

## BOOK REVIEWS & NOTICES

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**Eleonore Stump. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford University Press, 2010.**

*Wandering in Darkness* is Eleonore Stump's magisterial treatment of the problem of evil, combining work she has fashioned and revised from some of the most prestigious lecture series, including the Gifford Lectures, the Wilde Lectures, and the Stewart Lectures. It is bold, meticulously argued (chapters are marked by lengthy, stage-setting prologues), and highly nuanced (there are, for example, 153 pages of footnotes). In terms of scope and power, Stump's book clearly ranks among the best book length treatments of the problem of evil by such deservedly well-known philosophers as Alvin Plantinga, John Hick, Marilyn Adams, and Peter van Inwagen. She advances what she claims is a defense of the goodness of God as understood in Judaeo-Christian tradition, especially as that concept of God has been articulated by Thomas Aquinas. Stump defends a narrative approach to good and evil, develops a philosophy of love and relationships, and offers some fleeting, intriguing suggestions about the nature of divine glory. While we raise some questions about the ultimate success of her project specifically in terms of its scope, we have no doubt that Stump has produced a book that deserves the careful attention of any philosophically able reader interested in the problem of suffering in light of the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, essentially good God.

Stump follows Aquinas in developing and defending an account of suffering where suffering enables the sufferer to achieve a great good (an affective unity with God) and avoid a great evil (willed loneliness).

In addition, she augments the model from Aquinas by defending the view that while suffering is generated by denying the desires of our hearts, in the final analysis it can be seen to offer the possibility of giving us the desires of our hearts, albeit in forms perhaps not imagined before the suffering. On Stump's account, it turns out that suffering is, in a sense, good for us or is understandable as a benefit: "Roughly considered, a benefit defeats suffering when the suffering is somehow integral to the benefit and the benefit is such that it is rational to prefer having the suffering to not having it, given the benefit which the suffering brings" (p. 488). Stump's account is most powerful when she introduces and analyzes cases of individuals who have flourished as human beings and experienced heightened unity with God as a direct result of suffering.

Stump builds her account of suffering in the crucial central chapters of the book in which she takes up an extensive exploration of four Biblical narratives involving Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany. Stump argues that narratives and relational experiences (what Buber described as I-You relations) can be a source of knowledge that is not available in propositional, analytic format. Her term for knowing states of affairs through narratives is the *Franciscan* method, whereas propositional, analytic modes of knowing she calls *Dominican*. (It is doubtful that non-Christian philosophers would be happy with these terms and their accompanying connotations.) Knowledge reached by the Franciscan method is termed second-person in that the reader of the narrative enters into the characters with empathy based on some shared human experience. It is contrasted with the Dominican mode of knowledge characterized by third-person, objective, propositional analysis.

Stump's discussions in the narrative chapters are both intensely illuminating and worrisome. The Biblical texts she takes up are the narrative; her discussions of each are her interpretations of the texts. Where a reader agrees with Stump's interpretation of the narrative or finds it compelling, her approach is powerful and illuminating (see, for example, the account of Abraham); a careful reading of these chapters is very rewarding. However, narrative texts and their interpretations are much like empirical data and scientific theories; data underdetermines theoretical choice since a number of theories are compatible with the data. If the reader finds Stump's interpretation of the narrative not only possible but plausible, then the narrative support for her account of

suffering moves forward. But if the reader finds Stump's interpretation of the narrative perhaps possible, but implausible (in the sense that motives and inner states are imputed to the actors in the narrative which seem unnecessary to a more straightforward interpretation of the text), then her interpretation of the narrative has less force.

To illustrate, Stump is provocative in the interpretation of the Job narrative with her heavy emphasis on the conversations between God and Satan and the parental way in which she sees God graciously working in a redemptive way with Satan. This same parental theme is then emphasized in her re-telling of the Job narrative in terms of God dealing in a similar manner with Job and with all creatures. However, this parental theme is less potent if one simply takes the God/Satan prologue to be setting the stage for the story (noting that there is no narrative for how things turn out between God and Satan). One might read the famous passages at the end of the narrative where God asks Job where he (Job) was when he (God) set the boundaries for the sea, etc. less as referring to parental relations between God and his creatures, and more in terms of God noting that he is all-powerful and that even all of the chaotic world outside of human control is under his sway. This more common reading of the narrative (which Stump introduces as a foil to her interpretation) at least diminishes the parental theme which is crucial to Stump's account of suffering. Divergent interpretations of narratives suggest that for all their Franciscan potentiality of second-person knowledge, our reading of narratives does not escape some Dominican analysis about the way the world is which we bring to the narratives.

