution of this disposition, and its replacement by a tendency to will as one ought not, because of a diminution in the influence of reason and an increase in that of the appetites. Moreover, although God could have intervened to prevent the transmission of this defect to later generations, a Christian can explain why He did not do so: first, this would be "an abrogation of God's first creation,"¹⁴ leading perhaps to an endless series of frustrated subsequent efforts by God to create a race of free beings who do not commit original sin, and second, because God is right to give his creatures choices which have serious consequences. Finally, we may suppose that Adam's fall brought natural evil into the world, in the sense that (at least) no person suffered from natural calamities prior to that time.

I suppose we must concede that nothing in all this strictly contradicts our current biological knowledge—for that knowledge does not strictly preclude God's having meddled in various ways with the biological mechanisms He created. But let us reflect a moment upon just how implausible Stump's theodicy becomes, if it requires us to accept these factual claims. We can admit, first, that human actions can influence the human gene pool,¹⁵ and further admit—what seems more problematic—that genetic endowment determines such a complex feature of human nature as the relevant initial relationship between reason, desire, and the will. Nevertheless, it is singularly difficult to imagine a biological mechanism by means of which what Stump describes as a failure of some early human(s) (perhaps over many generations) to use their strength to preserve the uprightness of their wills, could lead to this particular alteration in our genetic makeup.¹⁶ Still, let us suppose it happened that way, even though, so far from requiring us to suppose that only a divine miracle could have *prevented* transmission of the defect we will find ourselves hardpressed here to avoid invoking a miracle to explain the *occurrence* of a mechanism of transmission. What at any rate surely *will* require a miracle is an explanation of how it came about that Adam's fall led to every case of *natural* evil. For natural evil does not consist solely in the suffering of human beings as a result of natural forces: it consists also in the sufferings these forces occasion in other animal species. How all

animal suffering can be causally explained by Adam's fall is not the worst difficulty for this view; an even more serious one is how this suffering can be thus justified. If it is difficult to understand why humans generally should suffer from natural evil as a causal consequence of Adam's failure, it is, if anything, far more difficult to see why other animals should.

Stump's defense of her account requires, further, that Adam have been given serious choices to make, including the ability to commit a transmissible original sin. But such a choice would not have been serious, in the intended sense, unless Adam (i.e., some primitive person or persons) *knew* of the consequences of that action. And in any case, Adam could have been confronted with many kinds of serious choices short of one as momentous as this, a choice which, having been made once and for all by Adam, is one which we ourselves are deprived of being able to make.

But all this does not yet uncover the most decisive difficulty. So I now want to ask: *could* God have prevented the transmission of Adam's sin, without infringing human freedom; and if so, *should* He have done so? Stump, I shall argue, has failed to show that these questions have negative answers.

According to Stump's interpretation of the Genesis story, original sin is a defect of the will with which each of us is born. Could God have seen to it, while respecting our freedom as agents, that we not be burdened with this defect? As Stump would have it, God could not intervene to remove this defect, for that would involve, *per impossibile*, God's causing us to will freely. But here there must be a mistake. For, on Stump's own theory, freedom of the will is a kind of strength, a capacity or ability to will as reason tells us we ought to. Why couldn't God restore to us at birth that capacity? To have such a capacity must be distinguished from the exercise of it upon particular occasions. Thus, God's causing someone who lacks it to come to have this capacity cannot be identified with His causing that agent to perform any particular action.¹⁷ To be sure, there is much that remains obscure in Stump's Anselmian account of free will. For example, it is unclear whether on her theory Adam's failure to use his strength to preserve the uprightness of his will is to be counted an action, and, if so, whether it can be regarded a free action. But in any case, God could have brought it about that no one is burdened with original sin at birth as a result of another's choices, without having to rectify any existing defect. For He could have made original sin a non-transmissible defect.

