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LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS? REFLECTIONS ON ELEONORE STUMP'S THEODICY

William Hasker

Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* is a major contribution to the literature on the problem of evil. This review essay summarizes the overall argument of the book, pointing out both merits and difficulties with Stump's approach. In particular, the essay urges objections to the solution she presents for the problem of suffering.

Seven years in the writing, and many more years in preparation, Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*¹ is a book that is both massive and masterful. The work deploys an extraordinary range of resources: philosophy, theology, and scripture, but also psychology and neuroscience as well as a multitude of references from biography and literature. Given this wealth of material, a critical comment such as this one must of necessity be highly selective. I will proceed by way of a brief summary and comment on each of the four main sections of the book.

I. Task and Method

What is needed, Stump says, is a justification for God's allowing suffering. This question has often been addressed by means of theodicies, and Stump spends some time discussing the theodicy project. She addresses quite effectively the objections that have become current to the very idea of theodicy. One important objection, urged by Terence Tilley among others, is that "theodicies are immoral because they blind us to the horror of evil, and they make us comfortable with suffering we might otherwise strive against" (16). Let it be said once and for all: Stump is not vulnerable to this charge. She writes with passionate eloquence about the severity of human suffering, and she never lets us forget the awfulness of that for which we are seeking a justification. Her search for a solution to the problem is energized precisely by her sense of the great evils involved in the suffering that, nevertheless, God permits.² One may disagree with some

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¹Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010. Page references are to this volume.

²Later on she states, "Human suffering is appalling, and the horror of the whole of it has to be faced. But there is more than one way of facing suffering, and consigning those who suffer to the scrapheap of human history is not the only way to respect their suffering" (456).

or all of the solutions she proffers, but the charge of minimizing or evading the reality of evil gains no purchase against her.

Having thus defended the propriety of theodicy, she takes an apparent step backwards and states that her own project is, strictly speaking, not a theodicy but a defense. Now the distinction between theodicy and defense has become common since it was introduced by Plantinga, but as yet there is no single, generally recognized explication of the difference between the two. She states that she is "construing 'defense' roughly in Plantinga's and Van Inwagen's way" (491n), but this fails to clarify matters, because the two men actually have somewhat different understandings of the notion. So we must look for clarification to what Stump herself says about it. In some respects, her explanations are clear enough. A theodicy presents to us a view of the world which elucidates the general nature of God's reasons for permitting suffering to occur, and claims that this is the way the world actually is. (This need not and should not involve a claim to discern the reasons for particular instances of suffering, which in many cases are unavoidably obscure to us.) A defense, however, presents to us a picture of a possible world in which God has adequate reasons for permitting the sorts of suffering that occur in our world, but does not include the claim that this possible world is our actual world. That is to say, it presents *possible* morally sufficient reasons for God's permitting evil, but makes no claim that these are the *actual* reasons. Even an atheist, then, may be able to admit that a given defense is successful—that is, she may admit that *if* there were a God, the sorts of considerations adduced might explain how God could permit evils without being morally compromised thereby. A defense does not, however, include the assertion that the world thus described is *not* the actual world, so it is open to a believer to conclude that the world of the defense *is* actual and that the reasons given in it are really God's reasons.³

So far this is clear enough. An ambiguity arises, however, when we ask: what are the epistemic requirements for a successful defense? Is it required only that the world of the defense be logically possible? If so, then the defense will be successful only against the charge that God and evil are logically incompatible, and that is a charge that is seldom pressed

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³For several reasons, I find this way of explicating the difference less than satisfactory. There is the epistemic ambiguity that is discussed below in the text. There is also a practical difficulty, in that these definitions will tend to have the result of eliminating theodicy: philosophers will tend to avoid making the more ambitious claim, to have discerned God's actual reasons, when the more cautious project of defense offers almost all of the same benefits. I do not believe that a theodicy needs to claim to have identified the actual reasons for which God permits evils: we should always leave open the possibility that God has other, and better, reasons for what he does than any we have been able to think of. On my preferred account, van Inwagen-type defenses are counted as tentative proposals for theodicy. The term 'defense' is reserved for arguments which purport to defeat this or that argument from evil *without* offering a proposal concerning God's reasons. Examples include Plantinga's free will defense, Plantinga's argument against the feasibility of a probabilistic argument from evil, the skeptical theist defense, and my own "necessity-of-gratuitous-evils" defense. For discussion, see my *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23–26, and *The Triumph of God Over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 16–21, 187–198.

these days. If on the other hand stronger epistemic requirements are imposed, the criterion of plausibility becomes important, and the distance between defense and theodicy narrows considerably. (What must be evaluated, of course, is whether the defense is plausible *given the truth of theism*—that is, of the particular variety of theism that is being defended.)

Now van Inwagen seems to opt for a fairly strong epistemic requirement; he describes a defense as “a story according to which God and suffering of the sort contained in the actual world both exist, and which is such that (given the existence of God) *there is no reason to think it false*.”⁴ Stump, however, has in mind a weaker requirement: she states that for a defense to be successful

it has to be the case that, for all we know⁵ (as distinct from all that we are committed to believing), the claims of a defense could be true. It would therefore invalidate a defense if something about what we currently know demonstrates that the possible world of the defense is not the actual world. (454)

If ‘know’ and ‘demonstrate’ are taken strictly here, as they must be, the requirement comes down to this: there must not be a valid deductive argument from uncontested premises to the falsity of the statements made in the defense.⁶ Now such demonstrations, whether of truth or of falsity, are very seldom available for wide-ranging philosophical claims such as those involved in a defense against the problem of suffering. It follows that if such a demonstration is required to invalidate a defense, then the epistemic requirements for a successful defense are really quite weak—but this means that the force of the defense itself will be correspondingly weak. If no more than this is being claimed, one might wonder whether the claim is significant enough to warrant much critical attention.

