

Worldview Analysis of Suffering and Disability: Six Perspectives

By Chuck Edwards

“Worldview analysis” broadens our understanding of an issue by revealing the religious beliefs that are the foundation for building a set of values, which in turn is the basis for personal behavior. In other words, what a person believes about God shapes his views about what is right and wrong, and these moral values are lived out in daily life. The faith assumptions a worldview embraces related to the God question¹ leads naturally to implications in other areas of thought and life. In this paper we will analyze five worldviews and what each teaches concerning suffering and disability, as well as compare them with a biblical worldview. We will limit our exploration of those implications to the nature of humanity and the view of human suffering in this world.

First, we consider Cosmic Humanism, an umbrella term for the eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism and, derived from those two religions, western-style New Age Spirituality. Another, more general term that describes this over-arching worldview is transcendentalism. The second major heading under investigation is Naturalism. This is divided into two worldviews: Secular Humanism and Postmodernism. And the third major heading is Theism, which includes the worldviews of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Cosmic Worldviews

Every worldview has certain assumptions about the nature and existence of God that cannot be proven in the sense of scientific proof or a mathematical equation. This starting point is presupposed, or believed, and everything else follows from that belief. This is not to say there are no reasons for holding certain presuppositions, or that some assumptions are therefore more rational than others. But whatever the case, there is a faith element that persists.

For example, the Cosmic Worldview assumes that everything that exists is part of god; god is all and in all—The One. If this is true, then it follows that humans are part of the god-force that is the ultimate reality, described as goodness, blissful peace, and perfect harmony. Suffering, in this view, is either an illusion, being a distorted understanding of the actual situation, or it is the result of bad karma from past lives that must be worked off in this life.

Based on the above set of assumptions, what are the implications for human nature and human dignity? A Cosmic Worldview offers two responses to suffering. First, if suffering is an illusion, then through the practice of deep meditation, *you should try to “get over it.”* This idea is illustrated in the popular children’s movie, *Kung Fu Panda*. In scene 13, Shifu approaches the old Master, The Great Oogway, saying, “Master, I have very bad news,” to which the Master guru explains, “There is just news, there is no good or bad . . . there are no accidents . . . let go of the illusion of control.”

However, this approach does not deal adequately with the physical pain and emotional reality that people experience. It seems that pain and suffering are *real*. How can it be the case that what seems so real is actually an illusion? If suffering has always been an illusion, how did the illusion of real pain get started? How did humans ever start experiencing pain when pain was never real in the first place? Common sense tells us that this world is not illusionary, but real, otherwise we would never know what is real.

A second implication of Cosmic Worldview assumptions is the concept of karma, the view that what you experience in this life—for good or ill—is the result of how you lived in a past life. Therefore, if suffering is the result of bad karma, then it is deserved, *so we should just “accept it.”*

Actor Richard Gere illustrated this view in his response to the 9/11 terror attacks. He said in an interview a month after the attacks, “In a situation like this, of course you identify with everyone who’s suffering. (But we must also think about) the terrorists who are creating such horrible future lives for themselves because of the negativity of this karma.”²

However, this view of karma has several flaws. In their book, *Making Sense of Your World*, authors Gary Phillips, William Brown, and John Stonestreet mention three problems.

First, are the victims of evil that is perpetuated by others—including the thousands who died in the World Trade Center attacks—not victims at all, but really deserving recipients of the suffering they experience? Second, if people deserve what happens to them, why should we be obligated to provide any relief? Viewing evil in this way discourages acts which would help to alleviate the suffering of others. Third, would not this view also demand that we regard those who escape a tragedy as morally upright?³ This overview shows how Cosmic Worldviews cannot offer a compelling case for why there is suffering, nor can they provide a compassionate solution. But what about Naturalistic worldviews? Do they fare any better in accounting for suffering and offering a remedy?

