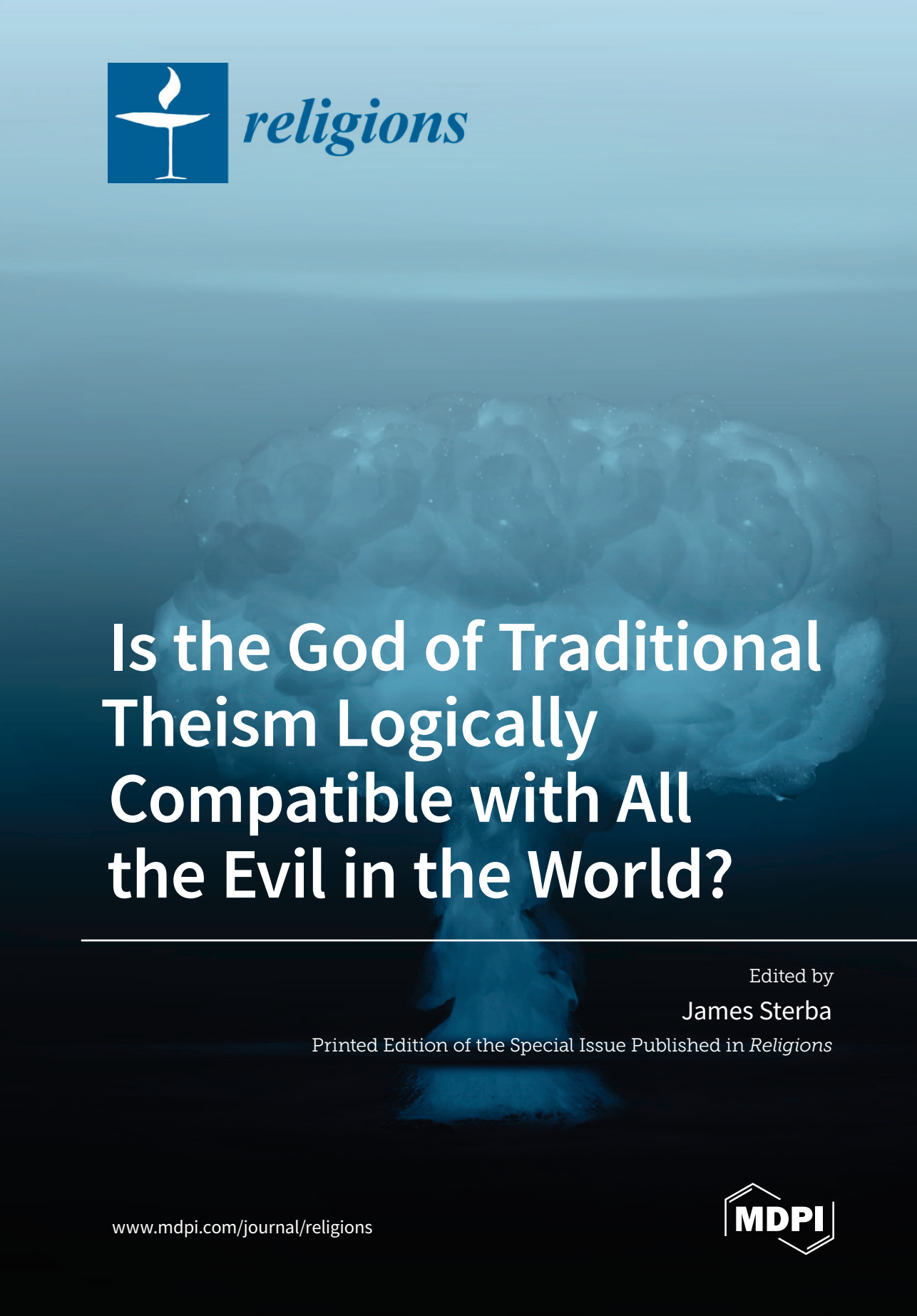

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Is the God of Traditional Theism Logically Compatible with All the Evil in the World?

Edited by
James Sterba

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Editor

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About the Editor

James Sterba

James Sterba is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. In 2013, he received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to apply untapped resources from ethics and political philosophy to the problem of evil. His book *Is a Good God Logically Possible*? and this Special Issue have resulted from work funded by that grant. Sterba is currently engaged in writing a debate book on the problem of evil co-authored with Richard Swinburne to be published by OUP. He is also the guest editor for another Special Issue for *Religions* on the topic "Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?". This Special Issue could have twice as many contributors as the present one.

