Here are certain topics in philosophy and other fields for which part of the pedagogical challenge is to convince students that the topic at hand actually presents a real problem, worthy of attention, effort, and care. The instructor typically does not face this challenge when suffering is the topic in question.

Before ever encountering “the problem of evil” on a philosophy of religion syllabus, most students will likely have already done some thinking (perhaps even some agonizing) about what suffering is, how the inescapable reality of manifold evils should affect the ways in which we think about God, and, perhaps, how discourses about “evil” are used and abused by religious and political actors. If many of us contemplate some such cluster of questions as we come of age, different experiences and motivations prompt such reflections in different individuals: for one person, it is the touch of personal tragedy, for another, a searching reading of the history of the last century and its horrors, for another still, the demands of faithfulness interpreting the texts of her own religious tradition.

From the outset of the quarter during which it was my privilege to teach, as an Alma Wilson Fellow, a course dedicated to “Problems of Evil: Narrative, Theodicy, Anti-theodicy,” I aimed for honesty: on the first day of class, I warned, “If they were discouraged by the intractability of the problems, my students did not show it.”

The quarter’s final reading was a short story by former University of Chicago professor J.M. Coetzee, which describes the anguish and anxiety of a missed encounter between two writers at a conference on “The Problem of Evil.” At the conclusion of the story, Coetzee leaves the reader alone with his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, in the cold solitude of an empty hallway, in an unfamiliar city, the tension between the two main characters left unresolved. I cannot speak to the level of anxiety or anguish in my students, nor can I deny having experienced these emotions myself (this being only my second course as a stand-alone instructor), but I think I can say that the place at which we parted ways at the end of the quarter felt something like the opposite of cold solitude.

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... arriving at a conclusion of atheism is not the only way to be critical of the enterprise of theodicy.