

ELEONORE STUMP

# Wandering in Darkness

*Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*



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# WANDERING IN DARKNESS

Only the most naïve or tendentious would deny the extent and intensity of suffering in the world. In the face of the common view of suffering, can one also hold consistently that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God? Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness* argues that one can. The book uses the development of a medieval theodicy, taken in the framework of biblical narratives, to give a defense for the problem of evil.

In an opening methodological section, Stump presents current research related to autism spectrum disorder to address issues in epistemology. She contends that some philosophical problems, including the problem of evil or suffering, are best considered with the help of narratives.

Against this background, she then investigates the moral psychology, value theory, and theology within which one typical medieval theodicy, that of Thomas Aquinas, is embedded. Stump explicates Aquinas's account of the good for human beings, including the nature of love and union among persons. She also makes use of recent work in neurobiology and developmental psychology to illuminate the nature of such union.

With the philosophical setting of Aquinas's views, Stump then turns to particular biblical narratives. Employing the methodology argued for at the outset, she presents detailed, innovative exegeses of the stories of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany, each of which is exemplary of a different form of suffering.

In the context of the interpretations of these stories and the previous examination of Aquinas's views, Stump first explicates Aquinas's own theodicy and then develops it to address one part of the problem of suffering Aquinas himself left largely to one side. She concludes by arguing that this extended Thomistic theodicy constitutes a consistent and cogent defense for the problem of suffering.

**Eleonore Stump** is the Robert J. Henle Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, where she has taught since 1992. She has published extensively in philosophy of religion, contemporary metaphysics, and medieval philosophy. She is past president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, the American Catholic Philosophical Association, and the American Philosophical Association, Central Division; and she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* incorporates her Gifford Lectures (Aberdeen, 2003), Wilde lectures (Oxford, 2006), and Stewart lectures (Princeton, 2009).

*For Ted*  
*In fletu solacium*

## PREFACE

All my adult life, I have wanted to write what has turned into this book, but only in these latter years have I had any idea how to do so. I made a first try in my Stob Lectures at Calvin College. My Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen incorporated and developed that material; they were a precursor to what has become Part 3 of this book. My Wilde Lectures at Oxford University were the predecessor of what is now Part 2. And my Stewart Lectures at Princeton University were an earlier version of Part 1. I am grateful to the schools and committees whose invitations to me gave me the opportunity to work on what, for a long time, has been my heart's desire to write.

Part 1 of this book is given over to explaining and justifying some of the characteristics of this book that run counter to more than one academic discipline's culture; but, even so, there are still a few things that need some word of explanation.

First, there is the matter of the poems. I suppose that, when I take up the books of other authors, I am not unusual in my practice of happily failing to read the ornaments of epigraphs and poetry that some authors like to put at the start of their chapters. If I had to put into words what motivates that practice on my part, it would be a sense that such epigraphs are basically just autobiographical expression on the part of the author and therefore not of much interest except to those people to whom the author is dear. But, in the case of this book, the poems interspersed throughout are meant not as autobiographical decorations but as part of the work of the volume. In my view, the poems give a different sort of access (a Franciscan access, as Chapter 4 explains) to the thought of the book. It is my hope that readers will not follow my own jaundiced reading practice but will instead read these poems reflectively in conjunction with the parts or chapters to which they are appended.

A special word needs to be said about the poem appended to Chapter 7. I found it in the texts for Osvaldo Golijov's *Passion According to St Mark*, and I have used it here by Golijov's kind permission. Golijov's prize-winning *Passion* is a stunning musical accomplishment, but it is also the best contemporary theological reflection on the passion and death of Christ of any that I know. I am grateful to Golijov for allowing me to include this one poem from the texts of his music in this book.