Preface to "Is the God of Traditional Theism Logically Compatible with All the Evil in the World?"

At least since the exchange between Alvin Plantinga and John Mackie in the 1970s, theists and atheists alike have tended to agree that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically compatible with all the evil in the world. Accordingly, the only question left open by this consensus concerns whether an evidential or probabilistic argument against the existence of God could be provided. It has been on that question that subsequent debate between theists and atheists has tended to focus.

Recently, however, I published *Is a Good God Logically Possible*? (Palgrave paperback 2019), in which I argue—in opposition to this long-held consensus—that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. The novelty of this argument led to a variety of responses of which this Special Issue is the most unique. In this Special Issue, sixteen philosophers have sought to challenge my logical argument against the existence of God, and I have provided a response to each of them. This Special Issue should, therefore, be of great help to readers seeking to determine whether the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

James Sterba
Editor

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Editorial

Sixteen Contributors: A Response

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It is a rare event indeed to have sixteen philosophers join together in a symposium to reflect up the central question of one's book. In my case, the book is: *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* These philosophers also related their reflections to my own answer to that question. I am deeply honored that these philosophers have chosen to participate and also very grateful for their contributions.

To better show my appreciation, I have chosen to respond to the main claims each of these contributors makes about my own work. This has been a Herculean task. When I thought it would be useful, I sent a draft of my response to particular contributors asking them to evaluate it for accuracy and cogency. Frequently, this produced a flurry of e-mails back and forth, which led to an improved response. All these responses taken together has turned out to be almost as long as will be my contribution to a debate book that I am writing with Richard Swinburne on essentially the same question that is taken up by this symposium. My hope is that my responses here, together with this debate book to be published with OUP, will help to provide an answer to the central question addressed in this symposium, which in some form or other, has been with us from the very beginnings of philosophy.

My plan here is discuss the contributions to the symposium in the order in which they now appear in this Special Issue.

1. William Hasker

In an earlier exchange, Bill Hasker claimed that traditional theists would find my moral evil prevention requirements repugnant and unacceptable. In that exchange, I had pointed out that in his own book, *Providence, Evil and the Openness to God*, he called a principle quite similar to my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I and III one that constitutes "a general requirement on the moral government of the world by God as conceived by traditional theism." Hasker now points out that if I only had looked on the next page from where he talks about this principle, I would have seen that he says "It is my belief that NGE is false, and this entire discussion is on the wrong track. In this paper . . . I shall argue . . . that NGE should be rejected by theists." However, I had read that passage and both then and now, and I still take it to be irrelevant to the question at issue which is what traditional theists actually do, not what they would do if they accepted Hasker's arguments for rejecting the principle. The issue here was about what traditional theists do, not what they should do, and my initial claim about what they do still stand supported by Hasker's own claim about this issue.

Now Hasker objects to an example with variations that I use throughout my book to show how the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be engaged in policy of limited intervention with respect to the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Hasker's objection is that if God prevented the amount of evil that I say he would be preventing in this example, the result would be that "God would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, allowing us to develop our characters by arguing over the Legos, but ready to intervene before anyone actually gets [significantly] hurt." To see that this is not the case, suppose we modify my example in the following way:

Suppose that you had done all that you could to prevent the consequences of some horrendously evil action and you could see that you were not going to be completely

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successful. Suppose that at that moment God were to intervene and provide what is additionally needed to completely prevent all the evil consequences of that action. Presumably, you would be pleased that God had so intervened. Now imagine you are again considering whether to intervene to prevent the consequences of another horrendously evil action. You might reason that if you did intervene you might well be successful this time. Yet, upon further reflection, you might decide that there is really no need for you to intervene at all because if you do nothing, you could now assume that God would intervene as he had done before and this time completely prevent the evil consequences from happening. So, you do nothing.