Since clearly God could have quarantined Adam's sin, we must next ask whether He should have done so. The Biblical conception of the heritability of sin seems to be linked to a notion of corporate or distributive justice.¹⁸ Though others may, I do not wish to take issue with the legitimacy of such a notion. It is at least reasonable to hold that the execution of justice against every member of a group is defensible when one or more of the following conditions are met:

(a) some agent performs a culpable action in the name of the corporate group; (b) membership in the group is voluntary; (c) the other members of the group have, by word or deed, tacitly or explicitly condoned or indirectly helped make possible the culpable action; (d) it is impossible to determine individual participation in the action; and/or (e) adequate restitution can only be obtained from the group collectively. Since none of these conditions apply to the present case, it remains mysterious how God's allowing original sin to be inherited by those who are not at fault, could be morally justified. On the contrary: it seems morally grotesque that God should permit a world in which His creatures labor from birth under a severely handicapped will, thereby causing untold suffering both to themselves and to others. Stump, especially, might seem committed to this conclusion by her insistence on the principle that one should not be made to suffer undeservedly and without compensation (principle P, but see footnote 8). For presumably, there will be some who end in hell, who would not have, had they not begun in original sin. Even if it could be argued that such agents get what they deserve, that would not exonerate God from at least partial responsibility—nor, I suggest, would His subsequent, albeit refused, offer of salvation. Doubly not, because the very wills by means of which we are to avail ourselves of the offer are damaged in a way that makes this recourse much harder for us. Suppose, by analogy, an auto manufacturer negligently produces a defective model. A subsequent offer to repair the cars it has sold does not entirely exonerate that company from blame for accidents caused by cars whose owners did not avail themselves of the recall offer. For those accidents could have been prevented by proper care in the initial designing of the model.

I shall return now, in my concluding remarks, to one of Stump's "hard cases"—the death of infants. Infants are born, on Stump's theory, with defective wills, and if they die as infants, they have no normal opportunity to rectify the defect. Moreover, their death is usually preceded by suffering. What could justify that suffering? Only, Stump tells us, some later benefit to the child, a benefit that outweighs the suffering and for which the suffering is a necessary precondition. And so perhaps God, who can plumb the depths of every soul, recognizes that for some of these souls, physical suffering during infancy, and even death, is the surest path to salvation. That would justify their pain.

But infants, though they may dispositionally possess free wills, cannot reason and hence do not enjoy the exercise of such a will. How, then, through the experience of pain or otherwise, can their will be willingly brought into conformity with God's will? Enlarging on Stump's account, we must imagine, I suppose, that in the hour of death, or—more plausibly—during some period of time thereafter, God permits such souls to mature. Many of them, we may further suppose, make good use of their remembered experience of suffering and come, upon attaining the mature use of their wills, to accept God's offer of salvation.

This is not, so far as I am aware, a theory that can be given any Biblical warrant. There are stories of infant death in the Bible that have profound moral import, but they do not teach us much about infant salvation. The author, for example, of the story of the death of David's first son by Bathsheba after a seven-day illness, represents that death as God's retribution for David's sin of engineering the death of Uriah. But he remains silent on the question of any benefit to the infant.¹⁹

I do not mean to suggest that a Christian theology should be constructed only from Biblical sources, but only that we should remind ourselves which doctrines can be found there, and which are the extensions or speculations of later thinkers. Further reflection, in any case, will show that Stump's solution to the problem of infant death, though ingenious, is not an attractive one. It requires us to imagine, first, that the undeserved and uncomprehending suffering of infants can subsequently have an edifying influence upon their souls; and that this influence is best achieved in that manner. We need to remember, further, that God has available every logically possible means for bringing about this edification: therefore, we must suppose that it is not *logically* possible to bring about the salvation of these infant souls in any more effective way.

Second, we know that infant suffering and infant death from natural causes occurs with different frequencies in different parts of the world: obviously, it is largely a function of how harsh or benign the physical environment is, and of the medical resources available to the population. But God permits the ravages of nature to take infant lives, according to Stump's theory, only when an infant's soul is in a state which makes this experience the surest route to salvation. Are we then to suppose that the frequency with which infants of that sort are born is higher at present in, say, Ethiopia than in the United States?

At the beginning of this discussion I praised Stump for attempting to construct a theodicy that incorporates the specific and more-or-less unique features of Judeo-Christian theology—features that go beyond, roughly, those that might be held by deists. It may yet be that such a theodicy can be discovered, but I do not find Stump's attempt convincing. In particular, I suggest that the doctrines of original sin and eternal damnation are especially potent weapons *against* such a project, and not ones the theist would do well to embrace.²⁰

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NOTES

1. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 392-423.