All but two of the poems introduce chapters; the two exceptions are the poems headed 'Incipit' (it begins) and 'Desinit' (it ceases). Medieval logic thought that there is something philosophically perplexing and worth investigating about beginning and ceasing. If, for example, the last instant (the ceasing) of a person's life is identified, it is not possible to identify the first instant (the beginning) of his death. Medieval work on beginning and ceasing and the theory of limits of continua that developed from it gave rise to something resembling a precursor to calculus. From the medieval point of view, *incipit* and *desinit* are an entangled pair, so to speak. It seems to me that something

similar can be said as regards deep and abiding philosophical problems. The ending point is not independent of the starting point. And so this project is bounded at each end by poems that mark the beginning and the ceasing of the process of redemption whose exposition and defense are the heart of this book.

The poem headed 'Desinit' is taken from the Song of Songs, a collection of love poems between a bridegroom and a bride in the Hebrew Bible. In Jewish and Christian tradition, this biblical book has been interpreted allegorically as a love song between God and the soul, or between God and his people. In the passage given as the 'Desinit' poem, the voice of the bridegroom calls to the bride when the time of the wedding is at hand and when the terribly troubled times that preceded it are finally over. By contrast, the poem headed 'Incipit' is a passage taken from a longer poem found after the war among the remains at Auschwitz. I have not dealt directly with the Holocaust in this book, for reasons I give in the first chapter. But the power of the Auschwitz poem, the witness it gives even in a hell on earth, is always with me. I have taken the book's beginning, and its name, from that witness.

Secondly, philosophers are accustomed to clarify claims with examples they themselves construct, which typically involve faceless characters baptized with common names—'Smith' and 'Jones,' for example. But because this book emphasizes the importance of persons and personal relations, I wanted the names of real persons to figure in my examples; and so I picked the names of historical figures in the Patristic period: 'Jerome' and 'Paula,' and occasionally 'Julia' (another name for Paula's daughter Eustochium). Sometimes we get very lucky; we find among the people we love someone who has an unusual power to fortify us, to ease what hurts, support what is broken, and strengthen what is weak. Some of the biblical stories in the book have such a relationship at their center, but every age has notable examples, too. The Patristic period is full of them—Rufinus and Melania, for example, or John Chrysostom and Olympias. The Patristic Jerome and Paula are a particularly moving pair. Irascible, self-willed Jerome was afraid of nothing and deferred to no one; plenty of people were afraid of him, however, and with good reason, because he could be venomous. But he loved Paula, and she loved him. For twenty years or more, she was his companion in an ascetic, self-sacrificial monasticism. When Paula finally died, Jerome was crushed. For months he was unable to do anything at all. "I have lost her who was my consolation," he said.<sup>1</sup> He pulled himself together eventually, in part because Paula's daughter Julia loved him in her mother's place; and with her he reformed his life, centered then as before in companionship. I have learned something from Paula and Jerome of the possibilities of real companionship to give birth to the best in human lives, and so I wove their names into this project. My examples involve not 'Smith' and 'Jones' but 'Paula' and 'Jerome,' and sometimes 'Julia' as well.

Finally, although in my view the first part of this book had to be dedicated to an exposition and defense of the book's methodology, John Foley persuaded me that the methodology being defended required the book to begin with a story. The very short story sketched in the Prologue therefore stands in for an abstract of the book. In the

circumstances, I thought I should say that this Prologue has its source in my own companionship with him.

This book has benefited immensely from the help of others, as would be clear just from the long list of acknowledgments given below, but there are specific debts that need to be acknowledged here.

To begin with what is essential, I have been fortunate in having outstanding administrative help. Various research assistants have contributed good work to this project, including Timothy Pawl, Fiona Grooms, and John Putz. My research assistant for the last three years, Stephen Chanderbhan, has been invaluable in helping to shepherd this manuscript through its various stages. He has been a superb proof-reader for the entire project, too. My secretary Barbara Manning has been the fairy godmother of the operation. That various disasters have *not* befallen this project are due to her intelligent, energetic, gracious labor and initiative. I am also grateful to Peter Momtchiloff, editor at Oxford University Press, for his superb judgment and generous care not only with regard to this project but also with regard to many other things over the years I have known him. I owe a debt of thanks to the staff at Oxford University Press, too, for their excellent work in the production of the book and their graciousness in working with me in the process. I am very grateful for all this help.

