

Tragedy Needs Explanation

We all want to make sense of life. Most of the time, we ask immediate questions to make sense of what's happening in our world: Why did she look at me that way? Why is it cold? Why can't my team win a championship? Why do I feel hungry? Why can't I relax? Why do I see so many advertisements?

Most of us ask big questions of life too. These questions and their answers are at the heart of the world's religions, the impetus for scientific endeavors and the domain of philosophy. Theology, science and philosophy explore both the minutiae and the big picture to make sense of reality. Big questions and our attempts to answer them are a big deal.

Those who believe in God—and I am a believer—typically think fully adequate answers to big questions include God. Science, philosophy, humanities, arts or other disciplines contribute to our quest to answer life's questions. Everyday experiences matter too. Comprehensive answers draw from all these domains.

Reflection on God—theology—should not be the trump card in efforts to understand reality. Phrases like “God only knows” or “it must be God's will” sometimes end conversations rather than shed light on how things might work or how things are. Theology doesn't have all of the answers.

But if God's presence and influence have the far-reaching effects most believers think, theology cannot be set aside during discussions

of existence. It must be included. In fact, theology should play a central role when seeking adequate answers to the most important questions of life.

And what an amazing life it is!

Existence abounds in feelings, facts, information, values, action, desires and unanswered questions. We experience love, joy and happiness, along with evil, pain and sadness. We act purposefully and intentionally. We also encounter randomness, chance and luck—good and bad. We seem to act freely. But circumstances, our bodies and the environment limit what we freely do. We decide, feel, relate and ponder.

In one moment, goodness and beauty delight us. In the next, we cringe in response to horror and ugliness. At times we're happy, and at other times we're not. Most of the time our lives consist of the mundane, usual and routine. And on it goes. We live.

Making sense of life—in light of such diversity—is a daunting endeavor. But we inevitably take up the task. In more or less sophisticated ways, we try to figure out how things work and what makes sense. We are all metaphysicians, in this sense, because metaphysics seeks the fundamental explanations of reality.

This book explores the big picture with a special emphasis upon explaining randomness and evil in light of God's providence. By *providence*, I mean the ways God acts to promote our well-being and the well-being of the whole.

In this exploration, I will not ignore purpose, beauty, goodness and love. But the positive aspects of life are fairly easy to reconcile with belief in God. Randomness and evil are far more challenging. Unfortunately, some believers dismiss the challenging aspects of life as inconsequential or unreal. By contrast, I think we must take seriously these aspects, so seriously that many believers will need to rethink their views of God. We may need deconstruction so reconstruction can occur.

By the end of this book, I will offer answers to some of the most significant questions of life. I take seriously randomness and purpose, evil and good, freedom and necessity, love and hate—and God. I'll be

offering a novel proposal for overcoming obstacles that have traditionally prevented believers from finding satisfactory solutions to the big problems of life. My solutions may even prompt unbelievers to reconsider their belief that God does not exist.

For millennia, many people have asked, “If a loving and powerful God exists, why doesn’t this God prevent genuinely evil events?” Thanks especially to recent developments in philosophy and science, a related question has also gained prominence: “How can a loving and powerful God be providential if random and chance events occur?”

In this book, I propose answers to both questions. At the heart of these answers is a particular understanding of God’s power and love. Theology, science, philosophy and Scripture inform this understanding. When appealing to these sources, I aim to account for the cruel and unpredictable realities of life, in their wide-ranging diversity. But I also account for purpose, freedom and love. I draw upon research in various disciplines to proffer a model of divine providence that I find both credible and livable.

To get at the heart of my proposals, it seems appropriate to begin with accounts of real life situations involving randomness and evil.

IT’S UTTER PANDEMONIUM

On April 15, 2013, Mark Wolfe finished the Boston Marathon. Not long thereafter, Wolfe witnessed the massive destruction of terrorist-devised bomb blasts near the finish line. “It’s utter pandemonium,” he said, describing the chaos. “Everybody’s just in disbelief and sadness.”¹

While Wolfe and others observed the devastation firsthand, people around the nation and world turned to the media for details of the tragedy. The explosions caused more than chaos and damage to nearby structures. At least 250 bystanders and runners were injured. Fourteen required amputations. Three died.

¹M. Alex Johnson, “‘Pandemonium’: Witness Accounts of the Boston Marathon Bombing,” *NBC Nightly News*, April 15, 2013, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/15/17765308-pandemonium-witness-accounts-of-the-boston-marathon-bombing?lite.