2. Michael P. Smith, "What's So Good About Feeling Bad?," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 424-429.

3. Eleonore Stump, "Suffering for Redemption: A Reply to Smith," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 430-435.

4. Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defense," *God and Other Minds*, Chapter Six, pp. 131-55.

5. Steven Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984) 73-93.

6. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Chapters 10 and 11.

7. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

8. Stump apparently holds—see below—that undeserved suffering caused by the choices of other humans is justified by the need to provide free agents with consequential moral choices. However, I am unsure whether Stump does hold this. In an unpublished paper, "Providence and the Problem of Evil," she applies principle P also to undeserved suffering that results from moral evil.

9. Stump herself takes note of Matt. 25:41-46 and Luke 16:19-26. Both passages suggest a retributive conception of hell's torment, and Luke clearly suggests a bodily existence in hell. New Testament passages that reinforce this conception of hell are too numerous to cite, but it is worth noting Matt. 5:29, Matt. 10:28, and Rev. 19:20, all of which reiterate the view that one goes to hell with a body (σῶμα). In fact, the disparity between Stump's view and the Biblical one seems even greater than this. While the latitude in interpretation of Scripture permitted (or at least contained) within Christian tradition is so broad as to place few real constraints on belief, it is extremely difficult to find Biblical warrant for the popular and indeed ancient conception, adopted by Stump, that after death human beings go either to heaven or to hell. It is my understanding that this doctrine makes its first appearance in Christian literature in the writings of Origen and, somewhat earlier, in the Apocalypse of Peter. But, even allowing for variations in exegesis, the following seems to me to be a fair account of the bare bones of Biblical soteriology: Evildoers go to hell, the righteous (or at least most of them), if they die prior to the general resurrection, remain in their graves until that time. Their post-resurrection eternal life is led in the New Jerusalem, which is located on a new, or renewed earth, not in heaven. Perhaps, in the end, this does not make much difference to Stump's theodicy. But to find her willing to dismiss the Biblical eschatology is surprising, given her willingness to accept Scripture as the revealed word of God, to the extent that she appears prepared to take the story of Cain and Abel as veridical.

10. Stump's reasoning here is not easy to square with the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

11. Suppose someone who is dying is in his final hour granted by God all the knowledge required for salvation and a last chance to choose, but remains unrepentant. Is it a just thing that such a one be condemned to eternal damnation? Surely not. For sufficiency of knowledge does not imply maturity of the will: a man who knows better may continue to sin but later have a change of heart.

12. Stump, "The Problem of Evil," p. 412. In another paper, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Theory of Morality, and the Love of God," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1986) 181-198, Professor Stump introduces a different solution to this problem, one that appeals to the fact that persons gradually acquire, through their own decisions and actions, a certain stable pattern of desires, habits, and character traits that may be directed toward good or toward evil. In persons sent to hell, this acquired, or second, nature has become both vicious and so hardened that the sinner will not repent. A crucial question here is whether in the relevant moral respects (especially, possession of a free will), existence in hell is similar to a sinful earthly existence—as Stump appears to hold. Does the

development of a vicious second nature imply that an agent *cannot* later repent and be saved? Clearly, in this life it does not; a sinner, however hardened and vicious, has the opportunity to repent (and some have done so) until he or she dies. This suggests that even an established vicious nature *can* always be overcome, if one has a free will. Now either God can foretell the decisions of His free creatures or He can't. If He can't, then obviously He should give the damned a chance after death to repudiate their second nature and escape hell. Even if He *can* predict, He should make a standing offer, whether or not it will ever be accepted. But if He *can* predict, there is some room for maneuver. Suppose that God not only can foretell what every free agent *will* do, but knows the truth values of all counterfactuals about what any agent would do in any possible future circumstances (including those obtaining in hell). Let us allow, for the sake of argument, that God condemns to hell only those persons of whom He foresees that they *will* not repent (even though they *can*), and that they *would* not repent in any circumstances He can make available to them, consistent with the preservation of their free will. This, so far as purely logical considerations go, appears to solve the problem; but not without other difficulties. What does God do with those who would, had they lived longer, have eventually repented? Does no one ever die before "the die is cast"—i.e., before a time such that God knows they will never henceforth change their ways under any freedom-preserving conditions? This requires us to suppose that God exercises a heavy hand in determining the timing of human deaths. It also requires supposing that in human agents, vicious second natures invariably *will* dominate once they pass the age of 150 years or so (since we all die before then). That is a logically coherent claim, but why should anyone believe it?