Naturalistic Worldviews

The foundational assumption inherent in Naturalistic worldviews is that the supernatural does not exist; meaning that God, angels, and the human soul are simply manifestations of the human imagination similar to leprechauns and unicorns. The Naturalist believes that nature is the ultimate and only reality, and nature has no goal or purpose. Therefore, human life has no inherent meaning. Humankind evolved through a series of biological processes as well as every other living thing. In this sort of world, “some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason, nor any justice . . . nothing but blind, pitiless, indifference . . .” as well-known biologist Richard Dawkins says.⁴

Secular Humanism

Secular Humanism is a naturalistic worldview that developed in the United States beginning with the publication in 1933 of the *Humanist Manifesto*, which has since been updated in 1973 and 2000. In those documents, not only is a godless universe endorsed but also ethics are grounded in the situation at hand. One form of situational ethics is called utilitarianism, where moral decisions are determined by which course of action secures the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

The implications of Secular Humanist atheism and utilitarian ethics for human nature and dignity is summed up by Robin Williams, playing Teddy Roosevelt in *Night at the Museum*, who said to Larry (Ben Stiller’s character), “I’m made of wax, Larry. What are you made of?” As “Teddy Roosevelt” understood, “what we are made of” determines who we are. If we are made only of what astronomer Carl Sagan described as “star stuff,” then we are simply part of the expanding universe of matter in motion, and since the universe is unknowing and impersonal, human life has no intrinsic value. Any value placed on human beings is the result of social consensus, it is not an actual state of being.

If human value is simply a choice of the collective society, then we have to agree with internationally

known professor of ethics at Princeton University, Peter Singer, who is attributed as saying, “The notion that human life is sacred just because it is human life is medieval.”⁵ According to Singer, and other Secularists, it is high time we moved on from our ancient understanding of ourselves and embrace the modern story of who we are: a highly evolved, random assortment of atoms.

Like nature itself, what we call “evil” and personal “suffering” are just the way things are. The Rev. Colin Bossen, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, Ohio states, “. . . humanism posits that suffering has two sources: human action (either through folly or malice) and the randomness of nature.”⁶ Therefore, whether by some other person or nature acting on you, *if you happen to suffer, it is simply bad luck* for you.

Since a disabled person is unlucky, then *he should try to “get out of it.”* Those with disabilities have no inherent value relative to persons without disabilities. In fact, they are at a distinct disadvantage in the evolutionary struggle for existence and thus are less valuable than people without disabilities. Therefore, if a preborn child or newborn infant is found to be disabled in some way, to the point of bringing suffering emotionally or financially for their parents, siblings, or others, the child should be eliminated. Again, Princeton professor Peter Singer, writes, “If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal.”⁷

According to Singer, the utilitarian action of killing a fetus or newborn baby will bring about more overall happiness to a greater number of people. While killing an infant may create short-lived suffering for the infant, the suffering would be far less than a lifetime of suffering if the infant were allowed to live or the long-term suffering and hardship of the family members, relatives, and society as a whole. Singer offers the following assumption for why this action is moral when he writes, “Similarly, the preference of utilitarian reason for respecting the life of a person cannot apply to a newborn baby. Newborn babies cannot see themselves as beings who might or might not have a future, and so cannot have a desire to continue living. . . . [I]f a right to life must be based on the capacity to want to go on living . . . a newborn baby cannot have a right to life.”⁸

Another implication of Secular Humanist ethics is that adults who have severe disabilities, either by birth defect or through an accident, should commit suicide or be killed mercifully so they won’t put an emotional or financial burden on the able-bodied population. In addition, one of the implications of state-controlled health care is that persons with disabilities would be eliminated if they pose an extensive financial burden on the larger community. This is because there is a limit to what society is able and willing to spend on maintaining human life, and if human life is devalued because of the prevalent worldview, those considered less desirable will die.

