

I haven't posted on this topic for a while, and looking through old posts from five years ago, I came across this one. I've edited it a bit from the first time, but my sentiments are pretty much the same now that I'm older and not much wiser.....

Sometimes people get upset because I deal with the problem of suffering even though I don't seem to be experiencing any severe pain and misery myself. Here is an example of the kind of comment I occasionally receive, this from someone commenting to me on Facebook a couple of days ago:

"Dude, in a world of suffering, you claim doubts in deity because you live the privileged life of a UNC professor. If you lived in a 40-year-old trailer in Tarboro, I'd take you more seriously. And you even charge people to read your self-indulgent crap. Just for the record, I'm a non-theist. But I'm not a hypocrite."

I take comments like this very seriously. Even though I recognize that it is, well, a bit hostile, my sense is that a lot of people who feel this way are themselves experiencing real hardship and find it offensive that I would have the gall to talk about issues of pain and suffering.

But I do want to say a few things about this kind of comment. Before doing so, though, I should say that my **harshes**t critics along these lines (the ones I know about) are actually people even better off than me who have castigated me for leading a privileged life and having the audacity to speak about suffering, with the assumption that they themselves have much greater insights - even though they also have much greater privileges. I won't name names, but believe me, I can. And **that** is what I would call real hypocrisy!

But apart from people of that ilk, I think it is an important issue and worth addressing. When I first received this comment on Facebook I had a number of conflicted and conflicting responses. I can say up front that I prefer not to go into the details of any of the ways I've suffered in life; but I can also say that it is absolutely true that however much I've suffered before, I do have a very good life right now and I am very grateful for it.

But in addition to that, here are some of my responses:

- It does seem to me that even people who are not suffering in extremis - for example, starving to death in a slum outside of Mexico City - have the right to think about people who **do** suffer and to ask what their suffering can tell us about the world we live in and about whether there is a caring and powerful God who is in control of it. All of us, whatever our personal situations may be, need (in my opinion) to think about what we believe about this world, and this life, and the existence of a divine being. And none of us can do so by being someone other than who we are. I am who I am, so are you, and so is this person registering a complaint. And I don't think any of us should be disallowed from thinking about the world and life as a result of who we are.
- In my debates on the meaning of suffering with Dinesh D'Souza, he sometimes would raise a point like this person on Facebook, and stress that people who suffer are precisely the ones who are more likely to turn to a divine being, so that it doesn't make sense for me to think about their suffering and turn **away** from a divine being. I think

it's an interesting point. But even though I'm concerned about people who suffering terribly, I don't think that they necessarily have to dictate what my views about suffering, or about a divine being, should be.

- I've tried to think of an analogy. The person who is suffering from gross economic injustice and is, as a result, living in poverty: is that person necessarily better qualified to establish the policy for the International Monetary Fund than someone else? Or to set governmental economic policy for his country? I'm not sure that the person suffering is the only one allowed to think about the solutions to the problem of suffering, or the implications of the problem of suffering with respect to the existence of God.

- I think my bottom line is that I absolutely do not think that my views of suffering should be imposed on those who have different views, especially if they themselves are suffering more intensely than me. But I do think that my reflections on others who are far less fortunate than I should dictate how I myself behave in the world. I do not know if I'm a hypocrite or not, but I certainly try not to be.

* My ultimate view of suffering is that we are much better served to have a *response* to suffering rather than a ready *answer* for it. I think we should all do what we can to help others in need. If I'm hypocritical, so be it. But I'm not going to stop responding to people in need, or to stop thinking about the religious implications of their being in need - for example, by pulling into my shell and enjoying all the good things I have without giving a damn about others - simply because someone might think that I have no right to do so as someone who has a very good life.

In any event, those are some of my reflections as of now. More will probably come as I think more about it.



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