Companion to C. S. Lewis help us to look at the various symbols, stories, and arguments presented in Lewis’s body of work and also to step into the beam of that work and look along it, gaining an understanding of Lewis’s fertile spiritual vision from the inside.


Eleonore Stump’s Wandering in Darkness poses a learned, astutely crafted argument for the compatibility of human suffering and God’s existence, and in doing so it provides a number of innovations that will be of real interest to analytic philosophers of religion in particular and more generally to anyone curious about the so-called ‘problem of evil’.

Stump advances rather directly by stating, at the commencement of the first chapter, the challenge she wants to take up. Consider, she says, the propositions ‘there is suffering in the world’ and ‘there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God’ (3). (Note that, in what follows, whenever I refer to the existence of God I mean by this ‘an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God’.) While for many the juxtaposition of these two propositions already forms a rather significant and seemingly insuperable dilemma, for Stump this is not the case – indeed, she claims that these propositions ‘are not by themselves logically incompatible’ (4). According to Stump, any attempt to make manifest the logical incompatibility supposed to reside in the heart of this juxtaposition will find itself in need of an additional premise, which she expresses as follows: ‘There is no morally sufficient reason for … God to allow suffering in the world’ (4). Such a premise, she remarks, ‘is eminently debatable’ (4). While this is a lengthy book, one with various detours and qualifications, it would be fair to say that its concern boils down to the articulation and contestation of this last premise. What Stump wants to show the reader is that it is, in fact, possible to imagine the existence of such a ‘morally sufficient reason’.

It may be noted, however, that I have phrased her goal as one of rendering credible the third premise, but not as one of demonstrating it in such a manner that opponents would come to see its inevitable truth. Stump’s aim, in other words, is ‘to undermine confidence in the crucial third premiss of the argument
from evil’ (19). This book, then, constitutes a ‘defense’ (19) rather than a theodicy. The intention of the latter is ‘to show us God and human beings in such a light that we can begin to see the compatibility of God and human suffering in our world’ (18). While Stump does not speak at much length about her reasons for preferring a defense to a theodicy, what becomes clear is that the effect of this preference is a shifting of responsibility. It is no longer a matter of showing that one knows, or that one can unproblematically supply, the reasons for God’s allowing suffering, it is now a matter of articulating ‘a possible world that contains God and suffering and that is similar to the actual world’, and of setting forth ‘a morally sufficient reason for God’s allowing evil in such a possible world’ (19). As the appellation of the approach indicates, what becomes central is a defensive rather than an aggressive attitude – success now means simply demonstrating that it is possible to believe in God amidst the existence of suffering, that doing so does not imply ‘some defect of mind or character’ (18). Or, to alter the emphasis, Stump’s goal could be understood as one of making visible the internal logic of the believer’s world-view, of revealing the sense that is ultimately implicated in it.

The defense proceeds by relying on the thought of Aquinas, as it is reconstructed and supplemented by Stump. It is a Thomistic paradigm, then, that gives sense to the coincidence of suffering and divine existence. In order for this paradigm to function, however, it will first be necessary to have an idea of what, precisely, suffering means, and so Stump defines it as ‘a matter of one’s having one’s flourishing undermined or of being deprived of the desires of one’s heart’ (13). It should be noted that this two-pronged definition of suffering allows Stump to envisage suffering as involving both an objective aspect (one’s flourishing) and a subjective aspect (the desires of one’s heart). Such a two-sided account of suffering, it should be noted, is what tends to ratchet up the degree of sophistication in her account of love as well as in her account of the Thomistic paradigm. Love, on the interpretation of Aquinas that Stump advances, ‘requires two interconnected desires’, namely ‘the desire for the good of the beloved’ and ‘the desire for union with the beloved’ (91). It is this duality within love – one in which, to put it somewhat hastily, the former desire presents love’s objective aspect and the latter desire presents love’s subjective aspect – that enables Stump to set forth love as a response to the dual character of suffering. The objective and subjective sides of suffering may be said to find their redemption in the objective and subjective sides of love.