This cannot, however, be the whole story. Stump also states that if the biblical narratives discussed in her book “are in fact divinely revealed truth, then the defense based on those narratives will also be a theodicy. There is nothing to keep readers committed to the belief that the biblical texts are God’s revelation from taking the defense I construct as a theodicy” (35). Stump herself is committed to the view that the texts are God’s revelation, so it seems clear that she also views her defense as a theodicy, even though that is not the conclusion for which she explicitly argues in

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⁴From van Inwagen’s “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence,” 156 (my emphasis); cited by Stump on 19. It is worth pointing out that this explication of ‘defense’ may very well exclude the paradigmatic instance, Plantinga’s free will defense. One could consider the free will defense to be successful, even if one thought it extremely improbable that everyone, or indeed that anyone, actually suffers from trans-world depravity. (I suppose that for Roman Catholics the idea that the virgin Mary was transworldly depraved is actually heretical!)

⁵The “for all we know” locution is also employed by van Inwagen, and I believe it tends to encourage the sort of epistemic ambiguity noted in the text. If ‘know’ is taken strictly, the requirement is rather weak, but the phrase is easily taken as indicating that, as in the quotation here, we *have no reason for thinking the assertions to be false*, which is a much stronger claim.

⁶Later on Stump says, “Because it is a defense and not a theodicy, [my proposal] needs only to be internally consistent and not incompatible with uncontested empirical evidence” (452).

the book. But if the defense is viewed in that light, broad considerations of probability and plausibility come into play, considerations that are apparently excluded if we consider only the "demonstrations of falsity" referred to in the preceding paragraph.

Given this somewhat unclear situation, a decision on the part of the reviewer is called for. I submit that for a defense (in Stump's sense) to be successful, the epistemic requirement set by van Inwagen needs to be met. That is, it must be the case that, given the existence of God, we do not have reason to think that the assertions made in the defense are false. (If we do have good reason to think them false, we cannot responsibly urge the defense as showing how, in our actual world, God could be justified for permitting suffering.) But if we have that much, the defense is at least a candidate for being a theodicy, a true account of the reasons that God is justified in permitting suffering. For purposes of this essay, then, Stump's defense will be viewed as a proposal for a theodicy—as a claim, albeit a tentative one, about what is actually the case in the world and about what may be God's reasons for permitting suffering.⁷ I do not believe this distorts her intention, even though her official position is limited to the less ambitious claim.

The remainder of the first part is devoted to method; primarily, to justifying the use Stump intends to make of narratives. She discusses at some length the ways in which narratives have been used in philosophy, and argues that these approaches can legitimately be applied to biblical narratives. The main function of narratives in her approach, it turns out, is that they provide a way of accessing "Franciscan knowledge." Franciscan knowledge is contrasted with Dominican knowledge, so named in virtue of what is known of the personalities of those two medieval saints. Dominican knowledge is organized, precise, propositional knowledge—the sort of knowledge analytic philosophy excels in presenting and processing. Franciscan knowledge, by contrast, is knowledge by immediate experience, knowledge which, Stump argues, often cannot be translated into propositional form. In a classic argument Frank Jackson described Mary, a neuroscientist

who knows everything there is to know about the brain, including everything there is to know about the way in which the brain processes color, but who has had no perceptual experience of color of any sort because from birth she has been isolated (by some suitable villain) in a black-and-white environment. Although, in her imprisonment, she knew all there was to know about the neurobiology of color perception, it seems clear that she will come to know something new when she finally perceives color. (50)

In an inspired move, Stump modifies the thought-experiment:

Imagine then that Mary in her imprisonment has had access to any and all information about the world as long as that information is *only* in the form of third-person accounts giving her knowledge *that*. Mary has available

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⁷Thus, the reference in the title to "Stump's theodicy."

to her the best science texts for any of the sciences, from physics to sociology. She knows that there are other people in the world, and (*mirabile dictu*) she knows all that science can teach her about them. But she has never had any personal interactions of an unmediated and direct sort with another person. . . . And then suppose that Mary is finally rescued from her imprisonment and united for the first time with her mother, who loves her deeply.

When Mary is first united with her mother, it seems indisputable that Mary will know things she did not know before, even if she knew everything about her mother that could be made available to her in non-narrative propositional form, including her mother's psychological states. Although Mary knew that her mother loved her before she met her, when she is united with her mother, Mary will learn what it is like to be loved. (52)

Mary's newly discovered knowledge of her mother exemplifies an especially important form of Franciscan knowledge, the knowledge that is gained through "second-person experience" of another person. (Here we have echoes of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship.) The importance of narrative here is that it can impart to us something similar to this even in the absence of direct contact with the person known. Thus, in reading a novel we may "come to know" the persons portrayed, may come to have a sense of the heroine, say, as a person. Stump contends that in this way the injection of narrative can counter what many have complained of as the "aridity" and "narrowness" of analytic philosophy. (Stump identifies herself as an analytic philosopher.) This Franciscan knowledge is what Stump wants us to get from her biblical narratives—and also, not so incidentally, from the numerous other stories that make cameo appearances in the various chapters of her book.

II. *Worldview*

The second main section sets out selected aspects of the worldview that is assumed to be true in the world of Stump's defense. Not surprisingly, the worldview in question is that of the arch-Dominican, Thomas Aquinas. First to be considered is the nature of love, which according to Aquinas has two components: a desire for the good of the beloved, and a desire for union with the beloved. Union, however, can take various forms, depending on the different kinds of relationship between lover and beloved; Stump terms these kinds of relationship the "offices of love." She analyzes what it means for one person to be present to another and for one person to be close to another. She then turns to the "willed loneliness" which is an important component in the fallen state of human beings, a loneliness which, to the extent it prevails, shuts out from one's life other human beings and even God. In a chapter entitled "Other-Worldly Redemption" she describes the divine solution to this loneliness in the form of sanctification and justification; in the process, she details her own version of the Thomistic solution to the problems of grace and free will.