Finally, Stump has mentioned to me (in personal communication) a Medieval view according to which existence in hell deprives a person of the ability to change their mind towards God. This is because disembodiment is held to destroy the relation between the intellect and the will that is required for such a change. Perhaps, then, the idea here is that disembodiment entails a loss or partial loss of freedom of the will. This is an interesting suggestion, but one that must be carefully elaborated before it can be evaluated.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 402-03.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

15. See Stump's example in "Suffering for Redemption: A Reply to Smith," p. 433.

16. Stump's theory, as I understand it, raises the further interesting prospect that the acceptance of divine grace through the mediation of Jesus' suffering on the cross may one day not be the only route to human salvation. A more modern approach would be to discover the defective gene through which original sin is transmitted and, through genetic engineering, to fix it.

17. Smith's criticism of Stump is on this point very similar to my own. In her reply to Smith, Stump asks us whether, if God had given Augustine a continent will at a time when Augustine wished to remain incontinent, Augustine's continent state would have been free. We are to suppose here a case of divine coercion, acting upon the (relatively unfree) will of Augustine, and changing it by producing an (allegedly) freer state of the will. Is this an incoherent description, a description of an impossible state of affairs? Augustine's story gives one case; here is another: in Haiti men and women are sometimes given drugs that turn them into zombies—creatures who have no fully active will of their own. (I cannot vouch for the factual accuracy of this claim, but for illustrative purposes that does not matter. See, however, Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) for ethnographic details.) Suppose a man in this state desires to remain a zombie, but is forcibly cured. Would his will then not be free? A third example might be that of a Moonie who is forcibly "de-programmed." Mere intuitions will not be of much help here. Clearly there is

in every case coercion, a contravening of a not-very-free initial will. But does that entail that the subsequent state of mind is unfree? To show this would require a more detailed account of the will than Stump has given here. Elsewhere (in “Sanctification, Hardening of the Heart, and Frankfurt’s Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming), Stump does provide such an account. According to it, roughly, a free will consists in there being harmony between one’s second-order desires, (which result from the operation of the intellect) and one’s first-order volitions, construed as effective or action-producing desires. This is not the place to discuss the merits of this proposal, nor whether it shows that God’s intervening in a way that limits or diminishes an agent’s freedom on one occasion, could not result in (and be justified by) a subsequent enhancement of that agent’s freedom. This is irrelevant to our main issue, since Stump’s account in any case cannot provide a reason why God should not exert control over the genetic endowment or nature of a fetus or newborn. Newborn infants do not will either good or evil, and certainly do not will to continue willing good or evil. Indeed, the development of a free will must be regarded to be a gradual and extended process—one linked to the emergence of a developed capacity for rational thought. But then, God could remove at birth an inherited defect of the will—understood as a tendency for the will’s relation to reason to develop in a certain way—without contravening any will to do evil or will to continue willing to do evil.

18. See, e.g., Ex. 20:5, Ex. 34:7, Ps. 85:5, and Matt. 27:25; contrast Dt. 24:16.

19. See 2 Sam. 11:1-12:23. A happy coincidence this would be, if David’s child happened to be one whose soul would benefit from early suffering and death: then, in visiting it with illness, God will have killed two birds with one stone (maximizing the child’s chance for salvation, and punishing David). But, if God had to tinker with the nature of the unborn child so as to put its soul in a condition best served by this kind of suffering, then He would be morally culpable.

20. I should like to thank Professor Stump for her kind and extensive comments on this paper, and for supplying me with other writings of hers. If there remain misunderstandings on my part, it will not have been through any lack of effort on hers.