Now here, I claim, God would be morally required to intervene to prevent the evil consequences of that action but that God's prevention should only be partially successful. Here is why. Originally, let us say you were in a position to prevent the abduction of a small boy into a car. Now that you have chosen to do nothing, you witness the abductors successfully driving off with the boy. Only later do you learn that the car was subsequently stopped many miles away by a passing patrol car because it had a busted taillight, and the small boy, who had been terrorized but not yet killed as the kidnappers had apparently planned to do, was then discovered in the car and freed by the police. So, you assume, not unreasonably, that God was involved in this prevention as well as in the earlier one. Nevertheless, you cannot help but note that the intervention was not as successful as it presumably would have been if you had chosen to intervene yourself. After all, imagine that you were standing close to the boy. You could have just screamed to alert others and/or pulled the boy away and completely foiled the abductors. As a result, the boy would not have been terrorized as he was after having been for a period of time in the hands of his abductors before the police finally rescued him.

So, in this hypothetical world, you begin to detect a pattern in God's interventions. When you choose to intervene to prevent horrendously evil consequences, either you will be completely successful in preventing those consequences or your intervention will fall short. When the latter is going to happen, God does something to make the prevention completely successful. Likewise, when you choose not to intervene to prevent such consequences, God again intervenes but not in a way that is fully successful. Here, there is a residue of evil consequences that the victim still does suffer. This residue is not a horrendous evil but it is a significant one, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible. You could have prevented those significant consequences, but you chose not to do so, and that makes you responsible for them. Of course, God too could prevent those harmful consequences from happening even if you do not. It is just that in such cases God chooses not to intervene so as to completely prevent both the significant as well as the horrendous evil consequences of significantly wrongful actions in order to leave you with an ample opportunity for soul-making. Now one might argue, as I would, that the God of traditional theism should prevent both the significant and the horrendous consequences of immoral actions in such contexts, but if God were to prevent just the horrendous evil consequences of such actions that would clearly make the world much, much better than the world we currently inhabit, and it definitely would not turn the world into a moral kindergarten since we would be able to prevent both the significant and the horrendous consequences of immoral actions, sometimes with God's help, when we chose to do so, and when we chose not to be do so, we would be responsible for the significant evil consequences of those actions that God would choose not to prevent to give us an ample opportunity for soul-making. Instead of being a moral kindergarten, it would be a world that all morally good people would prefer to inhabit. It just would not be our world in which the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions abound, consequences that an all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, if he existed, would not have permitted.

In an earlier article, Hasker introduced the example of a dictator of a small nation who starts a malicious war of aggression in order to extend his territory. The offensive fails, but results in huge amounts of suffering and death, and the dictator's palace is surrounded by an angry mob. Hasker then claims that according to my MEPR I, the dictator has a right to

be transported to a remote location where he can live out his life in luxury and safety; he has this right against anyone who is able easily to do this for him. In an earlier article, I responded that according to MEPR I, the dictator does not have a right to be spared the harsh punishment that would otherwise be inflicted on him by those he had previously oppressed. Now, in this article, Hasker responds:

> I have no doubt that almost all of us will agree with Sterba that, in my example, the dictator has no right to be spared his punishment. But in making his point, Sterba has in effect seriously compromised, if not actually undermined, the force of the principle (MEPRI). As this principle was originally presented, we naturally understood the role of the phrase, "(a good to which we have a right)", to be one of emphasis: it underscores the fact that, according to that principle, we have a right to be spared the consequences of morally evil actions. As applied by Sterba to the dictator's case, however, that phrase takes on a different role altogether. Now it must be independently established that the prospective sufferer has a right to be spared this suffering, before the principle becomes applicable. Clearly, the prospect for establishing this in the case of the dictator is far from promising.

Now there are two different types of consequences of the dictator's action here. One type is the consequence that he directly and intentionally brought about. These are the type of consequences that would call into play my MEPR I. The other types of consequences are those that, in the example, were imposed on the dictator by his abused citizenry. These latter consequences, unlike the former, are not consequences the dictator directly or intentionally brought about, and he clearly does not want them. Nevertheless, they are morally justified and so they do not call into play my MEPR I. I am not sure how these two uses of consequences got confused in our discussion, but once these two are distinguished, there is no reason to confuse them again, with the result that Hasker's challenge to my view here is answered in a way that even Hasker finds acceptable[1].

2. Laura Ekstrom

Laura Ekstrom concludes her paper with "Sterba's case remains for the incompatibility of God's existence and the degree and amount of evil in the world. On the matter of that incompatibility, we agree, although we make the case in different ways."