All this is to say that the redemption of suffering emerges through the reception of love – and not just interpersonally human love, but also, and more fundamentally, the interpersonal character of love between humans and God. These two modes of interpersonal love may be distinguished, of course, but on a Thomistic paradigm they are not ultimately separable, and this is because human existence, goodness, and love are enfolded within the existence, goodness, and
love of God. ‘The end of the love of persons – that is, the ultimate thing toward which love is directed – is union with God shared in the union with other human beings’ (91). Thus, while it is possible to distinguish the other-worldly from the this-worldly, it would be mistaken to exclude consideration of the former from consideration of the latter. For instance, even extreme suffering in the domain of this world can be seen as a benefit insofar as it allows one to secure, in a way that would not otherwise have been possible, the otherworldly good of union with God. It is such an attainment of goods not otherwise attainable – i.e., not attainable apart from suffering – that is adverted to by Stump’s notion of a ‘benefit’ (419). This is an important notion, for it figures centrally in Stump’s desire to render sensible the claim that God could allow suffering in the world. What is at stake – to state simply a rather complex issue – is the possibility of understanding suffering as making available a benefit that may only be received through the suffering. The suffering that a person encounters in her existence is not something that precludes the existence of God, it is something that enables a person to attain the benefits of flourishing and of the desires of her heart, and in this way to defeat the badness of the suffering.

There are, it should be observed, a multitude of qualifications that Stump attaches to this argument – the most notable of these concern the ways in which the benefits to be gained may not be transparent to the sufferer and in which the desires of the sufferer’s heart may be ‘refolded’ (464) through the suffering – but their volume and sophistication prevent their being addressed in the relatively short space of this review. What absolutely must be addressed, though, is Stump’s fascinating account of a kind of knowledge that can only be gained by ‘second-person experience’ (76). She calls this sort of knowledge – i.e. ‘knowledge which cannot be reduced to knowledge that’ – ‘Franciscan knowledge’ and contrasts it to what she calls ‘Dominican knowledge’, i.e. the ‘more philosophically ordinary kind of knowledge’ (51). What she wants to convey here is the possibility of a kind of knowledge that is transmitted through interpersonal experience and that, while perhaps generative of propositional knowledge, cannot be reduced to it. Stump recognizes that this cuts against the grain of the regnant epistemological approaches in analytic philosophy, and while she makes explicit that she does not wish simply to oppose such approaches, she nonetheless insists on the import of such ‘Franciscan knowledge’ as something like a necessary supplement. It should be said that, at least from the perspective of this reader, her account of second-person knowledge is separable from her overall argument regarding the question of God’s existence. That said, it is evidently her aim to marshal this sort of knowledge in support of her defence. She does this by noting that ‘Franciscan knowledge’ may be achieved not only through everyday interpersonal experience, but also through narrative, and by then proceeding to provide narrative accounts of the suffering experienced by Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany. What she hopes to show, then, is that the coexistence of suffering
and God may be grasped, in ways difficult to express immediately by way of propositions, through the process of encountering such narratives.

Shifting now from an adumbration to an evaluation of Stump’s argument, it should be remarked, first of all, that this is a very impressive book. It is very creative in the way that it brings together biblical narratives and properly philosophical erudition, and it tends to be quite sensitive to objections that might emerge at each jointure of the argument. A care for thought, and for the impact of thought on life, is in evidence throughout. Stump’s discussion of ‘Franciscan knowledge’ (which I have already mentioned) and her successful contextualization of the question of suffering within presumably unrelated questions of autism and mirror neurons (which I have not) is path-breaking. Philosophers who are unimpressed by theism in general, and by its ability to take seriously the question of suffering in particular, are here provided with a genuine challenge, for the creativity and complexity of Stump’s argument make it hard to dismiss. She provides adversaries of theism with innovative problematics. There are, in other words, new moves being made, and so Stump’s opponents are given the opportunity to respond with their own novel operations of thought.