All this is done with care and insight that can hardly even be suggested in a brief discussion such as this one. We cannot forget, to be sure, that this

is Stump's version of Aquinas, one that may at points disagree with other readings of that notoriously controversial figure. Stump's Aquinas is of course a libertarian, unlike some other interpretations of his thought. More surprising is the virtual disappearance of some of the divine attributes traditionally associated with Aquinas. I found nowhere in the book any mention of divine timeless eternity. Her descriptions of the relationships between God and human beings are highly personalistic and interactive—and also temporal. No doubt it would be possible to redescribe these relationships in a way that is consistent with divine timelessness. But Stump apparently did not think it would be advantageous to her project to do so; indeed, this might have interfered with the sense of such relationships she was trying to communicate. There is also an interesting twist with regard to divine impassibility. On her analysis of closeness between persons, for a human being, Paula, to be close to God requires that God be vulnerable to Paula. Stump is aware of the discomfort this may cause to some, but argues that such a response would be mistaken:

But what about the condition having to do with vulnerability? On the Thomistic conception of God as sovereign and ultimately self-sufficient, it certainly looks as if . . . it is not possible for God to be vulnerable to human beings. But these appearances are mistaken, too. According to a biblical text that Aquinas accepts as literally true, God wants all human beings to be saved, but, on a Christian doctrine Aquinas also accepts, not all human beings are saved. . . . Because God gave human beings . . . free will, God allowed certain things that matter to God—the salvation of all human beings—to depend on wills other than God's own. In this sense, God makes himself vulnerable to human beings. (123)

The traditional doctrine of divine providence as all-controlling has to go as well. Stump's Aquinas is not only a libertarian; he also rejects divine middle knowledge and accepts that God takes risks in his providential governance of the world:

Maybe God does not play dice with the universe; but perhaps, like a consummate chess master, through the application of great intelligence, he is able to get to ends he wants through myriad possible disjunctive roads to it. (226)

It will be left to other scholars of Aquinas to pass judgment on the attribution to him of views such as these. I do want to say, however, that in the depiction in these pages of God and God's interactions with his creatures there is very little that cannot be endorsed by the proponents of open theism.⁸ I say this by way of compliment and appreciation for Stump's views, but I am aware that some may react less favorably!

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⁸Without doubt Stump's Aquinas does hold that God is timelessly eternal, even if that is not said here, and possesses timeless knowledge of all that transpires in time, including what for us lies still in the future. But Stump seems on the whole to recognize that such timeless knowledge of the future (without middle knowledge) makes no difference for divine providence and is in fact providentially useless.

III. Narratives

The third, and longest, section of the book is devoted to the biblical narratives which are to furnish the materials for the theodicy/defense presented in the final section. A lengthy chapter each is devoted to Stump's comments on the stories of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany. It is clear that she has pondered long and deeply over these narratives, and her comments are largely based on these reflections rather than on the sorts of detailed linguistic considerations that are predominant in conventional commentaries. In the hands of a sensitive and imaginative commentator such as Stump, such a procedure can yield invaluable insights, and that is very much the case here.⁹ However, the procedure also makes possible the intrusion of subjective ideas that are not implied in the text and at times may even run counter to the text. I believe this does occur in Stump's commentaries, though not in the same way or to the same degree in all of the chapters.

One could, to be sure, take the position that this does not matter. Stump has pointed out that, for purposes of a defense against the problem of suffering, a fictional narrative could serve just as well as a historical account: either one can present the character of the "world of the defense," the world within which God is justified in permitting the suffering. We might add that from this standpoint it makes no difference whether the fictional elements are present in the original story or are added by an interpreter. But it is hardly feasible to leave it at that. Stump herself clearly wants more than this: she devotes considerable effort to justifying her readings and defending them against rival interpretations. And readers of the Bible will hardly be able to consider her versions of the narratives without asking themselves how well they fit with the stories as they have come to know them. In view of this, I offer here a few thoughts concerning her discussions of Samson and Job.

It's clear that many of the judgments Stump makes about the Samson story come from outside "the world of the story." She censures severely Samson's relationships with women; not without reason, to be sure. But the text records no judgment on this, except to say that the Lord was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. If one's objective is to pick a fight, some provocative actions may be called for, and Samson was always happy to oblige! Later on, Samson's stunt with the city gates of Gaza strikes Stump as hubristic. But the author,¹⁰ surely, is cheering him on, as have most readers ever since.

One of the interesting features of her treatment of the Samson narratives is her admiration for Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. This is striking because, although both Milton and Stump emphasize Samson's ennoblement

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⁹I find her comments on the story of the anointing of Jesus in Luke 7:36–50 especially insightful (355–362). But there are many more examples.

¹⁰In referring to "the author" I am acceding to Stump's plea that the narrative be considered as a unit; I am not taking a position concerning the literary history of the story. If in fact it was a composite effort on the part of many hands, "the author" will be taken to designate the final editor of this part of the canonical text.

through suffering, their readings in other respects are very different. Stump is quite critical of Samson for his failure to make more progress in his struggle with the Philistines; Milton's Samson, portrayed just before the end of his life, lays the blame for this on the Israelites who failed to rally in support. Indeed, he apparently finds nothing of major significance to repent of but his betrayal of the divine secret to Delilah. For Stump, in contrast, there was no secret to be betrayed, and what Samson told Delilah—that the secret of his strength was in his long, uncut hair—was believed by him to be false, and was in fact false, though in an odd way it came to be true as a result of his telling her!

