

The Good Report

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## Atheism's Problem of Pain

We all suffer. We've all felt grief or the overwhelming despair of lost love, broken trust tearing apart a relationship. The torment of struggling with depression or the prison of loneliness, battling disease, family clashes and financial stress. The pain and viciousness of life hits us all no matter how rich, successful or famous we are.

The pop star Prince said, *"I've been to the mountaintop, there's nothing there."* For many, the end of life is summed up in one word: confusion. It would be easier to hide behind fancy philosophical arguments than it is to admit our hurts, our loves and passions in the marketplace of life's heartfelt transactions. Death will knock at every person's door and every worldview, religious or secular, has to deal with it.

Pain and suffering is a universal feature of life, yet we view suffering as something which is wrong, as if it should not be, so we ask questions about suffering within the context of morality. But why have we blended the fact of pain with the demand for a moral explanation? Who decided that pain is immoral? This is often a big reason people struggle to believe in God, but in denying God, how does the atheist or sceptic then justify this assertion?

In the Judeo-Christian framework, pain is connected to the reality of evil and the choices made by humanity at the beginning of our time. The problem of pain and the problem of evil are inextricably bound. So when we assume evil, we also assume good. When we assume good, we assume a moral law. When we assume a moral law, we assume a moral lawgiver. One reason we make this final assumption is because every time the question of evil is raised, it is either by a person or about a person, and that assumes the question is a worthy one. But it is a worthy question only if people have intrinsic worth and the only way people have intrinsic worth is if they have an ultimate purpose, being the intention of one who is of ultimate worth, i.e. God.

However, in the naturalistic and atheistic worldview, when you believe no higher answer exists, there is no intention or motive to our existence. Man is simply a miscarriage of nature, lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe which came from and will result in effectively nothing. No meaning, no purpose, no good or evil intentions, nothing but blind pitiless indifference. In this view life has no intrinsic value, for how can it? The morals and values we cling to are merely subjective social constructs. The questions of suffering and pain are in this view equally bottomless and pointless, for what are you comparing this world to when you say it's unjust if this purposeless, natural world governed by laws of decay is all there is? Where does the atheist find their absolute reference to justify objective morals or human value? They find none.

So, if what's true for you is true for you and what's true for me is true for me, then what if my truth says your truth is a lie? Is it still true? If there is no transcendent context within which to define our value, then there is no objective moral truth and moral meaning dissolves into the subjective. This can give rise to anything.

## The fruit of moral subjectivism

The words of Hitler inspired a generation of young people when he said, *"I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality... We will train young people before whom the world will tremble. I want young people capable of violence, relentless and cruel."* We can see the proof in the remains of death camps where Nazis competed to fill rooms with thousands of pounds of women's hair, with other rooms filled with pictures of abused and castrated children and others still with toiletries and clothing stacked to the ceiling. And yet all this barbarism was conceived in the most educated nation in history at that time: Germany, but it was justified as a legitimate offspring of the atheistic philosophy that man is ultimately matter, merely particles. The concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, *"the gas chambers of Auschwitz were the ultimate consequence of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment - or as Nazis like to put it 'of blood and soil'. I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers."* Look at the connection between this and Joseph Stalin's justification of large scale murder of millions by his own philosophy that humans are in essence just meaningless animals.

Now of course I'm not suggesting that this is the way all atheists think, nor am I suggesting that this is the only outworking of atheistic thought. Obviously there have been others throughout history, who in denying God, may have chosen for themselves a path of kindness. But here is the point: in atheism you automatically forfeit the right to stand on a definite objective moral law with which to condemn any choice because atheism cannot build a true, complete and consistent ethical theory of good and evil without denying that all is objectively meaningless. This means that violence is excusable under atheistic philosophy. Whether one likes it or not, atheism does not recognise ethical claims as having any objective truth. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously said, *"if God does not exist, anything is permissible."*

Contrary to this, the Christian claim is that the world owes its existence to a moral God. All human beings are moral agents created in God's image and are expected to realise right from wrong because they all reflect God's moral nature. Therefore when the atheist rejects God while insisting on the legality of morality, they are simply rejecting the cause while clinging to the effect. Without God, morals are reduced to whatever human beings desire. No action is objectively right or wrong, and there is no intrinsic value of life. Rape, hate, murder and other such acts are therefore just as wrong as one could claim them to be right. Unless the world contains behavioural guidelines that transcend human opinions, there is no reason why anyone should object to these conclusions.

Aldous Huxley, a famous philosopher and writer came to realise that his atheism had motives for not wanting the world to have any meaning to satisfy and justify his own desires. He initially didn't want there to be a God so he didn't have to subject himself to any definite moral law. As this satisfied his lifestyle he concluded that there is no God. Now a supposed autonomous, individual morality that claims we can all decide what's right and wrong for ourselves can then give rise to anything else. The Nazis would have called that freedom; the Jews would have called it terrifying.

## The world as we know it

We have become the most drugged up and violent nations. Our talk shows teach profane argument as entertainment, much music teaches boastful pride as success. The world is full of fragmented families, affairs and emotional abuse. Relationships fall into nothing but lust among many young adults and nations victimise the weakest in the world to fuel our comfort and wealth. We are living in the afterglow of the bloodiest century in history. Is this the great freedom we all expected when we

abandoned all objective moral law? But when there is no higher answer who gets to say this is even good or bad?

Take a moment to reflect on the horror of history, where the Romans fed humans to animals as entertainment, or in Nazi Germany where multitudes were captured and buried alive. Consider the recent history of African warlords who captured children, forcing them to butcher their own parents, turning them into vicious soldiers, raiding villages and raping women. Consider the slave trade in which 12.5 million Africans were stolen and forced into ships, laying in their own sick and shit for two months, crossing seas only to be worked to death. Even today affairs tear many families apart leaving children hurt. Young women are pressured, forced into sex or even raped at summer parties. My point is this: I don't see anyone looking at the reality of history and our current world really believing that there is no such thing as true good and evil. If humanity consistently carried through the atheistic view that there is nothing true beyond material substance, life would become unlivable within the limits of reason or even common sense, and the very end, I'm confident, would spell pain.

People often say they can't believe in God because there is so much suffering, but if you're opting for atheism your worldview can't even justify pain or suffering, let alone provide any answer, as a world without God is ultimately meaningless. If we try to argue against the existence of an ultimate objective foundation for morality on the grounds that something is objectively wrong, we deny the basis of our own argument, defeating atheism.

## **The problem still goes unsolved**

The pure evolutionary mechanism of natural selection depends on death, destruction and violence of the strong against the weak, these are perfectly natural according to this view. On what basis then, can the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair or unjust if this natural world governed by laws of decay is all there is? Pain would be no problem unless side by side with our daily experience of this painful world we had received what we think a good assurance that the ultimate reality is a righteous and loving God. You do not call a line crooked unless you have some idea of a straight line. Consequently justice, good and evil turn out to make sense and atheism proves to be illogical.

Do not think that abandoning belief in God somehow makes the problem of pain easier to handle, it only proves the inescapable reality that existence is more than just materialistic. Abandoning atheism allows us to consider the evidence for another reality, a reality in which there is meaning, an ultimate meaning giver, a God. It's that God who brings a solution to these deepest of questions in the mind and in the heart.

*This article contains references to material by RZIM*