Having said all of this, a reading of this book raises some questions which Stump, despite her significant philosophical skill, seems to leave in abeyance. There is, for example, the question of whether one ought to presume the existence of an ‘internally integrated’ (150), or ultimately unitary, self, which her defence requires. One might also want to question the recurring analogy between this world, or more specifically one’s ‘this-worldly’ life, and a hospital. Are there not very good reasons for insisting that life, here and now, be seen as including a kind of enjoyment that is irreducible to a medical process? There are many other questions that emerge, and this must be the case in a book as long and rich as Stump’s. Yet what I would like to attend to – and this, I might make explicit, is because I take it to be the most overarching among the questions raised – is the matter of Stump’s decision to frame the argument in terms of a defence, as opposed to a theodicy.

There are undoubtedly some very real advantages gained by this decision, perhaps most obviously the space it frees up to address the ‘problem of evil’ – as it is perennially phrased – with a kind of sensitivity often precluded by the more polemical approaches that a theodicy tends to invite. It is as if Stump is inviting us into a foreign place and taking us on a tour, with the implicit message that there is something inadequate about straightforwardly judging this place. There is a polite but firm demand to seek, before anything else, to understand how things work in this place, and to concomitantly consider the possibility that our tendency to reject this place stems less from its inadequacy than from our unfamiliarity with it. All of this is beneficial, and it is clearly important to understand why a believer might want to inhabit a world that includes both the existence of suffering and the existence of God, but there still remains the question of why a
non-believer, or a sceptic, might want to inhabit this world. It is very difficult to see how this is not the ultimate question, even if it is not the question with which one begins. Stump’s commitment to the strict presentation of a defence is the result of a decision, but the careful reasoning that is evident in the presentation cannot be found when one seeks to understand why this decision was made.

This absence becomes more pressing if one begins to reflect on the historical and cultural conditions within which we now exist. If there is something like a taken-for-granted sense that the existence of suffering poses a very serious problem for belief in God, then how should we go about accounting for this? Can it be entirely attributed to a matter of logical laziness, or a lack of familiarity with the logic implied in belief in God? Let us, for instance, follow Stump in her attentiveness to non-propositional, experiential knowledge. If we do so, then I think it becomes possible to imagine that there is something about the experience of the last century that has made the problem of suffering more acute, and that this is what motivates suffering-based resistance to belief in God. Theodor Adorno infamously remarked, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Prisms (Boston: MIT Press, 1983), 34). While some may find a lack of precision in this statement, it is no doubt possible to discern in it a non-propositional, affective glimpse of truth—and this last is especially so when one takes seriously Stump’s claims about ‘Franciscan knowledge’. What I am gesturing at, then, is the possibility of countless narratives of suffering that do not end in the consolation of divine love, or even the possibility of narratives that remain uncommunicated precisely because they are so beset by suffering. Indeed, not only is it possible to delink ‘Franciscan knowledge’ from hagiography, it may very well be taken as an ethical demand—at least for those who find themselves bound to the type of affect that Adorno seems to express (I will call them ‘Adornians’)–to insist on this delinking. Is there a way in which Stump’s defence would be able to resonate with those who are thus affected? It is difficult to see how this would be the case, for the narratives she offers are (quite literally) hagiographic. It is hard to imagine Adornians being compelled by such narratives; it is much easier to imagine their being frustrated by them, even to the point of finding them saddled by clichés. This may once again bring us back to polemics, and so it is important to remember that the task Stump assumes is to show that such narratives are not reducible to clichés. Indeed, Stump ably articulates the possibility of a world in which these are not clichés, and so Adornians can therefore be said to have overstepped their bounds. The question that remains is what to make of the bounds of the world in which Adornians already find themselves living.

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