The turning point of the story, of course, lies precisely in that revelation, and it is not easy to give a psychologically plausible account of the episode. Samson had abundant evidence, based on his previous experience with Delilah, that she would use the information to betray him, so why would he make such a disclosure? Perhaps we can only say that he was weak, and was sexually obsessed with Delilah, and she eventually wore him down. It may be, also, that he irrationally believed, or half-believed, that God would deliver him whatever he told Delilah, and whatever she might do in consequence. Stump's account, however, is different. On her view it simply was not true, and was not believed by Samson to be true, that his strength depended on his hair. His telling Delilah that was simply another in the series of untruths with which he strung her along as she badgered him for the secret of his strength. But in telling her what he did, knowing that her reaction would be to cut off his hair, Samson showed contempt for his Nazirite status, the thing that set him apart as a special servant of God. Samson was therefore contumacious towards God, and God deserted him as a result. This was not, however, a punishment as such, but rather a means of securing Samson's repentance and restoration, which came about as a result of his terrible suffering at the hands of the Philistines.

This is certainly ingenious—too ingenious, I think, to be the intended point of the Samson narrative, which on the whole is quite straightforward. Virtually every reader of the story receives the impression that Samson's might did depend on his hair—not perhaps directly, as the result of a quasi-magical causality, but rather as a condition of God's granting to Samson his remarkable strength. It seems clear that the reference to the regrowth of his hair in captivity is meant to signal also the return of his strength. (Much of the strength must indeed have returned, in order for Samson to be able to perform his feats for the entertainment of the Philistine nobles. His final act in pulling down the palace was a different matter, for which he needed to ask God's extraordinary assistance.) If Samson believed his "revelation" to Delilah was false, why the emphasis in the text on his extreme reluctance, and the lengths to which she had to go in persuading him? (Note Judges 16:17: "*And he told her all his mind, and said to her, 'A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.'*")

The final episode of the story also merits attention. According to Stump, "He is great at the end of the story but not because he kills many of his enemies; his renewed strength and victory over the Philistines are by themselves hardly anything admirable in him. . . . In his praying to God as he does then, and in the drawing-near to God that his prayer expresses, there is the culmination of the best in him. He is most glorious in the hopeful openness with which he makes his prayer and waits for God to flood him with strength" (255). The near-exclusive emphasis here on Samson's improved state vis-à-vis God, and the minimizing of the importance of his triumph over the Philistines, is contrary to the impression received by most readers—and, I would argue, it is contrary to the view taken by Milton, and by the text's author.¹¹ To be sure, Stump may not herself greatly admire the sort of achievement involved in slaughtering some three thousand members of an "enemy" society with a single deed. But there may be another motive at work here as well. If Samson's greatness, and the justification of his suffering, depended in large part on his stupendous victory, a theodicy based on the story would have at most extremely limited application; most of us just are not in a position to do anything comparably spectacular.

Stump's treatment of Job is at least equally problematic. One indication that something is amiss is found in her complete neglect of one of the major themes of the book—the ancient version of the "prosperity gospel."¹² According to this doctrine, those who live righteously and serve the Lord will without fail prosper, and things will go well for them. The corollary,

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¹¹In my Bible, the account of Samson's prayer occupies six lines; the account of his deed is twelve lines long, culminating with the triumphant words, "So the dead whom he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life" (Judges 16:30). As for Milton, the answer must be found in these lines of Manoah:

Come, Come; no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause. Samson hath quit himself
Like Samson, and heroically hath finished
A life heroic, on his enemies
Fully revenged—hath left them years of mourning,
And lamentation to the sons of Caphtor
Through all Philistian bounds; to Israel
Honour hath left and freedom, let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion;
To himself and father's house eternal fame;
And which is best and happiest yet, all this
With God not parted from him, as was feared
But favouring and assisting to the end. (lines 1708–1720)

Even in the final lines, where Samson's relationship with God comes into view, the emphasis is on God's renewed favor *as shown in assisting Samson in his triumph over the Philistines*.

¹²Stump says that her interpretation "looks at only some parts of the book of Job, postponing or leaving aside entirely consideration of other parts" (181). I doubt, however, that her reading can afford to ignore such an absolutely central theme of the book.

of course, is that anyone who suffers calamity is being punished for sin and faithlessness. This is what motivates Job's friends in their increasingly strident criticism of him. It is wrong to say, as Stump does, that the comforters "abandon any objective standard of goodness in the interest of being on the side of the ruler of the universe" (217). The comforters are overwhelmingly concerned to affirm and defend God's goodness, in particular his justice. That is why they are outraged at Job's persistent denial that he has done anything worthy of such suffering—that is, at his denial that God's treatment of him is just. They are mistaken, of course, but their mistake is not aptly characterized as one of siding with sheer power and abandoning goodness.

Many readers (and most commentators) receive the impression that Job never receives an explanation of the reason for his suffering. Stump disagrees: he does receive such an explanation, precisely in God's description of his relationship with his creatures. This relationship is parental; more precisely, it is maternal. "The imagery in [Job 38:8–11] depicts God's dealings with the sea as maternal interactions between God and the sea. The sea is created by coming forth from a womb, and God deals with the sea as a mother deals with her child: he wraps it in swaddling bands; he clothes it with a garment" (188). "'Does the rain have a father?,' God asks Job. 'Who sired the dew drops? From whose womb comes the ice[?] The hoarfrost of heaven, who bore it . . . ' (Job 38:28–29)" (189). The ostrich "is portrayed as an inept and foolish mother, deprived of wisdom by God. . . . There is an implication that, if the ostrich's eggs and children survive, this is because God does the mother's job for the ostrich mother" (189). The payoff for this reading of the speeches is described by Stump as follows:

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. . . . Nothing in the divine speeches suggests that, when God considers what to do about the hunger of the baby birds, he thinks primarily about what might be a good thing for the cats in their neighborhood. God does not think about abandoning the baby birds in their need and weakness in order to benefit some other part of the creation. . . . Rather, he considers what will be good for *them*, and so he feeds them when they cry to him. (191)

Stump continues, "Nothing in God's speeches to Job specifically describes God's relations with human beings, of course, but there is certainly a ready inference—both for Job and for the audience of the book—from the way God deals with the rest of his creation to the way in which he deals with human persons. . . . The inference to this explanation about suffering is available to Job" (191). So Job was after all told the reason for his suffering: not the detailed reason, of course, but he has been told that the suffering will be *good for him*, will secure for him some commensurately great benefit that could

not otherwise be obtained.¹³ (That benefit, according to Stump, consisted in the transcendent greatness—the “gloriousness”—that came to Job as a result of his faithfulness and integrity in the face of his intense suffering.)

Thus interpreted, the speech to Job contains an anticipation of Stump’s overall defense or theodicy. What is even more striking, it seems to commit her to applying that theodicy both to animals and to human children, something she has declined to do in her official statements. (She has stated that she is addressing only the suffering of “adult human beings who are mentally fully functional” [4].) Perhaps mindful of this, she later on includes a note of caution: “Although . . . God portrays himself, in general, as concerned with the welfare of each of the animals directly, there are occasional notes that may seem to undermine that general picture. . . . God says he hunts the prey for the lions. But then the prey seems simply instrumental to the well-being of the lions” (568n). It seems to me, however, that it is too late for such caution. If God permits animals to suffer in a way that may not be conducive to their individual well-being (for instance, by becoming a lion’s breakfast), then Job has not after all been told the reason for his suffering, as Stump has argued at some length.

But what shall we make of Stump’s interpretation? Frankly, I find little in the text that supports the use she makes of it. (And of a number of commentaries I’ve consulted, I find none that supports her reading.¹⁴) It’s true that Job does not know the source of the rain, dew, and frost, but that does not mean that God is himself the father of the rain or that God has a womb from which the ice came forth. The young ravens cry to God, but some of them starve to death all the same; when they don’t, their survival is because of the death of the prey brought to them by their parents—by their raven parents, that is, not by God. Some ostrich eggs are crushed, though enough survive that we don’t run out of ostriches. (If the eggs were going to be safe anyway, it wouldn’t be foolish for the mother ostrich to neglect them.) And these facts about the seamier side of nature would have been well known to Job. I am afraid, then, that we have to classify Stump’s use of these passages as a case of eisegesis.

Yet another remarkable feature of Stump’s treatment is her account of God’s conversations with Satan. The first thing to notice here is the amount of attention they receive. In my Bible the two conversations, which occur in the first two chapters of the book, occupy together just over one column out of 78—about 1.5 percent of the entire text. In Stump’s 50-page chapter, a little more than twelve and a half pages are devoted to these episodes—a bit over 25 percent of the whole! Even viewed in the light of her statement

¹³These conclusions are not, of course, stated in the text, they are (it is claimed) *shown* in the relationship between God and the creatures, as depicted in God’s response to Job.

¹⁴Her foil throughout is the Anchor Bible commentary on Job, in which she finds little of merit. But none of a more or less random selection of commentaries I have consulted (including Francis I. Andersen, John E. Hartley, E. P. Hoebenor, G. Gerald Janzen, Keil and Delitzsch, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, and *The New Interpreter’s Bible*) supports Stump’s interpretation.

that some parts of the book are being passed over, this seems disproportionate. Why, we are led to ask, this extreme emphasis on what seems only a minor aspect of the entire text?

The answer is that part of what is seen in these episodes is God's parental care and concern for Satan himself! They reveal the hope on God's part that Satan may come to acknowledge the genuine goodness of Job, an exemplary servant of God; by doing this, Satan would abandon or at least modify his cynical attitude towards God's governance of the world, and would come a step closer to the reconciliation with God that God desires. Stump acknowledges that many would hold, on theological grounds, that Satan is beyond all hope of redemption; however she questions whether this is true "in the world of the story." But even if Satan's redemption is impossible, he may perhaps be kept from becoming even more alienated; anyway, a perfect love such as God's would not abandon a wayward child even if God is aware that genuine reconciliation is not within reach.

Frankly, I find so little in the text to support Stump's over-ingenuous reading that I don't think a detailed rebuttal is called for. (And once again, the commentators offer her no support.) The reasonable view to take, I think, is that the episodes involving Satan have the function of providing a context for the sufferings of Job that are the main theme of the book. If God's relationship with Satan as such were a major concern, it is incredible that there would be no mention of Satan in the book's conclusion. Unless, that is, the failure to mention him indicates that God's hopes for him were dashed. But in that case the book of Job would be in part about the failure of God's good intentions concerning Satan—and that, I submit, is about as untenable as any interpretation could be.

We have to wonder, at this point, about the reason behind Stump's preoccupation with these apparently minor episodes. Of course the notion that even Satan may not be beyond the possibility of redemption has attractions of its own; attractions, however, that are most readily appreciated in the context of a universalist narrative that Stump does not endorse. But there is another reason in this case: the episodes as she interprets them provide crucial evidence supporting what she terms the "fractal character" of the book of Job. A fractal pattern, as this is understood in mathematics, is one that is scale-invariant. A fractal such as the Mandelbrot set is such that "when any detail of the whole graph is enlarged, its graph closely resembles the graph of the whole but is not identical to it" (220–221). Fractal patterns can be discerned in nature to some extent; for example, the distribution of perturbations in the cosmic background radiation is said to be fractal, or scale-invariant. And it has been claimed that the apparently random drips in the paintings of Jackson Pollock also exhibit a fractal pattern.

