

Is there an ultimate purpose for the pervasive suffering in our world, or is it a condition that exists naturally? This book explores an intriguing possibility that arises when considering that there is an underlying unity to all of existence.

Why Does Suffering Exist? ... A Thought Experiment

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**WHY DOES SUFFERING
EXIST?**

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A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Steven Avatar

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ISBN 978-1-60145-818-6

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2009

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INTRODUCTION

No honest person would deny that there is a great deal of conflict, pain, suffering, frustration and despair in our world. The scope of suffering is so universal, in fact, that *all* sentient beings inevitably experience it to some degree. Even more troubling and seemingly inexplicable is that it is often the most kindhearted and benevolent among us who endure the most intense afflictions. Those who witness the excessive suffering of innocent victims will often question the fairness of our world; many become very angry or even despondent over the lack of justice.

The 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer went so far as to assert that we are experiencing the worst of *all possible worlds*. He suggested that “this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of continuing to exist.” Also, on a personal level, “the individual life is a ceaseless struggle for existence itself, while at every step it is threatened with destruction.” (*The World as Will and Representation*)

There are people who believe that selfish and malevolent behaviors are *completely* responsible for all of the misery, and that the amount of pain and anguish in the world is proportionate to the lack of good will. However, in examining many of the various sources of suffering, it is very difficult to justify this belief. Although a greater degree of benevolence would reduce some afflictions, it is much too simplistic to suggest that kindheartedness and good will alone could possibly eliminate *all* of the misery.

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Clearly, an overall purpose or explanation for all of the suffering would also have to account for the distress and adversity that is not caused by the actions of sentient beings. In light of this, it is helpful to explore some of the causes of the pain and anguish in our world before attempting to offer any kind of comprehensive reason or purpose for all of the suffering and injustice.

SUFFERING AND INJUSTICE BY DESIGN?

Before attempting to discern any type of reason or explanation for the existence of suffering, it should be understood that a question such as, “Why does suffering exist?” contains some important implications. By definition, any inquiry that begins with “why” *presupposes* that there is a purpose, reason or cause. Therefore, this question presumes that the universe, along with all of its suffering and other unpleasant conditions, is a product of design. However, the assumption that our world is a result of conscious intent should not be allowed to stand unchallenged and unquestioned.

To examine the inquiry of whether or not the universe was designed, a good place to start is to consider a basic question of the nature of the universe itself. Although very few people deny that the universe exists (**footnote -1**), even the simple act of asserting the universe’s existence raises a very difficult philosophical problem. In fact, the claim that the universe exists generates the following mind-boggling alternatives concerning its (possible) origin:

1) The universe simply began to exist, uncaused, from *nothing*.

2) The origin of the universe had an ultimate source, and the ultimate source simply came into existence, uncaused, from nothing.

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- 3) The universe had no origin, and is eternal.
- 4) The ultimate source of the universe is eternal.

All of these alternatives are difficult to imagine. Of course, modern cosmology has provided very strong evidence that the universe did not always exist, which greatly reduces the likelihood of alternative 3. Likewise, although the idea that “something can simply begin to exist, uncaused, from nothing” is (perhaps) a theoretical possibility, alternative 4 seems to be the most likely possibility.

Naturally, whether or not alternative 4 is the *most* likely option is irrelevant. This thought experiment is simply exploring the *possibility* that there is an ultimate reason or purpose for suffering, and therefore, the idea that “nature is the product of design” needs to be no more than a possibility as well. In truth, there needs to be no more than the slightest probability that “the origin of the universe had an ultimate source” (alternative 2 or 4) for the prospect “nature is the result of design” to remain possible.

To avoid confusion, it should be understood that suggesting that the world could be the product of design does *not* automatically imply support or belief in the concept of “*intelligent design*.” (**footnote - 2**) On the contrary, if our universe has an architect, then it is not only conceivable, but also very likely that evolution is part of the grand design of our universe (it will soon become apparent why this is the case).

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Subsequently, now the question becomes: If we assume that something was responsible for the origin of the universe, does it *necessarily* follow that nature is the result of design? As many philosophers have pointed out (the 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume, in particular), it should be understood that it is *not essential* to infer a designer from the intricacy, complexity and orderliness of the universe.

If the existence of these attributes of the universe *requires* an explanation, then any proposed agent said to be responsible for their existence in the universe would *also* require an explanation for these attributes in its *own* existence. In other words, if the universe *must* have a designer because of its intricacy, complexity and orderliness, then an argument must be presented which explains why the designer *itself* (which would have to be intricate, complex and orderly itself) is granted immunity from this requirement.