The problem with this humanist view of utilitarianism is that it fails to make a compelling case as to why a person’s worth is contingent on his “value” to society. Who decides who has this “value” and who doesn’t? Why does Peter Singer think he has the right to determine that only people who are rational and self-aware and who have a desire to keep on living are considered “persons”? Only if God does not exist can Singer and his fellow Secular Humanists assert their views on who qualifies as a person and who does not.

Moreover, the measure of utility is a very unstable standard, for how does a society determine what is the greatest “good?” Why should it not be “good” for a person with disabilities to live if that is what he or she wants? Why should a 51 percent majority decide the fate of the other 49 percent? Or do the intellectual elites decide who lives and who dies according to their whim? These and other questions are very problematic given the assumptions of Secular Humanists.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism takes the assumptions inherent in a godless universe to their logical conclusion. While a Secular Humanist is convinced that the universe can be understood through rational thought and the

scientific method, the Postmodernist believes that if God is not real, then neither are objective truth nor objective moral values. Postmodernists hold the philosophical position that true reality is ultimately inaccessible by human investigation, that knowledge is not independently “true” but is shaped by each particular society (multiculturalism), that truth-claims are actually political power plays (political correctness), and that the meaning of words is determined by readers, not the authors who wrote them (deconstruction). In brief, postmodern theory sees reality as what social groups make it to be. In this view, much of human suffering is perpetrated by the dominant group in a society forcing its will on the less powerful, causing oppression and suffering on their part.

Postmodernism acknowledges evil and suffering are real but offers no hope or help for alleviating either. Theologian N. T. Wright sums it up this way, “There is no way out, no chance of repentance or restoration, no way back to the solid ground of truth from the quicksand of deconstruction. Postmodernity may be correct to say that evil is real, powerful and important, but it gives us no real clue as to what we should do about it.”⁹ Since there is neither hope nor help, if we suffer, *we should just “get used to it.”*

The problem with this postmodern view is that very few people can live that way. That’s because postmodernism lends itself to a nihilistic perspective, which says that life has no meaning or purpose. Yet we humans have an inner sense that our lives *are* for some purpose. While the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*, presents an overall postmodern worldview, at the end of the film Neo tells the Matrix that things are going to change. He says:

... I don’t know the future. I didn’t come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it’s going to begin. I’m going to hang up this phone, and then I’m going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. I’m going to show them a world without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

This is postmodernism with a Happy Face . . . ☺. A world without rules, controls, and borders is Postmodernism. Yet, without any ultimate purpose to life, Postmodernism devolves into Nihilism. The screenwriters created this feel-good ending since Nihilism doesn’t sell! Who wants to see a story with no heroes, no bad guys, no romance, no hope or promise for the future, nothing but people living meaningless lives and going nowhere? We long for hope and happiness, not a socially-constructed, meaningless existence.

This brings us to a set of worldviews that offers hope that transcends the pain and suffering we experience here on this earth. The following three worldviews come under the heading of Theism. But as we will see, only one of the three provides a solid foundation for hope of alleviating suffering.

Theism

The assumptions of Theism are, at a minimum, that God is real, personal, all-powerful, and all-knowing.¹⁰ These assumptions provide the possibility for meaning in life because God is the author of life. And there is a future state of being with God in Heaven, where there will be no suffering. But the three worldviews, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, are very different in their understanding of how this future is achieved—and what it means.

Islam

There are two aspects of Islam that set it apart from both Judaism and Christianity. As Phillips, Brown, and Stonestreet observe, “First, Islam allows nothing to happen outside of God’s specific decree. God does not merely oversee human decisions and natural happenings, He ultimately decides them. Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali writes: ‘Good and evil are foreordained. What is foreordained comes necessarily to be after a prior act of divine volition. No one can rebel against God’s judgment; no one can appeal His decree and command. Rather, everything small and large is written and comes to be in a known and expected measure.’”¹¹

According to Islamic teaching, God's decrees border on fatalism, diminishing the role of man's free will. A scene from the movie *Hidalgo* illustrates this view. During a horse race across the Arabian Desert, a Muslim rider falls into quicksand and is languishing when Hopkins (Viggo Mortensen) comes upon him.