The stories of the injured, maimed and deceased captured hearts around the world. Reports of heroic helpers at the bombing scene soon emerged. Police officers, firefighters, nurses, physicians and ordinary citizens were good Samaritans in a time of dire need. While the public lauded the helpers, grief and shock prevailed. Making sense of things proved difficult.

A few days later, FBI agents identified Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev as the disaster's masterminds. The brothers placed nails, ball bearings and other metals in pressure cookers and detonated the homemade explosives with remote devices. After police had found the two, a chase ensued and authorities killed one. Authorities eventually captured the second, and he admitted to their crime. Religious beliefs motivated them, Mr. Tsarnaev said. This calamity seemed another in a long list of evils perpetrated in the name of God, Allah or some other religious ultimate.

The Boston Marathon bombing is not unique of course. Terror-motivated bombings occur throughout the world, although in the United States they occur less frequently. Some blasts are more deadly and more damaging. Any terrorist bombing—no matter where it occurs—is one too many.

Believers in God explain events like the Boston Marathon bombing in various ways. Writing as a guest columnist in the *Orlando Sentinel*, Josh Castleman affirmed his belief in God despite the Boston horror. "I realize that many people will see this tragic event as evidence against God's existence," wrote Castleman in the newspaper. "But the reality is that in order for thousands of people to feel relief and joy, some had to feel unspeakable pain and heartache."

Castleman concluded his piece with a rhetorical question: "Where was God during the bombing?" He answers: "I think he was right in front of us, and he was hoping we wouldn't just focus on the brief moment of evil, but instead, recognize him in the hours and days that followed."²

²Josh Castleman, "Where Was God During the Boston Marathon Bombings?," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 21, 2013, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2013-04-21/news/os-ed-god-boston-bombings-042113-20130419_1_god-tragedy-animal-instincts.

Some believers make sense of life by saying we need evil to appreciate the goodness of God and that God consoles those who suffer. Castleman seems to think evil is necessary for this purpose when he says that “in order for . . . people to feel relief and joy, some had to feel unspeakable pain and heartache.” Without evil, we would not know good, says this argument. To know firsthand the God of all consolation, we need reasons to be consoled.

We must go through hell to appreciate heaven.

The belief that God is present with those who suffer is increasingly common. “God suffers with us,” many say. God experienced pain and death in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, say Christians, and as a Fellow Sufferer, God now suffers with those in the throes of pain. In the midst of our greatest difficulty, God is present and empathetic. Many believers say they worship a suffering God. But must we endure evil to appreciate good? And can we best account for evil by saying God is present to and suffers with victims?

Most believers think God can do anything. God could control people or situations and stop any evil event, they say. If this is true, God must voluntarily allow evil just to suffer alongside victims. God permits evil in order to feel our agony. God could stop such evil, says this view, but God allows it so that we can feel supported in the midst of our pain.

Does this view make God a masochist? And do we want to emulate masochists? Do we always allow loved ones to suffer so we can suffer with them? Do we think it more loving to suffer with others than to prevent evil, if we were able, in the first place?

I think we should doubt that evil is a prerequisite for good, especially the vast amount of evil in our world. The amount of evil far outweighs whatever we might need to appreciate good. Besides, most Christians believe in an afterlife of eternal bliss. If we follow the logic of “good requires evil,” heaven must include pain and evil so saints can appreciate the heavenly hereafter. Not only does this way of thinking make evil necessary, but it causes one to wonder if the saints could experience perfect bliss knowing that evil makes their bliss possible.

Presumably, the Tsarnaev brothers used their free will to construct

and detonate the Boston bombs. Yet their victims were apparently random: runners and bystanders just happened to be where bombs exploded. The brothers freely wreaked deadly havoc, yet their victims unknowingly came near the blast.

This may prompt believers to ask different questions: Was the Boston Marathon bombing part of God's providence? Although the victims seemed random, did God pick them to be injured or killed as part of a divine master plan? Are free will and randomness ultimately unreal because they actually manifest God's all-controlling hand?

Should we say evil is required, God-intended or even God-allowed?

IT'S AN ACT OF GOD

It was a typical fall day, on a typical Canadian road, with a typical Calgary family. The clan had vacationed in British Columbia, and they were driving south of Fairmont Hot Springs. A news report describes what happened around noon. "The family was in a north-bound Subaru Legacy and was approaching a southbound semi with an unloaded low-bed trailer," reads the report. "A rock measuring 30 by 13 centimetres crashed through the front windshield and hit the mother of two in the head, killing her."

In an instant, a stone penetrated a windshield. It crushed a woman's skull and killed her without warning. A life ended tragically.