As applied to the book of Job, the fractal pattern amounts to this: God's loving concern for Job, which includes a willingness to see him suffer for his own greater good, is mirrored in the lives of each of the other persons mentioned. We don't see how this works in the case of Job's original children: how was it to their benefit to be killed by the wind that collapsed

the house in which they were partying? We shouldn't expect to see this, however; it is not their story that is being told. But for the fractal analysis to carry conviction there has to be someone in the book other than Job himself to whom the principles of the theodicy can be seen to apply. And the best candidate for this "someone" is, of course, Satan:

Insofar as the details of God's dealings with Job and also their outcome is very similar but not identical to the details and outcome of God's dealings with Satan or with the non-human animals and the other parts of creation, the book of Job seems to me the second-person analogue of a Mandelbrot set. (221)

The notion that the book has this sort of fractal character is certainly an attractive one. But the only substantial evidence in its favor is found in the episodes exhibiting God's relationship with Satan, and the interpretation of those episodes we have been given just doesn't stand up. I am afraid, therefore, that the source of the fractal pattern must be found in Stump herself.

I have been critical especially of Stump's treatment of Job, but it is important to say here that her account of Job as well as of her other protagonists contains much that is insightful and valuable, especially in her depiction of the redemptive value of Job's second-person encounter with God. There are, I think, flaws in the interpretation, but the flaws by no means negate the value of the whole.

IV. Theodicy/Defense

The final section of the book consists of three chapters. In the first, she sets forth the Thomistic theodicy that is the heart of her project, and defends it against certain objections. In the second, she addresses a topic not considered by Aquinas: suffering that results from deprivation of "desires of the heart," things upon which a person's heart is set that are not essential to the person's ultimate flourishing, understood as "shared union with God." (This is one of the best and most interesting chapters in the book, though it also poses problems for the theodicy. Unfortunately, I will not be able to pursue this fascinating topic further in this essay.) Having shown to her own satisfaction how the Thomistic theodicy can be enhanced so as to account for such suffering, she completes her defense of it in the final chapter; she defends it, however, not as a theodicy but rather as a defense, in the sense discussed earlier.¹⁵

Stump's proposal draws upon the portrayals in the biblical narratives of the preceding section:

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¹⁵I am not entirely clear about Stump's reasons for preferring defense to theodicy. We might suppose that it is because nonbelievers cannot be expected to accept the positive theological claims made in a theodicy. But this would be a bad reason: all sensible theodicyists realize that their task is one of warding off objections and that theodicy as such is not expected to provide positive grounds for belief. The only other substantive advantage I can think of lies in the lesser epistemic requirements for a defense as she understands it. I believe, however, that these lowered epistemic requirements constitute a weakness rather than a strength of her project of defense.

[T]ogether, Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary give us an iconic representation of the panoply of human suffering. The physical pain and mental agony of an innocent victim are pictured in the story of Job. The self-destruction of human evil is evident in the story of Samson. The heartsickness whose source is the deprivation of a heart's desire is portrayed in the story of Abraham. And the misery of being unwanted, shamed, and heartbroken is shown in the story of Mary. . . . All the *modes* of suffering are here, even if many of the species are missing. (373)

These stories could be used as examples to illustrate premises in her arguments about suffering, but Stump objects that "to use the stories in this way is to wreck them as stories" (372). She prefers to regard them as a fund of shared experience between author and readers, as a way of accessing the "Franciscan knowledge" that the stories (it is hoped) will have communicated.

Before engaging the central claims of Stump's defense, it is necessary to note certain limitations in the scope both of the defense and of the Thomistic theodicy on which it is based. The defense does not attempt to provide a justification for suffering which is entirely voluntary, nor for suffering which is justly imposed as a punishment for wrongdoing; in neither case is any further justification called for. (One might suppose that this excludes Samson from her purview, but she thinks not: "Even if we grant . . . that Samson is guilty of serious moral wrongdoing . . . the ruin of Samson's life seems out of all proportion to that wrongdoing" [380].)

There is, however, a further limitation: the theodicy applies only to the sufferings of "mentally fully functional adult human beings"; excluded, then, are the sufferings of animals, of children, and of mentally impaired adults. One might suppose that the fundamental principle, that all suffering is ultimately to the benefit of the sufferer, applies in those cases also, the difficulty being that we have less grasp of the sorts of experiences possible for children, impaired adults, and animals. Those difficulties do play a role here, but Stump is unwilling to commit herself even to the basic principle: "There is no guarantee that one and only one explanation of suffering applies to all the kinds of sufferings there are in the world" (379).

I think this limitation is problematic for her. For one thing, it may strike us as strange for someone to write a 650-page book on the problem of suffering, and yet exclude from consideration what may well be some of the most difficult cases. (Are we to expect another 650, or 1300, pages that will address those missing cases?) Furthermore, it is hard to see how the moral principles which drove Stump to accept the basic principle as applied to normal adults will allow her to make exceptions in the case of children and impaired persons. We saw in her treatment of Job that an important role is played by the intuition that "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." Would it not be strange, then, for her to hold that God is *not* bound by this principle in his own treatment of human children?

At this point, however, we need to address the central claims of the theodicy, with respect to those cases in which it applies. These claims are formulated by Stump in terms of a series of questions, all of which must receive an affirmative answer for the theodicy to succeed. The two questions that are germane for the present discussion are initially stated as follows:¹⁶

(C a1) Does God's allowing a person's suffering enable her to flourish?

