Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness. Narrative and the Problem of Suffering.* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2010). xix + 668pp. ISBN 978-0-19-927742-1. Hb. £55.[1]

The problem of why a loving God should allow so much appalling suffering has long been one of the hardest stumbling blocks to acceptance of the Judaeo-Christian worldview; and so much ink has been spilt on it over the centuries that many might suppose there could not possibly be anything more to add. Eleonore Stump's new book spectacularly disproves this supposition. In a formidably long and massively erudite volume she manages to offer a not only a host of fresh and original insights into the dynamics of human suffering but also a different kind of philosophical framework for conducting the defence of theism against this most devastating of challenges.

The opening pages refer to a growing disquiet about the current state of analytic philosophy, particularly in areas, such as moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, which are specially concerned with the significance of the human predicament and the domain of personal relations. While fully supporting the precision and rigour for which the analytic tradition is noted (and much of the book contains enough careful distinctions and conceptual clarifications to satisfy the sternest practitioner of the genre), Stump deplores its 'cognitive *hemianopia*' – its blindness to the kinds of insights associated with the right cerebral hemisphere, and its unwarranted tendency to 'suppose that left-brain skills alone will reveal to us all that is philosophically interesting about the world' (pp. 24-5). Intricate and technically expert argument has its place, but when it comes to problems like that of human suffering we need additional resources – in particular those arising from our manifold responses to the multiple resonances of literary (and scriptural) narrative.

A certain kind narrative or literary turn in philosophy has of course been advocated before, notably by Martha Nussbaum (to whom Stump acknowledges a partial debt). Nussbaum is famous for arguing that in approaching a great literary text we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and porous, knowing when to yield instead of maintaining a constant critical detachment. Somewhat analogously, Stump insists that literary narratives cannot be used as mere illustrative tools for philosophical arguments – that would be to 'demean' the role of narrative to that of a mere picture or example. She proposes instead an 'antiphonal' structure, where the narrative is considered in its 'disorderly richness', but then philosophical reflection, now suitably enlightened to aspects of reality to which it might otherwise have been blind, takes up the baton and proceeds in its 'customary way' (pp. 26, 27).

The four biblical narratives that Stump considers in her exploration of the problem of suffering are those of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany (the sister of Martha and Lazarus). Each of them, as portrayed in the stories, undergoes appalling suffering: Job, physically and emotionally tormented and stripped of all that has given his life meaning; Samson, 'eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves', fallen from his former glory as champion and become an object of scorn; Abraham, confronted with the horrifying command to sacrifice his beloved son; and Mary, prostrate in the desperate grief of bereavement, her earlier pleas for help having been apparently ignored by the one she most trusted. Providing a minutely detailed dissection of each of the stories, Stump develops a distinctive and original interpretation of what happens to the central characters.

The key to it is an analysis, provided in an earlier part of the book, of the nature of love. Drawing on the work of Thomas Aquinas (of whom she is a highly accomplished expositor, as all who know her earlier magisterial study in the Routledge Arguments of the Philosophers series will testify), Stump argues that people can be 'ultimately and deeply united with each other only if they are united in goodness.' (p. 95) A corollary of this is that internal integration

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is a vital requirement for two parties truly to love each other. If you desire union with someone, you desire to be intimately close and personally present to them; but such closeness is undermined if one of the parties suffers from internal conflict or psychic dissonance (cf. p. 130). Now in all the cases discussed, Stump suggests (if I understand her rightly) that the biblical protagonists start out in a state of something like double-mindedness: they are unable to enter into a fully loving relationship with God either because they lack a wholehearted commitment to the good, or because they lack a wholehearted trust in God's goodness. Thus Abraham (as Stump shows by analysing the biblical account of his earlier behaviour towards his other son Ishmael) longed to be the father of a nation, but tried 'to bring about the fulfilment of the divine promises by devices of his own' (p. 281). Only *in extremis* , in the anguish of being ready to sacrifice Isaac, is he is finally willing to trust God to keep Isaac safe, and this 'makes Abraham into something glorious. It moves him from being a prosperous nomad with powerful religious experiences to being the father of faith, and so it brings Abraham to the flowering of his life' (p. 306). In the case of all the protagonists Stump discusses, what happens as a result of their terrible suffering is that they are somehow brought to a 'gloriousness' that could not have been achieved had their goals, as they originally envisioned them, been brought about. So Mary of Bethany loses, she thinks irretrievably, what she thought she wanted more than anything. But 'as it turns out, what seemed to be irretrievable loss was not; and however much it seemed to Mary that Jesus betrayed her trust, in fact in the story he did not. She was not wrong to be heartbroken … Nonetheless she was mistaken about what she thought she knew … When Lazarus is restored to her … what Mary is given is more what she really desires than she would have known how to want …' (p. 367).