Here is how our arguments differ. My argument is a logical one in the tradition of Mackie which reaches the conclusion that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. By contrast, Ekstrom's argument is an evidential one in the tradition of Rowe that reaches the conclusion that the God of traditional theism is improbable given our evidence. This difference does matter. To see how it matters practically, just listen to few online debates between theists and atheists, particularly ones involving the well-known Christian apologist, William Lane Craig. In his debates with atheists, Craig is especially good at getting his opponents to admit that given their arguments, God is still logically possible. That concession, at least since Plantinga's exchange with Mackie, is taken by theists to be quite significant. So, it is worth noting that it is a concession my argument does not make to theists, but Ekstrom's does.

It might also be useful to indicate how my argument achieves its conclusion rather than just an evidential conclusion. First, with respect to the moral evil in the world, my argument employs the following fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us:

1. Goods to which we have a right that are not logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
2. Goods to which we have a right that are logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions.
3. Goods to which we do not have a right that are not logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral actions

4. Goods to which we do not have a right that are logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral actions.

My argument then shows that the application of my three necessary moral evil prevention requirements (MEPR I–III) to this fourfold classification has the following results:

1. MEPR I prohibits God's provision of goods (1) by permitting significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
2. MEPR II eliminates any need for goods (2) and goods (3) by requiring God's prevention of significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
3. MEPR III prohibits God's provision of goods (4) by permitting significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions.

I also have an analogous argument that works for the natural evil in the world.

In this way, my argument is able to conclude that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world, whereas almost all other arguments for atheism currently on offer, such as Ekstrom's, only conclude that given the evidence we currently have, the God of traditional theism is incompatible with all the evil in the world. Thus, defenders of these evidential arguments must still admit that God is logically compatible with all the evil in the world, whereas my argument eliminates the need for that admission.

Ekstrom goes on to fault me for confining my argument to what I have called an ethics after creation. Ekstrom thinks that the God of traditional theism should also be critiqued on the basis of an ethics before creation. Here, I have two responses.

First, even if the argument worked, we do not need it. This is because if my argument based on an ethics after creation works, then we would have succeeded in showing that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Hence, we would not need to introduce the additional assumptions required for an ethics of creation argument in order to show that the God of traditional theism must be rejected on that basis as well. So, if we already have a logical argument against God's existence, why complicate things by including this additional argument even if that argument worked?

Second, this argument that we do not really need does not work either. This is because before God creates he is not under any obligation to anyone. Nor would it benefit anyone, not even himself, to create, or to create one particular world rather than any other. Moreover, provided that the creatures in the world that God creates are better off existing than not existing given their natural capacities, no one would be harmed by God's creating of that particular world rather than any other. After creation, however, God would have an obligation to benefit and protect those he did create, but that obligation is grounded in the needs of the creatures he actually brought into existence. So, it is only after creation that God's options become constrained by what is for the good of the beings he created. Hence, given that creatures that exist in this world are almost all, as far as we can tell, better off existing than not existing, there is no argument against the existence of God that can be based on creation. That is why my argument is based on what God would have to be doing after creation because only then would God, through his actions, be benefiting or harming the creatures he presumptively has made. Notice that something like this obtains for ourselves with respect to the procreation of our own children.

There is one last important issue that Ekstrom raises that I want to consider.[2] In my book, I talk about rights that we have and about what we would morally prefer, and this raises the question concerning what grounds atheists have for the moral assertions that they make. To indicate what sort of grounds Ekstrom thinks is needed, she sketches near the end of her paper an argument for the intrinsic value of persons.

Now reflect back on that important exchange between Mackie and Plantinga. Mackie, at the time, was a subjectivist in ethics, and this seemed to present a problem. This is because for anyone to use the problem of evil against the existence of God, they must appeal to an objective morality. At the time, Mackie solved this problem by assuming for the sake of argument the moral objectivism that theists bring to the table. Nevertheless,

Mackie failed in his exchange with Plantinga not for making this assumption but because he hypothetically brought the wrong norms to the table. If Mackie had come up with something similar to my MEPR I–III, I think the history of philosophy of religion for the last 50 years would be substantially different.