Investigators of the accident stopped the semi driver whose trailer pitched the rock. After analyzing the truck, its tires, the victim's car and the accident scene, investigators determined the stone must have been lodged between the trailer's dual tires. It shot out from the tires, smashed through the car's windshield and killed the victim.

Those investigating said the truck driver was not blameworthy. "There's no intent on the driver to stick a rock between his tires and launch it in the air," said Cpl. Tom Brannigan. "It's an act of God."³ An act of God?

³Stephane Massinon, "Police Call Highway Accident That Killed Calgary Woman 'an Act of God,'" *Calgary Herald*, October 8, 2012, www.calgaryherald.com/Police+call+highway+accident+that+killed+Calgary+woman+with+video/7363376/story.html.

This accident is not the first time, of course, that an unintended event caused death and destruction. It's not the first time an unexplained accident has been called "an act of God." We're more likely to hear the phrase "act of God" to describe hurricanes, tornadoes or floods. But perhaps this woman's death is also a natural disaster: an unplanned event with dreadful consequences.

Many believers recoil in disgust when God gets blamed for accidents, tragedies and natural disasters. Yet many also think that God totally controls life, or at least that God controls the natural world and its inanimate objects. These people must think such events—including rocks kicked up by semitrailer wheels—are part of God's providence. After all, they say, an omnipotent God could stop those accidents. Therefore, God must permit them. Yet, for many others, God's causing or permitting evil conflicts with their belief that God loves perfectly.

Can we believe that random events or events resulting from chance or luck do occur in the world—especially those with negative consequences—and also believe in divine providence? If God has a plan, how does randomness figure in? Is this a divine blueprint, in which all details are predetermined or foreknown? If God can control people and nature, why recoil in disapproval when some people say the accidents of life are acts of God?

IT WAS JUST MEANT TO BE

Hank Lerner and his wife gave birth to their second daughter six weeks early. An emergency C-section brought Eliana Tova—a name meaning, "God answered with good"—into the world. Even before doctors delivered Eliana Tova, they knew she'd need heart surgery. And at two days old the tiny infant underwent a major procedure to address her life-threatening condition. This was not how her parents imagined life would begin for their child!

A month later, Eliana Tova's kidneys began to shut down. Her health deteriorated. Hank and his wife were faced with a decision, as he puts it, "either to put her on dialysis for the next two years or so in

the hopes of getting her to the point where they can do a transplant, or just let her go quietly.” Sometimes death is preferable to the grim struggle for life.

When Hank and his wife met their rabbi, the cleric asked, “Are you angry with God?” Hank certainly was! “Every time I heard someone say something like ‘it’s all part of His plan,’ or ‘it was just meant to be,’” he said, “I growled a little bit inside.”

Further tests revealed that little Eliana Tova had a rare condition diagnosed only 250 times in the last fifty years. By the time Hank blogged about Eliana Tova’s condition later that year, she had undergone five operations. More surgeries would be required, in addition to hospital visits for related health problems. Her life, were she to survive, was destined for enormous adversity.

“I’m more than a little peeved that my child’s life depends on hooking her to machines 12 hours a day, every day, until she can grow large enough for a transplant,” Hank said. This doesn’t include infections and possible health complications Eliana Tova will likely endure as she moves through life. There’s plenty to infuriate Hank!

“At the end of the day,” says Hank, “it doesn’t matter whether I’m angry at God. What matters is that we—Mom, Dad, and Big Sister—stop thinking about the past and worrying about the future so we can concentrate on kicking down doors and moving Eliana forward just a little bit every day.”⁴

Eliana Tova, of course, is not the only infant born with debilitating conditions, disease, defective body parts or severe deformities. Millions of infants are so burdened annually. Some survive but endure a lifetime of surgeries and suffering. Others survive for a short time before succumbing to whatever ails them. Still others are stillborn, not capable of living beyond the womb.

Parents with severely debilitated children encounter the “rationalizations” given Hank: “it was meant to be” or “it’s God’s plan.” Other

⁴Hank Lerner, “Getting Angry with God over My Daughter’s Rare Disease,” *Kveller* (blog), October 28, 2013, www.kveller.com/blog/parenting/getting-angry-with-god-over-my-daughters-rare-disease/.

parents stop believing in God, or at least stop believing that God makes any difference. They become practical atheists. Along the way, many people rely more on sheer determination than on any reassurance that God providentially directs their lives. “God doesn’t seem to be helping,” they say. “So we’ll have to work this out ourselves.”

If it’s to be, it’s up to me.