While Stump claims that the truth of the Biblical narratives is not essential to the cogency of her defense (because, after all, she is only describing a possible world, not necessarily the actual one), it seems to us that Stump's project as a whole is best read as a theodicy or an identification of the values that would justify God in creating and sustaining the actual world with all its evil. Stump sees herself as following Aquinas in holding that "God's allowing suffering [is] morally justified either as an antidote to permanent willed loneliness or else as therapeutic for deepened union among persons" (p. 22).

Stump's treatment of suffering is limited by some self-imposed boundaries. The defense of suffering she marshals targets a specific class of persons: "It applies only to the suffering of mentally fully functional

adult human beings; it does not apply to human beings who are not adult or not fully functional mentally, and it does not apply to non-human animals” (p. 476). She defends this limitation by noting that there is no reason why an account of the benefit of suffering must handle all cases of suffering, and suggests that it may be possible to expand her present account to handle other cases of suffering. Her account of suffering, then, focuses primarily on the suffering of individuals with certain qualifications, and does not attempt to resolve questions of suffering for other categories of persons, e.g., the suffering of innocent children.

This setting of limitations also shows up at the outset when thinking of suffering as an evil on a larger scale, a scale beyond the analysis of suffering of particular individuals. She rejects any engagement with reflection on the Holocaust and comments:

Although it is vitally important for us to remember the Holocaust and to reflect deeply on it, taking it simply as one more example or counter-example in academic disputation on the problem of evil strikes me as unspeakably awful. It is enough for me that I am a member of the species that propagated this evil. Stricken awe in the face of it seems to me the only response bearable. (p. 16)

Perhaps one reason (aside from diminishing the Holocaust as only one more example in a debate in the academy) for not discussing the Holocaust is because it would put in very sharp relief the scope of the justificatory nature of Stump’s project. Stump thinks that suffering is (or can be) good for us, which is why a recent review of her book in the *Times Literary Supplement* had this title “Great gifts of pain” (May 27, 2011, p. 32). It would be very hard indeed to claim that the Holocaust was a divine gift or that it would be the kind of event that could be covered by some of the moral intuitions Stump identifies, e.g. “On one common moral intuition, a good parent will sometimes allow the children she loves to suffer – but only in case the suffering confers an outweighing benefit on the child who experiences the suffering, and confers this benefit on him in some way that could not have been equally well achieved without the suffering” (p. 191).

As theists, we believe that it is far better to preserve the thesis that the Holocaust and much suffering is not justified. Mass, industrial murder – genocide – should not occur, ever. We think it more promising to approach the problem of evil by asking whether it is incompatible

with God's goodness for God to create and sustain a cosmos in which some events that occur are good and justified and some events are evil and unjustified. One can see the danger of a justificatory approach to suffering when Stump asks whether, on her view, some suffering should be allowed or not prevented by us because this suffering might be good for the victim. Consider Stump's addressing a case when someone named Paula is considering relieving the suffering of someone named Jerome:

But when Paula considers whether she ought to try to prevent or relieve Jerome's suffering, she cannot know whether the future suffering of Jerome that she is considering is suffering that God will allow. That is because, if Paula does not do what she can to alleviate that future suffering of Jerome's, someone else might do so. (p. 413)

This does not seem fully satisfactory, however, for Stump seems committed to holding that if Paula does not relieve the suffering, God will only allow suffering that is a benefit such that Jerome would retrospectively recognize the suffering as worth the cost.

To be fair, Stump is clear that suffering may only put the one suffering in a position to make a redemptive move toward human flourishing and unity with God. She notes: "Aquinas's theodicy need not be committed to the implication that all suffering moves a sufferer closer to God, or to the implication that God is not justified in allowing suffering if it does not succeed in moving a sufferer closer to God" (p. 404). The sufferer retains libertarian free will which must be exercised. In addition, Stump is clear that her defense also means that individual suffering and its (potential) goods for the individual must be revalued by taking into account the extent of this life in contrast with the potential of everlasting life with God.

Stump's book is distinguished by her working with a view of God that is profoundly personal; God is responsive to the conditions of the world and created souls. Much may be opaque about the role of suffering when we look at the narratives of the lives of others and even consider our own narratives. She believes that a relationship with God is the deepest, true desire of our hearts. It may be that we are not aware of such a desire, but her defense draws back the curtain to show us how the goodness of God is responsible for (or God's creative will is essential for) the created goods that we desire and gives us a glimpse of the enormous good of being in relation to God.