Muslim: Do not assist me, just kill me, please, use your weapon. It is God's will.

Hopkins: Tell you what. You can do whatever the hell you want when I get you out of there.

Muslim: Why did you turn back for me?

Hopkins: Ain't no prize money worth a man's life the way I see it.

Muslim: It is written that God leaves us three wishes and grants three wishes. It is God's will that I die in this race. Just as it is God's will who will win.

Hopkins: What about your will? What about your horse's will? Seems to me that's what gets you across the finish line, only then is it written.

In *Making Sense of Your World*, the authors continue with a second assumption found in Islam, "Second, there is no fall of man or of the creation in Islam. While the events of the Garden of Eden were historical and teach man's responsibility to obey God's decrees, it did not result in any essential consequences to man (i.e. original sin) or nature (the curse). What this implies in an Islamic view, then, is that *nothing has gone wrong with the world*. In Islam, the world is as it was given by God. This provides a very different picture of "natural evil" than that given in Christianity..."¹² Natural evil and suffering are simply part of God's decrees, not the result of man's sin.

Islam's implications for human suffering are summed up in the Quran, where it says, "And most certainly we [Allah] should try you by means of fear, hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of life or of labor's fruit. But give glad tidings unto those who are patient in adversity, who when the calamity befalls them, say, 'Verily unto God we belong and verily unto him we shall return.'" (Quran 2:155–156) Therefore, *when faced with suffering, we should "grimly bear it."*

The result of an Islamic view of evil is that there is little incentive, apart from human emotion and love, to help those who are suffering. If God decides everything that happens, then to help someone who has a disability is to go against what God has decreed. On the other hand, there are other Muslims who believe that helping those in need will be counted on their behalf when God judges their works in this life, and gives them a better chance of heaven. There is even a Muslim organization for helping disaster victims, The Red Crescent, styled after the Red Cross, an organization founded by Christians in 1863. Islam, it seems, offers a mixed bag when it comes to the disabled.

Judaism

The assumptions associated with Judaism are the following: God is real, loving, and sovereign, we are made in God's image, and we live in a fallen world. So far this is in accord with Christianity. However, in contrast to Christian instruction, Jewish tradition teaches that we must work to achieve personal righteousness and eternal salvation.

The implication for Jewish orthodoxy is that we have a righteous duty to help those who suffer. However, there is also an element in Judaism of people reaping what they sow. This is brought out forcefully in the biblical story of Job, where Job's friends continually pressed him on how he sinned to deserve such pain and suffering. In that case, people suffer because they deserve it. Therefore, *when we suffer, we should "repent in light of it."*

The downside of this view is that people who do such good works, thinking it earns them favor with God, can become proud, and the Bible warns against this kind of pride. In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus often took the Jewish leaders to task for their pride (see Matthew 23:1–12).

Biblical Christian Worldview

In a biblical Christian worldview there are four foundational assumptions: The first assumption is that God is real, all-powerful, loving, and sovereign. In addition, God is the creator of the universe and all living creatures.

The second assumption is that we are made in God's image (*Imago Dei*). Therefore, everyone has inherent dignity, regardless of nationality, race, social standing, ability, or disability. Relationally, we need each other.

The third foundational assumption is that we live in a fallen world. Not only is humanity fallen, but the cosmos is fallen as well (Genesis 3, Romans 1). Therefore, since we and the world are broken, this means that things are not perfect. People are not perfect. President Barack Obama, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, referred to "human imperfections." We are fallen people living in a post-fall universe. For this reason, we should expect a degree of suffering as the norm, not the exception. It's just the way things are at this time in redemption history.