I am indebted to Mike Gale and Dan Schutte for finding the image on the cover of this book. In my view, the image they came up with is a tribute to their own sensitivity and insight into the problem of suffering. I am grateful to them for the gift of their time and labor in finding it.<sup>2</sup>

I did some work for this project as a Lilly Fellow at the National Humanities Center; I am grateful for the help of the able administrators at the Center and for the good fellowship of the other scholars who were in residence with me. I wrote much of the material that I presented at the University of Aberdeen as a Fellow of the Colledgeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St John's University, surrounded by the warm hospitality of the Benedictine monks and their abbot. Some of the material was also worked out during the term I spent at Baylor University as a recipient of the very generous Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching. I am grateful to these communities for their graciousness to me while I was with them. I also owe a debt to Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem and its Rector Michael McGarry. Tantur is a magnificent place to work. Its setting is beautiful and quiet, and its library is excellent. I wrote various parts of this book there, during different visits; and I finished the book there as well. I am indebted to Tantur for its welcome, and I am grateful for the friendship of the people visiting or at home there, especially Michael McGarry, whose kindness over the years has made a difference to me.

At one point in the process of writing this book, I imagined that it would consist just in a revised version of my Gifford Lectures. At that point, a small group of scholars spent some months carefully working through that revised version and then assembled for a week at the Colledgeville Institute to discuss the manuscript chapter



by chapter. I am grateful to the Collegeville Institute and its Director Don Ottenhoff for making available to us the facilities of the Institute, which are lovely, and for the support of the Institute while we were there. I am particularly grateful to the very generous scholars, representing more than one discipline, who came together at the Institute to discuss the revised Gifford Lectures: Jeffrey Brower, Frank Burch Brown, John Foley, Scott MacDonald, Michael Murray, Michael Rea, and Theodore Vitali. This book is immeasurably better because of their contributions; and that week of intense conversation around the topic of the problem of evil, important to everyone present, is one of the most precious and memorable experiences of my academic career.

I also need to express a debt of gratitude to the community around me in St Louis. In one seminar or another, I have taught parts of this book to graduate students, whose challenging questions have helped me in shaping the final manuscript. My colleagues and students also gave of their time to listen to all the Wilde Lectures and discuss them with me in the term before I gave them at Oxford. I was touched by their generosity, and I benefited from their many helpful criticisms and questions. The Dominican friars, whose support is a blessing to me, have worked through some of the ideas with me in reading groups and conversations; I am particularly indebted to Paul Philibert, who read much of the manuscript and gave me welcome encouragement as well as very helpful comments. I would be remiss if I did not add that I am also very grateful for the university at which I work and the administrators who have run it in the years I have been here, especially the school's president, Lawrence Biondi. His ability to combine the excellences of a successful university president with the virtues of a mendicant in a passionate, living commitment to Jesuit ideals has been a significant source of the nurture this community has given me.

Among my local community, however, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Michael Barber, John Foley, John Kavanaugh, William Rehg, and Theodore Vitali. They discussed the issues of this book with me as I was thinking about them; they read the chapters as I wrote them, and sometimes reread them as I rewrote them; and they were among a group of friends who came to Aberdeen, Scotland, to hear me deliver the lectures on which some of the chapters are based. The acknowledgments I have made to one or the other of them in the footnotes of this book are insufficient to express my debt to them or my gratitude for them. The good of their companionship is woven throughout this whole book. John Foley and Paul Philibert also each wrote for me a *vade mecum*, which I kept by me as I was working. Those pieces, and new music John Foley wrote during this time, have been a source of strength and consolation for me. I am intensely grateful for all the generous gifts of this community.

The period in which I wrote the Stob Lectures, which were the beginning of this project, was marked for me by a firestorm of grief. I owe more than I could possibly say to Theodore Vitali, whose wise counsel and great-hearted willingness to suffer with me walked me through the storm. The poem by Rabanus Maurus appended to Chapter 5 expresses something of my own gratitude for him in the intervening years between then and now. I have dedicated this book to him, as a small return for the gift his continuing companionship is to me. (The line in the dedication comes from the medieval Latin

hymn, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. It is reproduced in Latin and in my translation at the end of the acknowledgements section.)