Now I myself come to the problem of evil having worked in a moral and political philosophy most of my career. Over the years, I have come up with a non-question-begging solution to the why-be-moral question that favors morality over egoism. I have also shown how a minimal libertarian morality with its negative rights of noninterference can be seen to lead to the positive rights of a welfare state and further that when those positive welfare rights are extended to distant peoples and future generations, it leads to the substantial equality favored by socialists (See Sterba 2013). Over the years, I have applied these moral and political arguments to the topics of nuclear deterrence, biocentrism, feminism, and affirmative action.

Nevertheless, for the problem of evil, very few resources from moral and political philosophy are actually needed. This is because the moral requirements needed to make the argument against the God of traditional theism, while important, are so minimally demanding they simply cannot be challenged as fundamental requirements of morality. Accordingly, atheists do not have to import much from ethics and political philosophy in order to make their case against God. They only need to make a judicious selection form the resources that are there.

Of course, theists who deny that God is a moral agent still have to be dealt with. I have dealt with one such challenge by Brian Davies in Chapter 6 of my book, and Mark Murphy has developed another such challenge. Ekstrom has developed a fine argument that responds to Murphy's challenge in her just published book that, to use Murphy's own terminology, "defangs" his own view.[3] I myself have only responded briefly to Murphy in my book, but I think my response there is also telling. So, while there may yet be more views, such as Davies's and Murphy's, to which atheists will still need to respond, given that the overwhelming majority of theists want to view God as a moral agent, they now will to have to figure out how are they going to live with my argument that the God of traditional theism, who is also assumed to be a moral agent, is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

3. Janusz Salamon

Janusz Salamon has proposed a theodicy that he thinks can escape my argument that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism God is logically impossible given all the evil in the world. The central claim of his theodicy is that God has given us collectively complete sovereignty over our world, which God can only do by totally refraining from preventing any evil in our world. Salamon claims that a similar account of human sovereignty can be found in Pico delis Mirandola's work (see the quotation from Mirandola).

Now Salamon contends that the freedom of complete human sovereignty, which is collectively exercised in a Morandolian world, is the greater good that could possibly justify God's permission of all the evil in the world. Salamon might have ended his essay right here, but he did not. Rather, he sought to further support his view by employing two theses from Dostoyevsky.

The first thesis is that experiences of horrendous evil can serve to advance our self-development, especially in relationship with others, and in that way, promote a greater good. Here, Salamon cites Alexander Solzhenitsyn saying: "Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul" (Solzhenitsyn 2007, pp. 312–13).

The second thesis from Dostoyevsky that Salamon utilizes is that the evil we suffer can be justified by the good it provides for others. Here, Salamon claims that parents and teachers are familiar with evils that are justified in this way.

Again, Salamon could conceivably have ended his essay at this juncture simply contending that the possibility of a Moradolian world taken together with his two theses from Dostoyevsky showing how evil can be justified in our world provides a morally plausible enough a counterexample to my argument against the existence of God. However, Salamon sees the need to add one more thesis to his theodicy, one found in Dostoyevsky, as well as Salamon tells us in "theistic traditions which presuppose a collectivist account of selfhood," such as the one that Salamon himself employs in his theodicy. Thus, the last thesis that Salamon sees the need to add to his theodicy is that innocent victims of evil will ultimately receive a divine reward.

With his theodicy so completed, Salamon appears ready to confront the serf boy from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* depicted on the cover of my book who, Salamon tells us, is about "to be torn to pieces by dogs in front of her mother." Salamon also appears ready to confront the victims from the list that Salamon provides us of "mass-murders, starting with Auschwitz, Kolyma, Chairman Mao's 'cultural revolution' genocide, Armenian genocide, Cambodian genocide, Rwandan genocide, etc."

So, what does Salamon have to say to these victims? Obviously, it is quite difficult for him to appeal to the two theses in his theodicy he just took from Dostoyevsky. The victims that Salamon is confronting here do not seem to be such that they or others would have truly benefited from the horrendous evils which they are experienced. Rather, when confronting such victims, Salamon thinks it is best to appeal to the Morandolian sovereignty we all are said to exercise collectively, understood as a greater good that could conceivably justify God's permission of such horrendous evils.

