Bryan Frances, GRATUITOUS SUFFERING AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION

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democracy. The question of the weight of reasons of worth, then, is central to Wolterstorff’s project in *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, and one that has not been sufficiently addressed.

I cannot defend an answer of my own here. But here’s a thought. Christians have always attached a great deal of weight to the importance of human free will in explaining the presence of great evil and suffering in the world. That is, Christians already think that God regards human free will as sufficiently precious to outweigh ending evil and simply “brain-washing” us to have good motives and right beliefs. Perhaps this indicates that we have similar reasons to respect the free choices of individuals.

An obvious worry follows: God allows people to do all kinds of wicked things, and we surely don’t have reason to do the same. Christians think God has sufficient reason to allow Holocausts, but that humans surely have sufficient reason to use whatever coercive power we have to stop it. So why not think that, while God has reason to allow damnation, we must use whatever coercive power we have to stop it?

Reflection on the reasons God might allow damnation may point the way forward. In her new book on the problem of evil, *Wandering in Darkness*, Eleonore Stump argues that God allows evil in part to produce a complete relationship with human beings, united in goodness. Perhaps our reason to respect freedom is that we can only achieve the sort of unity we wish to have with others and God eternally if we allow others to reject us, and the True Church. The use of force cannot produce genuine unity, as it would merely displace their will with ours. I suggest then that Christians are already committed to holding that God has sufficient reason to allow damnation, an infinite loss, in order to respect freedom. If so, perhaps Christians have reason to allow similar losses in respecting an institutionalized right of religious freedom.

I find the problem of Christian toleration both fascinating and disturbing. I am grateful to Wolterstorff for helping to bring this critical problem into focus and providing at least part of the answer.

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According to its back cover, this book promises to deliver a “lucid and jargon-free analysis of a variety of possible responses to the problem of gratuitous suffering.” It is also advertised as being “the perfect size and
scope for an introductory philosophy class’s discussion of the problem of evil and suffering.” To a large extent, this book delivers on these promises. Nevertheless, I have some significant reservations about its content, reservations that would make me hesitant to recommend it as a stand-alone introduction to the evidential problem of suffering.

Frances defines an instance of gratuitous suffering as an instance of suffering that is “not coupled with any combination of goods whose goodness outweighs the badness of the suffering” (16). The problem of gratuitous suffering, as Frances characterizes it, is a problem for theists who adopt a “4-Part conception” of God, one according to which God is “the unique (1) supremely moral, (2) supremely knowledgeable, (3) supremely powerful, (4) creator of the universe” (18). It arises in connection with the following two premises:

**Consequence Premise:** If the universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being, then that being arranged things so that there is no gratuitous suffering.

**Gratuitous Premise:** But there is gratuitous suffering. (17)

According to Frances,

The Problem of Gratuitous Suffering is simply this: There is good reason to think that the Consequence Premise is true, there is good reason to think the Gratuitous Premise is true, and yet if both are true then there is no supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful creator of the universe. (17–18)

Frances critically examines five responses to this problem that a theist might give and concludes that all of them are deeply problematic in some way. The five approaches (as Frances names them) are these: (1) The Confident Approach, (2) The Compatibilist Approach, (3) The Profoundly Hidden Outweighing Goods Approach, (4) The Skeptical Approach, and (5) The Non-4-Part Approach. The first of these involves the theist’s rejecting evidential arguments from suffering on account of the fact that she takes the denial of their conclusion to have sufficiently greater justification for her than the conjunction of their premises. The second involves denying the Consequence Premise. The third corresponds roughly to attempts to respond to evidential arguments from evil by way of providing a theodicy. The fourth roughly corresponds to what have become known as “skeptical theist” approaches. The fifth involves adopting some version of theism that gives up the 4-part conception of God.

It isn’t hard to notice that Frances’s definition of “gratuitous suffering”—suffering that is “not coupled with” any combination of outweighing goods—is imprecise. But I regard this as one of the strengths of the book. As Frances explicitly notes, it is difficult to spell out more precisely just what the requisite nature of the relevant coupling relation is. As he points out, the kinds of connections between the various instances of suffering and the relevant goods (connections that would serve to justify God’s
permission of those instances) might turn out to be quite subtle and indirect (16–17). My complaint about Frances’s definition lies elsewhere.

As Frances himself notes, his characterization of what it is for an instance of suffering to be gratuitious is non-standard. It is non-standard because it counts an instance of suffering that is coupled with a certain combination of outweighing goods as non-gratuitous even if those same goods could have been achieved by a being like God with less suffering (or indeed without any suffering or other comparable evils at all) (26–29, n.33). Frances suggests that the problem of gratuitous suffering, as he characterizes it, is difficult enough for the theist to deal with as it is (29). But I can’t see how that is really the case.

Suppose, for example, that we allow that it is sufficient for an instance of suffering to be non-gratuitous that it causally contribute to the obtaining of some combination of outweighing goods. Then I don’t see why the 4-Part theist should think that there are strong evidential grounds for believing that any suffering is gratuitous. We all recognize that many of the causal connections that hold in the world are opaque to us. So even if we ask whether the relevant causal connections hold between the instances of suffering in question and goods realized in this life, I don’t see any particularly good reason for the theist to think it is unlikely that those connections do hold. Add to this consideration various traditional religious beliefs regarding the afterlife and the like, and a theist might easily believe that it’s not unlikely that every instance of suffering causally contributes to the realization of an outweighing good.