When children with severe debilities like Eliana Tova are born—or, for that matter, when anyone suffers from diseases caused by random genetic or prenatal malfunctions—we wonder if perhaps God misdialed the controls. If God is responsible for the dialing, are health problems divinely allotted? Are genetic and physical mutations truly random, or are they divinely planned?

While some believers give up believing that God makes any difference, others turn their anger toward God. In fact, a number of biblical passages report the laments of ancient believers venting their ire. Expressing anger can prove cathartic. But as natural as anger may be, one wonders if God deserves blame when evils occur. Is it really God’s fault? Is God culpable?

Some say God should *not* be the object of our anger—in the sense of being blamed for causing or allowing evil. God only does what is good. But if we should not blame God when things go badly, should we praise God when things go well?

Does God have a hands-off approach to our lives?

I DON’T KNOW IF MY HEART WILL EVER HEAL

Zamuda Sikujuwa pushed apart her thighs in grimaced pain, demonstrating, in a lewd-looking gesture, what they’d done. Militiamen shoved an automatic rifle inside her body during the rape.

Associated Press reporter Michelle Faul wrote of Zamuda’s story from Doshu, Congo. “The brutish act tore apart her insides after seven of the men had taken turns raping her,” Faul reported. “She lost consciousness and wishes now her life also had ended on that day.”

The story is horrific. Rebels from a Tutsi tribe came to Zamuda’s village demanding money. When her husband had nothing to give,

they put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. Her two children cried at their father's murder, so rebels shot them too. Then they attacked Zamuda, raping her and leaving her for dead.

After two operations, Zamuda still has difficulty walking. "It's hard, hard, hard," she says. "I'm alone in this world. My body is partly mended. But I don't know if my heart will ever heal. . . . I want this violence to stop."⁵

Genocide and rape both have extensive and harrowing histories on planet earth. In nearly every society, a frighteningly high percentage of women are raped. In some cultures, raped women constitute the majority. Sexual assault has a ghastly history.

Some believers think God allows evil to test us and through testing build our characters. According to them, God could prevent pain and suffering but allows it so we might grow. God most wants to strengthen our souls, says this explanation of evil.⁶ And permitting suffering is God's way of leading us toward moral maturity.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Is this true? Are Zamuda and hundreds of millions of raped women better off because of their ordeals? Are they stronger? Do they now have better character? Is the world, overall, a better place? Does an omnipotent God allow every evil—including rape and genocide—as part of some elaborate plan to toughen us up?

Of course we sometimes must endure suffering for some greater good. We sometimes allow children to endure hardship to build their characters, for instance. But does God cause or allow *every* evil, whether intended or random, to make us better? If so, how is that working for Zamuda's husband and children? Is the "lesson" they learned in death worth the evil they suffered? Can dead people mature?

⁵Michelle Faul, "Congo Women Fight Back, Speak About Rape," Associated Press, NBCNews, March 16, 2009, www.nbcnews.com/id/29719277/ns/world_news-africa/#.UvVm11CpUfU.

⁶The most influential form of this argument in contemporary scholarship comes from John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977). One of the best scholarly criticisms of this view comes from C. Robert Mesle, *John Hick's Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

Some evils are character destroying rather than character building. Many people have lives that are made far worse because of intense pain. They grow bitter, vengeful and tyrannical, making life hellish for others and themselves. The alleged divine strategy of improving personal character is often counterproductive.

For some people, witnessing evil fails to build their characters and convinces them God does not exist. When Elie Wiesel was forced to watch a young boy hanged in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesel stopped believing in God. God dies in the belief systems of many who cannot make sense of evil. The problem of evil is the primary reason most atheists say they cannot believe in God.

Is God the grand disciplinarian?

CONCLUSION

How can we make sense of these true stories? What do they tell us about life and God? There is much goodness, purpose, and beauty in life, and we must acknowledge it. But in doing so, we must not take evil lightly. Pain, suffering, and evil are difficult matters for those who believe in a loving and providential God.

Each story points to the influence that free will and randomness have in life. Sometimes random events (e.g., rocks accidentally killing people; random genetic mutations causing deformities) cause suffering and death. Sometimes humans use freedom wrongly, and this leads to tragedy (e.g., making bombs, raping and murdering). But humans can also use free will to deal positively with suffering and misfortune (e.g., choosing surgery or helping victims). Free will and randomness seem capable of both abuse and constructive use.

If we want a plausible explanation for how God acts providentially amid randomness and freedom, we should clearly define what we mean by these terms. Without clarity, we won't make much progress in understanding life. In the following chapter, I look carefully at the randomness and regularities of life. This examination should help in seeking adequate answers to life's most difficult questions.