Yet how do we exercise this sovereignty collectively? When horrendous evil is done, the perpetrators exercise their freedom while the freedom of their victims is suppressed. While perpetrators and victims do interact—the one group exercising its freedom by suppressing the freedom of the other group—there seems to be no sense in which they are collectively exercising freedom together. Now it is true that perpetrators can belong to a group that collectively does evil and victims can belong to another group that collectively suffers evil, and it is also can be true the perpetrators and the victims together can still belong to a third group that acts collectively to achieve some good or other. However, there is no sense in which, when a perpetrator imposes horrendous evil consequences on his victim, the perpetrator and the victim are acting together to exercise their collective sovereignty. Salamon appears to recognize this as well. That would explain why he added the last thesis to his theodicy, which maintains that innocent victims of evil will ultimately receive a divine reward. Reward in an afterlife could thus be understood as making up for the significant loss of freedom or sovereignty, collective or otherwise, of victims who suffer from horrendous evils in this life.

So how morally plausible, then, is Salamon's theodicy? Not morally plausible at all, I think. Here is why. It is because good people would morally prefer that God would have prevented the especially horrendous evil consequences of moral wrongdoing from being inflicted on innocent victims to their receiving goods that logically depend on God's permitting those consequences to be inflicted on those victims. Even the perpetrators themselves, if they even repented their wrongful deeds, would have always morally preferred that God would have prevented especially the horrendous evil consequences of their immoral actions from being inflicted on their innocent victims.

Now the reason good people and even the perpetrators of moral wrongdoing if they ever repented would have these moral preferences is that they would have no real need for the goods that God would be providing them with by permitting rather than preventing especially horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on innocent victims. Such goods are not needed in order for their would-be benefactors to have the opportunity to be friends with God or to have a decent life. First, God's providing us with the opportunity to be friends with himself cannot logically depended on God's permission of horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims because then the God would not be all-powerful and so not the God of traditional theism. Second, a right to a decent life, which is a first-order

right, cannot be logically conditional on God's permission of especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Since then, the goods that God would be providing us with by permitting especially horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on innocent victims would not be needed for us to have an opportunity to be friends with God or to have a decent life, they should be rejected given that they come at the cost of inflicting horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims and we can so easily do without them.

That is why the would-be beneficiaries of goods that God would be providing by permitting horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on innocent victims would morally prefer that God prevented rather than permitted horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on those victims to provide them with these good (See my MEPR II). Hence, the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, if he exists, would have honored those preferences which, of course, we can clearly see has not been done. That is why Salamon's theodicy cannot possibly work to defeat my argument that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

4. Jerry Walls

Jerry Walls criticizes atheists, such as myself, for denying innocent sufferers of horrendous wrongdoing the hope, as expressed by my colleague, Peter van Inwagen, that '[t]here must be a God who will wipe away every tear; there must be a God who will repay' (van Inwagen 1994, p. 97). Of course, as Walls correctly points out, the crucial question here is whether or not this hope is rationally warranted. Obviously, the idea of an all-good, all-powerful God who will make up for the evil we suffer in this life in an afterlife is comforting. Yet is this hope not logically incompatible with the idea of that same God permitting especially all the horrendous evil that people suffer in this life when he could easily do so? If it is, as I argue in my book, that would show that the hope is not rationally warranted. Accordingly, Walls seeks to overturn the argument of my recent book.

Walls begins by agreeing with Marilyn Adams that having an intimate relationship or friendship with God is incommensurate not only with other goods but also with whatever evils we might experience in this life. Yet, here, it is important to appreciate how this greatest good of friendship with God relates to the evils that exist in our world. Friendship with God, or better, God's offer of friendship, is not logically dependent upon God's permission of the horrendous evil consequences; otherwise, God would be logically constrained with respect to providing his friendship and so would not be the all-powerful God of traditional theism that he is supposed to be. It follows that God's offer of his friendship cannot serve as an appropriate compensation for his permission of especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions because God could always offer us his friendship whether or not we have suffered from those consequences, and so his goodness would require that he offer it without permitting such consequences.

It is also the case that the would-be beneficiaries of those goods that are actually logically dependent on God's permission of horrendous evils would morally prefer not to receive those goods. This includes the wrongdoers who impose horrendous evil consequences on their victims. Those wrongdoers, if they ever repented, would throughout all eternity always morally prefer that God, if he existed, would have prevented the horrendous evil consequences of their actions from being inflicted on their victims in the first place. Accordingly, the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism would, if he existed, have honored the moral preferences of those would-be beneficiaries of God's permission of the horrendous evil in the world, and that obviously has not happened. Nor does it help Walls's case to think that Jesus would forgive what an all-good, all-powerful God, if he existed, should have prevented in the first place.