(C a2) Is a person's suffering the best available means, in the circumstances, for her to flourish? (456)

These questions, however, need to be reformulated in terms of Aquinas's scale of values, according to which human flourishing consists ultimately in "shared union with God." So reformulated, we have

(C A1) Does God's allowing a person's suffering enable her to be willing to let God be close to her?

(C A2) Is a person's suffering the best available means, in the circumstances, to enable her to be willing to let God be close to her? (456)

Let me say here that I don't think we should forget entirely the first version of the questions. It may be true that shared union with God is the most important thing, but it would distort our view of human life if we were to ignore all the other things that are ingredients in what we normally consider to be a person's flourishing. (Stump's actual procedure is consistent with this; she does consider goods other than union with God.) The "best available means" language also calls for comment. The "best available means" are those means which, in the light of the existing circumstances, are *most likely* to bring about the desired result, given that the *actual* results, which depend on the free response of the sufferer, cannot be known prior to the decision to employ those means. The purpose, then, of the "best means" language, and also that of the word "enable," is to allow for cases in which, due to the free will of the sufferer, the good results God intends in allowing the suffering do not in fact come about. Now for determinists and Molinists, who hold that God knows, prior to his decision to allow the suffering, exactly what the results will be, the issue of "best available means" (in this sense) arguably does not arise. God in permitting the suffering is choosing to bring about precisely those results which will actually ensue. But with Stump's open-theist-like view of providence, God does *not* know this prior to his decision to allow the

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¹⁶In addition to the two questions discussed here, there are two more dealing with the "desires of the heart." As noted above, this topic will not be addressed in this essay.

suffering,¹⁷ so all that can be expected is that God should choose the best available means to the desired result.

Stump holds that these questions can and should receive an affirmative answer. I believe there are serious problems for her position, both of a broadly empirical and of a conceptual nature. She makes an attempt to address both sorts of problems, but not, I think, successfully. First, the empirical problem. Let me say at the outset that I accept completely that suffering can, and sometimes does in fact, have the sorts of beneficial results she contemplates. The problem, as I see it, consists in the many, many cases in which no such results are evident—in which it seems that the actual results are quite the opposite. In order to highlight this problem, I think a further reformulation is called for, one that brings out more forcefully the *universality* of what is being claimed:

(C A1)* Does God's allowing a person's suffering *in every case* enable her to be willing to let God be close to her?

(C A2)* Is a person's suffering *in every case* the best available means, in the circumstances, to enable her to be willing to let God be close to her?

In support of affirmative answers to (C A1) and (C A2), Stump cites scientific studies concerning "post-traumatic growth," in which various researchers have verified empirically that extreme trauma does in fact produce unexpected personal growth, including growth in religious and spiritual awareness. This research is impressive, and provides valuable backup for the anecdotal evidence for the same conclusion. The research, however, supports affirmative answers to what we might term the existentially quantified versions of (C A1) and (C A2); it does little to vindicate the universally quantified versions needed by the theodicy. The real difficulty, then, concerns the all-too-numerous cases in which no result of the desired sort can be seen to occur—rather, the sufferer becomes embittered, or unable to function, or perhaps just limps through life in what appears to be a permanently compromised condition. The scientific data are far from providing unambiguous support for Stump's position. A major concern stemming from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the number of returning veterans who suffer from untreated, or inadequately treated, post-traumatic stress disorder. Mental health professionals who are concerned about this do not suppose that the solution lies in waiting for the expected post-traumatic growth to become manifest! The point concerning "best possible means" provides only limited help. In very many cases, surely, it is highly predictable that severe suffering is unlikely to produce positive results.¹⁸ At this point I will make my appeal to one of my own favorite

¹⁷What is at issue here is, of course, priority in the order of explanation, not temporal priority, which for a timeless God cannot exist.

¹⁸The emphasis on the free will of the sufferer as the explanation for an unfavorable result has a downside of its own: it implies that, when suffering fails to have a beneficial effect, this is invariably the sufferer's own fault.

theodicists, Austin Farrer, who wrote, "Good, even animal good, such as physical health or a moderate plenty, is a more fertile breeder of good on the whole—yes, even of moral good—than evil of any kind can be."¹⁹

At this point Stump is likely to say—in fact, she does say—that "neither suffering nor the benefits defeating suffering are transparent" (413), so that in many cases the apparent lack of beneficial results from suffering may be only apparent, and misleading to us who do not know the secret recesses of the heart. The point is well taken, but it cuts both ways. It may also be the case that some who appear to us to have coped reasonably well are in fact deeply embittered, or have lost all hope, even though they are able to maintain a plausible front to others. Our lack of insight into the hearts of people should make us cautious in judging individual cases, but it has no tendency to show that things overall are better rather than worse than they appear to us to be.²⁰

The sorts of claims made by Stump may seem hard to refute when we consider individual cases of suffering that come to people from time to time. It may be, we think, that for some special reason, unknown to us, these particular persons are especially suited to deal with such trials and to benefit from them—at least, it is difficult to prove otherwise. The situation becomes far more grave, however, when we consider natural or man-made disasters which suddenly and in an indiscriminating fashion bring great suffering upon nearly every individual in an affected area. Are we to suppose, in such cases, that for every such individual there is a particular reason why he or she was selected for such suffering? It must be the case that each one of them, without exception, would benefit at least as much from this disaster as from anything else that could have happened to them. And if this is so for each of them, then presumably it is so for each of us as well. (I scarcely think Stump would want to say that catastrophes occur because they are particularly appropriate to the needs of the persons in the affected area.)²¹ Occurrences bringing sudden death²² on a massive scale (such as the recent tsunami in Japan) must also be considered. If all such deaths are beneficial to those who perish, it must be the case that, for nearly all of us nearly all of the time, sudden death with little or no time for preparation would be more conducive to a happy afterlife than would whatever years of life might remain to us in the absence of such a disaster.²³ And that is a hard doctrine to swallow. I believe therefore, that,

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¹⁹Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962), 167.