Finally, I am grateful to my husband Donald and to my children, all of them, including those I have acquired as my biological children got married. Their love and care are the *sine qua non* of everything I do.

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chapters were also presented at the Association for Jewish Studies, the Australasian Association of Philosophy, and the Castelli Congress/Rome; a short version of Chapter 5 was my presidential address for the APA Central Division Meeting in 2006. I am grateful to the audiences whose questions and comments helped me to think more deeply about the issues.

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## VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS

*Veni, Sancte Spiritus,  
Et emitte caelitus  
Lucis tuae radium.  
Veni, Pater pauperum,  
Veni, Dator munerum,  
Veni, Lumen cordium.*

*Consolator optime,  
Dulcis hospes animae,  
Dulce refrigerium,  
In labore requies,  
In aestu temperies,  
In fletu solacium,*

*O lux beatissima,  
Reple cordis intima  
Tuorum fidelium.  
Sine tuo nomine  
Nihil est in homine,  
Nihil est innoxium.*

*Lava quod est sordidum,  
Riga quod est aridum,  
Sana quod est saucium.  
Flecte quod est rigidum,  
Fove quod est frigidum,  
Rege quod est devium.*

*Da tuis fidelibus,  
In te confidentibus,  
Sacrum septenarium.  
Da virtutis meritum,  
Da salutis exitum,  
Da perenne gaudium.*

*Come, Holy Spirit,  
and send forth from heaven  
the stream of your light.  
Come, Father of the poor,  
come, Giver of gifts,  
come, Light of the heart.*

*Best of comforters,  
sweet guest of the soul,  
sweet healer,  
rest in hardship,  
cool in stifling heat,  
solace in sorrow,*

*O most blessed light,  
fill the inmost hearts  
of those who trust in you.  
Apart from you  
we are nothing,  
and everything is toxic.*

*Wash what is filthy;  
water what is dry;  
heal what is unhealthy;  
soften what is unyielding;  
enflame what is cold;  
govern what is bent.*

*To those who trust in you,  
who put their confidence in you,  
give your sevenfold gifts.  
Give the merit of virtue;  
give salvation in the final hour;  
give unending joy.*

## PROLOGUE

There is a special kind of pain in watching someone whom you love in agony and being helpless to help him. This must have been what Mary Magdalene suffered at the death of Jesus. The Gospels report that, when Jesus was crucified, she was there, watching.<sup>1</sup>

It is not really clear who Mary Magdalene was. Augustine is partly responsible for a tradition that identifies her with Mary of Bethany.<sup>2</sup> Mary of Bethany is the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. John Chrysostom is vehement in his rejection of that identification. That is because Mary Magdalene is a sinful woman, and Mary of Bethany is the friend of Jesus. Chrysostom, who knew how to be friends with a woman,<sup>3</sup> is sure that Jesus would never have been friends with a sinful woman.<sup>4</sup>

Whoever exactly she was, Mary Magdalene loved Jesus enough to brave being present at his crucifixion, when most of the others who had followed him had fled. His agony must have been an agony for her. The Gospel stories report her both as near him and also as at some distance from him. Maybe she was near enough to see him and hear him but far enough away not to be close to him. At any rate, the comfort of being able to give him any comfort at all was unavailable to her. It must have been heartbreaking for her.

In these circumstances, she forms a plan. She watches till he is taken down dead from the cross, and she marks where they put his dead body. She gathers the necessary things and waits, as she must, till the time is right and the coast is clear. Then she goes to the tomb to anoint him. If she could not comfort him in his dying, she can anoint his body after his death. It must have been her heart's desire to do so.