Walls next employs an argument from William Hasker. Hasker claims that if I am glad on the whole about my own existence and that of those whom I love, then I must be glad that the history of the world, in its major aspects, has been as it is.[4] Yet he still finds the claim somewhat problematic because whole parts of the past history of the world have been filled with horrendous moral evil. However, Walls suggests that if God would compensate for

those horrendous evil consequences in an afterlife then we can justifiably feel less troubled by our willingness to accept goods that are logically tied to God's permission of horrendous evils. Even so, compensating for wrongdoing never excuses anyone from acting wrongly in the first place. Here, God would be acting wrongly in the first place by permitting horrendous evil consequences to secure some logically related goods because the would-be beneficiaries of those goods would morally prefer that God had prevented the horrendous evil consequences to their receiving those goods. Hence, even if God were to compensate for permitting horrendous evil consequences that are logically related to such goods, that would not excuse him for not preventing those consequences in the first place. Any God who was engaged in such compensation rather than preventing such evil consequences in the first place would not be the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism.

5. Cheryl Chen

Cheryl Chen thinks my argument that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world fails because even if God were to prevent all significant and especially all horrendous evil consequences in the world, as needed, as I claim he is morally required to do, it still could be the that case, given the assumption of libertarian freedom, that more people would choose to act wrongly in that world than do so in our world. That possible outcome, Chen thinks, undermines my claim that the God of traditional theism would be morally required to engage in such preventing acts in our world, because, according to Chen, that could make our world morally worse than it is.

Now I grant that it is logically possible, although unlikely, that, given the assumption of libertarian freedom, if God were to prevent all the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences in our world, as needed, more people might choose to act wrongly than actually choose to do so in our world. What I deny is that such an outcome would make this hypothetical world morally worse than our world.

Here, it is useful to begin by noting that Chen understands the playpen objection to my argument differently from most theists. William Hasker's contribution to this Special Issue illustrates the typical theist understanding of the objection. What Hasker tries to show is that a world where God would prevent all the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences in the world, as needed, as I claim he is morally required to do, would be a world where good people were no longer as motivated to prevent evil consequences themselves as they are in our world, and thus would be less engaged in soul-making preventions than they are in our world. Hasker thinks this shows that my required hypothetical world would be a less morally good world than the world we actually inhabit. My response to Hasker has been to show how good people would have ample opportunity for soul-making even if God were to engage in the kind of prevention of evil consequences that I claim he is morally required to do (Sterba 2020). I should point out that in my response to Hasker in this essay, I have slightly altered my previous response so as to more clearly establish my conclusion.

In contrast, my response to Chen's version of the playpen objection is to simply deny that a hypothetical world where both God prevents all the significant and especially all horrendous evil consequences in our world, as needed, and subsequently more people act wrongly than do so in our world results in a world that is morally worse than our world.

To see that this is the case, just consider how the Holocaust would play out in the hypothetical world. In that world, let us assume, Adolf Hitler would be joined by even more committed Nazis all bent upon exterminating the Jews and other undesirables. The problem for Hitler and his even more numerous band of Nazis is that is that despite their evil intentions and despite their long hours of planning how to carry them out, they are never able to implement any of their hateful polices but are stopped at every turn by the good people aided, when needed, by God intervening on their behalf. Given then that this is how things would turn out in a hypothetical world where God engaged in the prevention of all the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences, as needed, is there any question about which world morally good people would prefer to live in? Clearly, the

only people who would prefer to live in our world rather than this hypothetical one would be the Nazis themselves and their fellow travelers, but their preferences should have no weight at all when the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is deciding what he should prevent or permit. Hence, the hypothetical world would clearly be morally preferable to our world. It is the world that the God of traditional theism would have brought about.

Let us suppose that everyone, not just more people, would all attempt to act horrendously wrong if God were to prevent, as I claim he should, all the horrendous evil consequences in the world, as needed. Surely that hypothetical world would be morally worse than our world, and that possibility is all that is needed to undercut my argument.[5] However, I would contend that when assessed in terms of their inner morality, the people in both the hypothetical world and the actual world are pretty much the same. They are both very morally bad. What we know from the hypothetical world about people in the actual world is something quite revealing. It is that all that it would take to get them to intend horrendous evil all the time is to have God do what he morally should do—prevent horrendous evil consequences in the actual world. Then, they would show their real moral colors. We would then see that in terms of their inner morality, they are no different than people in the hypothetical world. Hence, once we know about the moral equivalence of the people in the two worlds in terms of their inner moralities, the best thing God can do is make the world so that all external consequences of horrendous evil are prevented. However, that would make the hypothetical world morally better than the actual world, which is just the outcome required for my argument to work.