²⁰Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998), 27–28.

²¹Paul Reasoner has pointed out to me that the same problem arises in relation to doctrines of karma; it is implausible to suppose that the same karmic outcomes are appropriate to each of a large, randomly selected group of individuals.

²²Death also, even painless death, counts as suffering on Stump's extended notion of suffering; see p. 5.

²³Hamlet (Act III, Scene IV) decided not to kill the murderer of his father while the man was at prayer, lest he do the villain a favor by sending him to heaven with his soul purged

evaluating the claims made in Stump's defense in terms of van Inwagen's requirements for a successful defense, *we have good reason to think the defense is false*. If Stump should reply that I have not demonstrated that it is false based on uncontested empirical evidence, I will readily agree. But I will add this: if she thinks that is good enough, she is too easily satisfied.

The conceptual problem is at least equally serious. Stump introduces this by saying, "someone might complain that on Aquinas's views we ought never to try to alleviate suffering since to alleviate suffering would also be to prevent the benefit brought about by the suffering" (412).²⁴ She responds that "one person Paula's allowing some suffering on the part of another person Jerome that Paula could readily prevent or relieve is morally permissible only if Paula is justified in holding the true belief that suffering is the best means in the circumstances for drawing Jerome closer to God in the process of justification or sanctification" (413).²⁵ But human beings are very rarely in a position to know anything like this. Stump notes, however, that "The putative objector might rejoin here that the possession of a Thomistic theodicy in effect provides what one might otherwise not have—namely, the basis for concluding that any particular suffering will in fact serve the purpose of justification and sanctification. . . . And so . . . a Thomistic theodicy provides what I have just claimed human beings rarely have: moral justification for permitting the suffering of others" (413). She replies,

But this rejoinder is also confused. On Aquinas's theodicy, any particular suffering *allowed by God* will benefit others in the way the theodicy explains. 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. (413)

Two comments are in order here. First of all, there are plenty of circumstances in which we have good reason to believe that, if we fail to act or prevent or alleviate suffering, no one else will do so. The women who, in the nineteenth century, were denied anesthesia because Providence had ordained that childbirth should be painful (Stump's example) were not

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of guilt. In truth, the prospects for Hamlet's revenge were worse than he feared: *whenever* he might slay his enemy, he will make the man's chances of escaping damnation better than had he enjoyed more years of life. This is bad news for those intent on murderous revenge, but bad news also for all of us, whose lives on this view represent mainly a relentless downward spiral of spiritual decline.

²⁴Stump attributes this objection to me, referencing *The Triumph of God Over Evil*, 189–191. I do not, however, affirm the objection precisely in the way she formulates it, nor do I agree with some of the other views she attributes to her objector. Conclusions about my views need to be formed on the basis of what is actually said in my book, as well as in this essay.

²⁵Surely this cannot be true; it's obvious, as I think Stump would admit, that other benefits (such as restoring Jerome to health) might justify Paula's permitting his suffering (for instance, if she has medical power of attorney and can decide whether or not to permit serious and painful surgery to be performed on him).

relieved of their pains in some other way. Very often, those who suffer from natural disasters simply will not be helped, if we don't help them. And there are many situations of this sort. But second, if Paula does not prevent Jerome's suffering but someone else does, then Paula will not have permitted Jerome to suffer at all. In fact, from the standpoint of Jerome's welfare, Paula's decision not to intervene is a "fail-safe" option: if the suffering does occur, it will be because it is the best possible means to Jerome's ultimate welfare; otherwise, he simply will not suffer. I am not claiming that it would be morally wrong for Paula to intervene, but it is impossible to deny that if she does intervene, *this will not enhance Jerome's ultimate welfare and may very well detract from it*. If she knows that Aquinas's theodicy is true, she knows this as well; it follows, that if she nevertheless ought to intervene, the reason she ought to do so has nothing to do with Jerome's welfare.

This does not, of course, entail that Paula ought not to care about Jerome's suffering. It is right and appropriate that she should care deeply about it, but her caring may not and should not be the sole determinant of what she should do. She will be in a situation comparable to one discussed several times by Stump: a parent has a sick child, and the best chances of recovery lie in a treatment which will be excruciatingly painful for the child. If she does not allow the treatment, the child may not recover from the illness, but if she does allow it, she will suffer along with (and perhaps even more than) the child. I submit that it is intolerable to suppose that we are *always* or *nearly always* in such a situation when we contemplate the opportunity to relieve or prevent serious suffering on the part of others. To suppose this creates a certain sort of conceptual incoherence in a religious worldview that urges us to be ready in our response to those who are suffering, yet also informs us that if we prevent or relieve their suffering we are very likely harming their most important interests.²⁶

In a hedonistic society such as ours, it takes courage as well as wisdom and resource to write a book extolling the redemptive benefits of suffering. Stump has performed this daunting task with great distinction. I've argued that some of her claims cannot be sustained, but this in no way negates the value of the materials she has assembled. The book ought to be read by everyone with an interest in the topic; it may even bring light to some who wander in darkness (and that is many of us, at one time or another). I do not think we can learn from her the solution to the problem of suffering. But that may be because a solution of the kind she is looking for is simply not available.²⁷

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²⁶Ironically, the objection to Stump's theodicy at this point parallels a very similar objection to the skeptical theist position: skeptical theists are obliged to hold that we have no knowledge whatsoever, with respect to any particular action we may choose to perform, whether that action is likely to make the world better or worse overall. See my "All Too Skeptical Theism," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010), 15–29.

²⁷My thanks to Thomas Flint, Paul Reasoner, and Charles Taliaferro for valuable comments on an earlier version of this material.