Indeed, I’ve found, in teaching the problem of suffering at the introductory level, that it is difficult for many students to see the force of the problem for precisely this reason. To get them to see the force of the problem, I often have to go out of my way to stress that the relevant connection between the suffering and the outweighing goods must be such that a being like God could not have achieved those goods without that suffering (or something just as bad). If I were to set up the problem of suffering as Frances does, I’d find it much more difficult to convince my students that there was any significant problem here. In fact, I’d think my students would be right to think there isn’t one.

The manner in which the problem of gratuitous suffering is characterized is not the only complaint I have concerning the approach of the book. As Frances states at the outset, “there is no name-dropping” to be found (10). The rationale given for this is that he has “found that focusing on what famous philosophers have said usually leads to excessive attention to exposition and fails to encourage independent thinking on the issues” (10). I am sympathetic to this rationale, but the result is that the reader ends up being treated to Frances’s own (at times) highly idiosyncratic take on things. This limits the value of the book as a general introduction. At the very least, the book would have been significantly improved with the addition of a bibliography at the end of each chapter, one that provides a
representative sample of what other contemporary philosophers have had to say about these issues.

A fairly significant idiosyncrasy, one that infects much of Frances’s discussion of the various theistic approaches to the problem of gratuitous suffering, arises with respect to how he characterizes the dialectical situation. Frances claims that those theists who would deny the Gratuitous Premise “need to successfully argue that the overall evidence shows that *all instances of pain and suffering* (even the Holocaust!) are coupled with goods that made all that suffering worth it” (46). This is not, however, how the dialectical situation is typically characterized in the literature, nor is it clear that 4-Part theists should accept this characterization. As the problem of suffering is typically presented, there being instances of suffering that do not appear to be appropriately coupled with any outweighing goods is alleged to provide us with strong evidence against theism. This evidence, it is often further alleged, makes it irrational for those who are aware of it to be theists. In order to respond to this evidential challenge, all the theist needs to do is successfully argue that this is not the case. One way to do that would be to show that the total evidence indicates that there are no instances of gratuitous suffering. But that’s not the only way.

Another way, for example, would be to argue that it is probable *on the assumption that theism is true* that there would be instances of suffering of the sort we find in the world. One way to do that, furthermore, would be to argue that it is probable on the assumption that theism is true that God would need to permit such instances in order to achieve various outweighing goods. To establish this would be to establish that the instances of suffering we find in the world do not afford us with strong evidence against theism. Many attempts to provide a theodicy of suffering that make use of specifically theistic assumptions, for example, are (more or less) attempts to provide arguments along these lines. But in order to successfully make such arguments, one need not show that the total evidence supports the assumption that theism is true (and thereby supports the claim that the suffering in question is not in fact gratuitous). Frances, however, denies that this sort of strategy is legitimate (111–113), and thereby (as I see it) significantly misconstrues the dialectical situation. Similar things could be said about how Frances construes the dialectical situation when he evaluates skeptical theist approaches to the problem of evil (159–161).

I do find it commendable, however, that Frances explicitly notes that the force of the problem of gratuitous suffering depends on how strong the epistemic grounds for 4-Part theism are in total. As Frances points out, even an extremely strong evidential challenge can be overcome by sufficiently strong contrary evidence (48). This is a point, I believe, that is often underemphasized in discussions of this topic. Nevertheless, given the focus of the book, I think it could have done without the relatively lengthy treatment that Frances devotes to evaluating the various possible epistemic grounds there might be for theism. He devotes (in chapter 4) just
a little less than fifty pages to this topic—a considerable amount given the length of the book. And that discussion is not especially noteworthy. The treatment Frances gives to the evidential value of religious experience, for example, involves only a brief (and somewhat condescending) dismissal of standard approaches (like reformed epistemology), with the remainder constituting Frances’s own (to a large extent) highly idiosyncratic take on that issue (53–54, 88–92). The evaluation of standard theistic arguments, such as the argument from design and the cosmological argument, consist of more or less standard objections. But these objections (and the various possible responses to them) are much better discussed elsewhere.

On account of these and other reservations that I have about the book, I would (as noted at the outset) be hesitant to recommend it as a stand-alone introduction to the problem of suffering. Nevertheless, in spite of what I have said, there is much to be praised about the book. It does present a lucid and reasonably comprehensive introduction to the evidential problem of suffering. I could see myself assigning it to an introductory level course, provided that I supplemented it with other materials on that topic.


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This edited volume is a collection of papers presented at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 2003. The four conversations facilitated by the book’s editors address the possibility that theology and theologically informed moral reflection may contribute to “the contemporary quest for a public philosophy capable of sustaining and advancing America’s ongoing experiment in self-government and ordered liberty” (ix). The conversations are organized in sets of responses to four key addresses: “Perils of Moralism” by Charles Taylor (1–48), a reflection on the “Theistic Account of Political Authority” by Nicholas Wolterstorff (49–86), the interrelationality of political consensus and religious commitment by Robin Lovin (87–134), and a reflection on “moral traditions” (in dialogue with Alasdair MacIntyre) by Jean Porter (135–180). The remaining contributors are Kenneth Grasso, Fred Dallmayr, William Schweiker, J. Budziszewski, Jeanne Heffernan Schindler, Joshua Mitchell, Charles Mathewes, Jonathan Chaplin, Michael L. Budde, Eloise A. Buker, Christopher Beem, and Peter Berkowitz. In sets of three, these contributors offer responses to the four primary essays. Jean Bethke Elshtain concludes the volume with a