Unlike the Cosmic Worldview's emphasis on karma, a Biblical worldview teaches it is a mistake to think everything that happens to us is the result of something we have done. When his disciples asked Jesus where to place the blame when a man was born blind—on the parents or the man himself—Jesus replied that neither had sinned (John 9:2–3). On another occasion, Jesus commented that the people who had a tower fall on them did not do wrong, falling towers are a natural occurrence due to poor construction and the law of gravity (Luke 13:4). In the Bible we're not told exactly why we suffer at a particular time and in a particular way, only that suffering in general is part of this world.

Fourth—and this sets Christianity apart from every other worldview—Christ brought redemption through suffering. Jesus' suffering brought life to others. We are told that our trials provide a platform for offering hope to others (2 Corinthians 1:3–7). In addition, suffering has the benefit of producing perseverance and Christian maturity (James 1:2–4). Therefore, *when we suffer, "we should live it out."*

What are the implications of the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption? Since Jesus commands his followers to bear up under suffering and help those who suffer, then *we should strive to "relieve it."* The history of the Church reveals how Jesus' directives were carried out, as Christians started hospitals, orphanages, schools for all, universities, soup kitchens and disaster-relief agencies. It was the Church that was at the forefront of abolishing slavery, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights movement.¹³

Concluding Thoughts

In contrast to the other worldviews summarized, as Christ-followers we are given a different understanding of the purpose for our lives. This is because of Christianity's unique perspective on our earthly existence and our eternal state.

An Earthly Perspective

We are created relationally yet live in a fallen context. Part of what it means to live in a fallen world is that there are people with disabilities. Considering this, there are three important perspectives to keep in mind.

First, it is important to involve the full Body of Christ (including those of other races and persons with disabilities) when we are discipling the people of God. Otherwise, if certain people get left out, we are anemic as Christ's Body.

Second, we need to fight the modern secular and postmodern impulses toward control, efficiency and convenience as the highest measures of community. We should not seek to control *who* comes into our midst, but meet people (like Christ did) where they are. Also, in some situations *inconvenience* may be better than *convenience* and *inefficiency* better than *efficiency*. The inconvenience and inefficiency of those who are disabled forces us to confront our selfish tendencies and may be more sanctifying in the long run.

Third, the fall means that being disabled is a universal condition. We are all less than we ought to be.

Further, in the biblical narrative, redemption comes via suffering, as Jesus embodied humanity and experienced a scarred physical body as a sacrifice for us all.

An Eternal Perspective

This current state of living in a fallen world among fallen people is not the way things ought to be or ultimately will be. God has provided a new heaven and new earth awaiting those who thrust their sins on the cross of Christ. Then, in the eternal state of God's presence, evil and suffering will be replaced with goodness and rejoicing.

Notes

1. The "God question" is actually two questions: 1) Does God exist? 2) If so, what is God like?
2. "Interview with Richard Gere," ABC News Radio, 10 October 2001.
3. W. Gary Phillips, William E. Brown, & John Stonestreet, *Making Sense of Your World*, 2nd ed., (Sheffield Publishing Co., Salem, WI., 2008), p. 153.
4. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, p. 113.
5. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/peter_singer_2.html
6. Black Humanism's Response to Suffering by Colin Bossen, <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/162467.shtml>, accessed 9/22/2010
7. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge University Press, UK, 1993) p. 169.
8. Singer, p. 171.
9. N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), p. 33.
10. When I refer to these attributes of God as "assumptions" I am not implying they are based on blind belief. There are philosophically reasonable grounds for God being real and having these qualities. Also, the Bible describes God in these terms. So through both human reason and God's Revelation we can be assured these attributes are true of God. I use "assumption" to mean the starting point(s) for building a worldview. In the same way every building has a foundation, everyone must start with some foundational beliefs (assumptions) on which to construct the rest of his or her worldview.
11. *Making Sense of Your World*, 2nd ed., p. 154.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
13. See Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity*, and Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery, and The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*.

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