A highly compressed summary cannot possibly do justice to the complicated twists of Stump's analysis as she unravels the details of all four stories. But it may be enough to hint at the outlines of Stump's proposed defence to the charge against God of allowing such frightful suffering. In the cases described, the suffering, terrible as it is, ends up playing a role in the person's ultimate flourishing by bringing them, in the end, closer to God. If one accepts the theistic worldview propounded in Aquinas, this would, Stump thinks, amount to a 'theodicy' (the providing of morally sufficient reasons that God has for allowing such suffering) (p. 389); for those rejecting the theistic worldview, she suggests that it can at least offer a 'defense' (a description of a logically possible world in which God and human suffering coexist) (p. 451).

There may nevertheless seem to many people to be something odd about a strategy of arguing the case via scriptural stories whose whole rationale is to demonstrate or record the salvific power of God that brings glory out of suffering. Secular critics, who will regard the stories (or their presuppositions) as fictional, might complain that such examples skew the debate in advance: would it not be more reasonable to base the discussion on examples of suffering and its outcome that are within our ordinary experience, and supported by uncontested empirical evidence? Stump, however, fully accepts that the question of whether suffering contributes to flourishing is sensitive to empirical evidence about what we actually find in the world; and she cites some interesting research about how traumatic stress, leading to the point of desperation, can be the catalyst for psychic integration and new growth. The collecting of favourable instances does not of course finally settle the matter; but at the very least the claim about the value of suffering is, as Stump aptly points out, brought within the domain of falsifiability: 'if all psychological research showed no posttraumatic growth, or virtually none, that would count as evidence against the … defense' (p. 460).

This may seem cold comfort for the many desperate and devastated people whose sufferings have deprived them of the 'desires of the heart', in the Psalmist's phrase – the persons or projects they most profoundly care about. In her closing chapters Stump does not shirk this worry. Part of the answer has to do with integration: the heart's desires can be reconfigured or 'refolded', so that they are 'interwoven with a deepest desire for God' (pp.

442-446). This is not supposed to take away one iota from the 'execrable and lamentable' nature of the suffering. But nonetheless Stump argues that 'the change made by encompassing all the desires of a person's heart within a deeper desire for God and shared union with God works a transformation not only as regards the character of the heartbreak over the loss of other heart's desires but also as regards the very nature of the loss and the possibilities for the redemption of it' (p. 466).

It can perhaps be seen from this that Stump's approach is very much, as she puts it in earlier chapters, a 'second-personal' one. It takes us deep into the psychology of the 'I-thou' relation, and the way in which the demands of love, linked, as on Aquinas's account, to what is objectively our highest good, require self-awareness, integration and inner transformation. It is significant, moreover, that all the characters in the stories discussed are people who are presented even from the outset as already, albeit in a flawed way, in a deep personal relationship with God; and this clearly makes a difference to their own interpretation (in the stories) of what is happening to them – and indeed to how the reader will interpret and respond to the unfolding of the stories. For this sort of reason, Stump's approach seems likely to strike far richer chords for those who are committed to the theistic framework, while probably meeting a stone wall, or perhaps even an angry rejection, from those who wholly repudiate the theistic premises that underlie the very notion of a divinely oriented 'refolding' of one's deepest desires.

But even those unable to accept this work as a full theodicy cannot, I think, fail to be impressed by the power and sincerity of the case that it unfolds. Despite its monumental scale, *Wandering in Darkness* is, as the author readily admits, a limited project; by its very nature, in its appeal to complex facts about psychological integration, it can apply 'only to the suffering of mentally fully functional adult human beings' (p. 476). But within the parameters she sets herself, Stump stands out from many of those who have tackled this most daunting of topics by the unflinching honesty with which she refuses anything that looks remotely like an attempt to gloss over the horrors of human suffering. As is acknowledged both right from the start in the book's title (from a fragment of a poem by an anonymous inmate found on a wall at Auschwitz), and also explicitly in the closing paragraphs, it will sometimes be the case, for those who are compelled to wander in darkness, that 'the suffering a person endures breaks that person past healing' (p. 480). That despite all this, the book can engage the emotions and the imagination, as well as the intellect, in such as way as to afford even a partial sense of the 'grace and wonder', which might bring hope of redemption, represents a truly remarkable achievement.

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