

“Can We Trust God?” *Faith and the Challenge of Evil*, by **John Stackhouse**, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 90-92, 99-104.

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by John G. Stackhouse

Complete Theodicy

A complete theodicy would consist of a complete account of all the evil we encounter, both natural and moral, past and present, general and particular. However God would do it (a voice in our heads? a visual display? an angel?), God would explain everything to us at every turn so that we had not a flicker of doubt, not a moment's worry, that God might not be entirely good or all-powerful. Wouldn't this be terrific? No more asking, “Why?” and having no answer. A completely satisfying answer would be rendered on demand.

Many Christians (and perhaps this is true among Jews and Muslims as well) happily entertain what is, as far as I can see, the ecclesiastical equivalent of an urban myth. This church myth is widespread, but seems utterly groundless in the Scriptures. And the myth is this: “Someday, in heaven, God will tell us why. God will explain it all to us, and we'll see it all clearly. We may not know now, but just be patient: someday all will be made known.”

What exactly are such believers anticipating? That one day in heaven angels will escort us into a splendid lecture theater, the lights will go down, and a multimedia show of our former life will unfold, with God providing explanatory voice-over? Or perhaps that God instead will unroll the cosmic blueprints on the largest seminar table you've ever seen and walk us through them?

I have taken to offering a free cup of coffee to anyone who can provide me with a single verse of the Bible that supports this idea. Almost every time I have made such an offer someone will recall, if unclearly the same New Testament verse, I Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” “Aha!” he or she will say. “Bring on the espresso! Does this not prove that one day we will know all?”

Yet the chapter from which this verse is taken is the Apostle Paul's encomium on love. The focus of verse 12 is personal relationships (“face to face”), not abstract knowledge (“face to computer screen” or “face to flowchart”). The knowledge spoken of here clearly has to be personal knowledge of the beloved, not abstract knowledge of God's workings in earthly history.

Is such a comprehensive explanation even possible? It seems likely, instead, that the phenomenon to be explained (namely, the global providence of God through history--or even in one's own life) is far too complicated to be grasped by the human intellect. Moreover, adequate comprehension and appropriate ethical evaluation of such complexity might well require a moral sensibility beyond human capacities. Philosopher

Thomas Morris facetiously questions the credentials of critics who presume to understand and then pronounce upon the adequacy of God's administration of the entire cosmos. What he says about their limitations is true of all of us:

[Questioners of God are often] people who don't have a clue as to what exactly they would do about the most pressing problems of their own city if they were mayor, or concerning the greatest difficulty facing their state if they were governor.

They would probably be quite hesitant if asked how precisely they would solve the greatest national crises if they were president, but they have no hesitation whatsoever in venturing to declare how they would solve what may be the single most troubling cosmic religious problem if they were God.

The issue here, of course, is not God's ability to explain things to us. Presumably a Supreme Being has superb pedagogical skills. The problem instead lies in our relatively limited capacities to comprehend the matter at issue--God's supervision of the world--no matter how simply and extensively God might present it to us. We might note that the very best minds devoted to this subject throughout history have failed to offer a theodicy with which even a majority of similarly interested experts could agree. Theodicy seems an extraordinarily difficult, and probably impossible, task.

Even if, however, we grant for the sake of argument that God could somehow convey all of this knowledge to us--and not just in heaven, either, but here and now--would a complete theodicy help us or hurt us in our progress toward "the point of it all"? Do we have strong grounds on which to suppose that providing such a complete theodicy would be a better way to achieve God's chief purpose of establishing relationships of trust and love and peace? . . .

Sufficient Warrant

If God is not going to explain everything to us so that we can see for ourselves that Providence is doing right, and if God wants our faith to be intelligent and not blind, then God must provide us with some other intellectually satisfying grounds. We have already seen that God has given us at least partial answers to our questions. And those partial answers are not to be despised just because they don't resolve everything. Still, many of us need more. If God isn't going to show us what God is doing, then God needs to give us adequate reason to trust anyway. In short, God must provide us with grounds to trust in spite of evil, and in spite of our lack of a complete understanding of it.

Consider an automobile mechanic. You consult him about a problem. He responds like this: "You have dirty spark plugs." You nod knowingly. "All you need is some new ones, and we have some on sale. You replace them yourself, or I can do it for you while you wait." The mechanic has explained the situation to your full satisfaction. You decide to reward his insight and his favoring you with a complete diagnosis by paying him to install the new plugs.

Suppose, however, the mechanic says something different. “You actually have a problem with your thrombulator that is affecting the discharging pressure of your whole ignition system. We can fix it, but it’ll take a couple of days and some special parts.” You know that special, in this lexicon, means quite expensive. But that’s about all you know, since you’ve never heard of a “thrombulator”; nor does the concept of “discharging pressure” make any immediate sense to you.

Now you have to decide whether to trust the mechanic (unless, of course, you know enough about cars to recognize that I made up all of that automotive pseudo-terminology and it in fact means nothing). If you have just pulled off a major highway into a seedy-looking gas station thinking that you just needed your gas tank filled and your oil checked, and the attendant summons the mechanic without informing you first, and if I specify certain other conditions to fill out the story, you’re likely going to distrust this stranger and drive to the next garage. On the other hand, if you have taken your car to the mechanic who, as far as you know, has given you reliable service for five years, and if the car did have some starting problems in the first place, then you may well simply hand over the keys. You are not irrational to do so, of course: you have good reason to believe him even as you do not know that he is telling the truth. Indeed, most of us probably would judge that you have sufficient warrant to trust him.

Each religion and each philosophy offers warrants to inquirers and believers. What each person must decide is whether those warrants are (a) sufficient for belief, especially in comparison with arguments against that religion or philosophy; and (b) whether the warrants for option X are stronger, and thus more worthy of assent than the warrants for options Y or Z. The rest of this chapter takes up the first of these two questions in regard to the Christian faith. Christianity will function as an example of a religion that provides warrants for belief in an all good, all-powerful God in the face of evil. Judaism and Islam would mount their own versions of such an argument, of course: they, too, would argue that the evidence of God’s love and God’s trustworthiness are adequate for faith despite the evil around us that prompts us to doubt God. But because my own main interest and expertise are in the Christian faith, and it is the religion to which I am personally committed, I shall confine my argument to that religion.

As for (b), each reader will have to decide for him or herself as to the relative strengths of the case for Christianity vis-à-vis other intellectual and religious options. My purpose now simply is to see if Christianity can provide warrants sufficient for faith in God.