How much she had her heart in that plan is shown by her reaction to its failure. When she came to the tomb and found his body missing, she wept hard. In his harmony of the Gospel narratives, Augustine supposes that several angels came to her, on successive occasions, to try to stop her weeping, but without making any real impression on her.<sup>5</sup> Whatever we may think about Augustine's harmonizing, and however we are to understand the narratives about her experience of angels at the tomb, there is no other biblical story in which angelic visits have so little impact on the person being visited. In her heartbrokenness over not being able to anoint the body of Jesus, Mary Magdalene brushes off even angels.

And then Jesus appears to her, to her first of all the people close to him, before the apostles, before his family, before his mother. "Mary!," he says to her; and she recognizes him in the saying of her name.

In that electric moment, in that presence of each to the other, her weeping ends. Her heartbreak at his death is over, and her heart's desire to anoint him, so pain-filled in its formulation, falls away. What she had wanted is so small by comparison with what

she has. She has him, and she has him gloriously. Who could fail to miss his love for her? Neither she nor anyone else in her community—that is the answer. The whole community—apostles, disciples, family—first learn that Jesus is still present among them from her report of her experience of him.

All the elements of the problem of evil are present in this story, and so are the elements of theodicy. Jesus suffers physical pain and death, and Mary Magdalene's helpless endurance of his suffering makes psychic suffering for her. The source of his pain is the moral evil of others. Her suffering has in it the pain of those who are powerless and the shame that comes to people unable to protect their beloved from the depredations of others. Suffering in all its variety is present here. Furthermore, the story also shows us that there is more than one kind of heartbrokenness that can afflict us. When Mary Magdalene weeps because she cannot find the dead body of Jesus, what matters to her matters only because she has her heart set on it. The loss of his dead body is not the loss of *him*. She lost *him* when he died. There is heartbreak when a person loses something of great value, the life of someone she loves, for example; but there is also heartbreak when she loses what matters only because she wants it so badly. In the world of the story, for Mary Magdalene, in the presence of the loving beloved, heartbreak of both kinds is redeemed in love.

It is—isn't it?

No!, someone may think. There is no redemption of her suffering in this story. Mary Magdalene is glad in her reunion with Jesus only because she has restored to her what caused her great suffering when it was taken away. But it would have been much better if it had never been taken away in the first place. *She* would have been better off if Jesus had never suffered and died. She gains nothing in consequence of her suffering that she did not have before. And so her life without that suffering would have been better. In the story, her suffering is for nothing.

What does it take to redeem suffering—to defeat evil, as philosophers say? It is not always easy to say in the abstract. How would we adjudicate an answer to this question? What would count as evidence for our answer? How are we to discuss the question? What looks perplexingly blank in the abstract has handholds for our thought when we think about the question in connection with a story. In the world of this story, perhaps it is not so difficult. If, in the end, Mary Magdalene herself would prefer her life with the suffering in it, if she would be unwilling to lose what the loss of the suffering would take from her, then, for her, the suffering is surely redeemed.

A blind man, telling the painful story of losing his sight, says that he came to see his blindness as a gift. In the end, what he says about his blindness is, "I accept the gift; I accept the gift."<sup>6</sup> How could anyone—anyone sane or reasonable, that is—receive suffering as a gift? How could anyone receive blindness as a gift? It takes the details of the narrative of a life to answer questions such as these. And so the difficult questions raised by the problem of suffering can be considered best in the context of narratives, especially biblical narratives.

Or so I will argue in this book. In my view, narrative makes a contribution to philosophical reflection that cannot be gotten as well, or at all, without the narrative.



And, contrary to trends still prevailing in biblical studies, I will argue that it is legitimate to examine biblical narratives philosophically, rather than historically as source material for the understanding of ancient civilization.

In the course of this book, I will explore and reflect philosophically on biblical stories of suffering in its manifold variety, from moral evil to psychic brokenness and shame. I will present a philosophical case for a certain response to the problem of suffering, but I will make that case through an examination of narratives. I will argue that suffering can be redeemed for the sufferer in personal relationship, that heartbreak can be woven into joy through the reciprocity of love.