This philosophical argument is very significant when considering the reason that suffering exists, because it raises the possibility that there may not be any reason at all! If there was no architect to nature, then there would be no underlying reason or purpose for all of the suffering and unpleasantness in our world. The realities of, for example, predation and natural disasters, simply would be conditions that exist naturally. Consequently, questions such as, “Why does suffering exist?” and “Why are we here?” would have no ultimate answer.

Nonetheless, even though the intricacy, complexity and orderliness in nature may not *require* an explanation, this does not preclude the possibility that there *is* an ultimate explanation for the universe, and that it *could be* a product of conscious intent. Therefore, if we continue to explore the

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possibility that nature is the result of design, then all of the unpleasant conditions in our world are either an accident caused by the designer or the outcome of the designer's intentions.

Given all of the excessive suffering, not to mention the seemingly senseless tragedies in our world, it is certainly possible that the universe is just an elaborate experiment that has gone awry. David Hume considered this scenario, suggesting that our world could be the work of an "apprentice" designer.

On the other hand, it is also plausible that a competent, yet malevolent designer is the architect of the universe. Assuming that our world is not a completely horrific domain, those who subscribe to this idea might suggest that the architect is either: a) very competent and merely somewhat malevolent (as well as quite mischievous), or b) very malevolent and only competent to a certain extent.

As appalling as these prospects are, there is one more option to consider. There is a chance that the dreadful and sickening conditions in our world could be the work of a designer who is skillful, but still not malevolent. This alternative is conceivable if there is a *hidden purpose* for all of the conflict, pain, suffering and despair we experience.

Of course, there are a tremendous amount of terrible events that this hidden purpose would have to be able to explain. For example, it would have to account for the problem of innocent victims in our world. While it is conceivable that our world could have been designed without disease and natural disasters, they do exist, and conscious

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beings suffer and perish in large numbers as a direct result. As cruel and monstrous as the Holocaust was, recall that the historical toll of suffering and deaths as the result of disease and natural disasters absolutely **dwarfs** that which was caused by the Nazi regime in the early 20th century.

Did sentient beings really have to be designed with a natural instinct of predation upon other conscious beings? It is easy to imagine a world without predation, where all beings could attain nourishment without killing and eating each other. Besides, why were we designed to have fundamental needs (such as breathing and nourishment) in order to survive in the first place?

It is conceivable that beings could be designed (in a world different from ours) in which there are no fundamental necessities to survive. For example, what if we could experience food for pleasure only, and did not need it for nourishment to live?

Additionally, satisfying some of our fundamental needs does not offer us any pleasure at all. Consider the act of breathing: no one derives pleasure from it, but one will suffer greatly if unable to breathe for even a short amount of time. Naturally, one will suffer an excruciating death if deprived of oxygen for more than a short amount of time.

In our world, it seems that most people have difficulty leading lives that consistently result in true satisfaction and fulfillment. Why is happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment so difficult for most (if not all) conscious beings to attain? Also, why is the experience of euphoria so rare in our world? And when it is achieved, why must the experience be so transitory?

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On the subject of death, it is possible that the only certainty about it is that no sentient being will escape it. Perhaps the main reason so many people have such an intense fear of it is because there is no *guarantee* of an afterlife. But if there is an afterlife, why must its existence appear to be so dubious and mysterious to us? Consider the enormous amount of anxiety that this mystery has caused throughout history.

Why must we commonly experience such a wide range of suffering (which is often very intense, excessive and gratuitous), while euphoric experiences are so infrequent and transient? Considering all of these aspects of the universe may lead to the question: If our world was designed, why does it so often seem like such an elaborate and cruel hoax?

(footnote - 1) Solipsism, the philosophical theory that the self is the only reality, is the alternative to asserting that the universe exists. However, when examined carefully, solipsism is reduced to unintelligibility. Quoting Stephen P. Thornton, "The proposition "I am the only mind that exists" makes sense only to the extent that it is expressed in a public language, and the existence of such language itself implies the existence of a social context ... A non-linguistic solipsism is unthinkable and a thinkable solipsism is necessarily linguistic. Solipsism therefore presupposes the very thing it seeks to deny. That solipsistic thoughts are thinkable in the first instance implies the existence of the public, shared world that they purport to call into question." Lastly, even if solipsism

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were a valid philosophical theory, the identical four alternatives concerning the universe's origin would instead apply to the origin of the self.

(footnote - 2) The concept, "intelligent design," is essentially no different than the religious concept of creationism. The use of the term, "intelligent design" is an attempt to endow creationism with a secular name. Many proponents of this concept had hoped that this new designation could circumvent the American constitutional mandate of governmental separation of church and state such that it would no longer be considered unconstitutional to teach this concept in public schools. To date, their efforts have been unsuccessful.

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