Interestingly, Chen herself comes very close reaching the same conclusion I do. At the very end of her paper, Chen notes that value I place on political freedom—the freedom from external constraints—and affirms that if this form of freedom were judged more valuable than what she calls metaphysical freedom—roughly, inner libertarian freedom—then "a world with ample political freedom but no metaphysical freedom would arguably be more valuable than the actual world." Yet, one does not even have to assume even this much in order to reach the conclusion I defend. In my hypothetical world, people have ALL the metaphysical inner freedom that they have in our world. The only difference is how political or external freedom is allocated in the two worlds with my view having a morally better distribution of it than the actual world. Hence, once Chen comes to see what my view actually requires here, I am hopeful that she will end up agreeing with me.

6. Brian Huffling

Brian Huffling thinks the argument of my book works against the existence of God of traditional theism but not against the existence of the God of classical theism. What distinguishes the God of classical theism from the God of traditional theism is that the God of traditional theism is understood to be morally good whereas the God of classical theism is understood to be good but not morally good. Since Brian Davies is best known for his defense of classical theism, Huffling's paper is devoted to a defense and further development of Davies's view, thus opposing that part of the argument of my book that is, in fact, directed against the existence of the God of classical theism.

Huffling notes that I argue that since God is said to be rational and it is in virtue of being rational that the moral law applies to us, then the moral law should apply to God as well. However, here Huffling rightly observes that I have not established that being rational requires being moral either for ourselves or for God. This is true. I did not present any argument for that conclusion in my recent book on the problem of evil. Fortunately, in my earlier work in moral and political philosophy, I have been able to show how a non-question-begging notion of rationality requires a commitment to morality. This is just the sort of argument that is needed here to establish that God's commitment to rationality supports a commitment to morality as well. Thus, the gap that Huffling found in my argument can be remedied in this way.

Huffling also claims that the view he shares with Davies can be supported by the following argument.

First premise: If God is the creator of the universe then he does not have the property of creation.

Second Premise: Morality is a property of creation.

Conclusion: Therefore, God does not have moral properties—he is not a moral being.

To evaluate Huffling's argument, let us keep the first premise and substitute for the second—Intelligence is a property of creation. Now Huffling does not want to draw the conclusion that God does not have the property of intelligence—that he is not an intelligent being. In fact, elsewhere, Huffling affirms that intelligence is an analogical property possessed by both God and ourselves.[6] Why then can being morally good not also be understood to be an analogical property that is possessed by God and ourselves.

A bit later in his paper, Huffling asks, "Is there any way that moral virtue can be ascribed to God?" His answer is that it can if the ascriptions are understood to be made analogically. Here, Huffling claims to be following Aquinas who thought it was "proper to call God 'just,' 'merciful,' and the like," to which Huffling adds that "it would be hard to deny that since the Scriptures do so." Yet, it is important to realize what Huffling is conceding here. To allow that moral virtues, such as being just, merciful and the like, can be analogically ascribed to God are simply particular ways of claiming that God is morally good, but that is simply inconsistent with Huffling's account of the God of classical who cannot be said to be morally good.

There is one other place in his paper where Huffling inconsistently portrays the God of classical theism as acting in morally defensible ways. Here, Huffling says:

God cannot murder. Murder has the idea of taking a life that does not belong to the murderer. But if God is sovereign over all life, then he owns all life and can do what he wants with it. God cannot steal, since all things belong to him.

However, here, Huffling is arguing that the relevant moral principles governing murder and stealing that would otherwise apply and require a certain compliant behavior, when applied to God, do not similarly require the expected compliant behavior. Likewise, we might argue that the goods we took from our neighbor's guarded possessions are not in violation of the moral requirement not to steal because those goods had been originally stolen from us. Thus, in both in Huffling's cases and in my hypothetical case, moral evaluations are involved; it is just that the moral evaluation are nonstandard ones.

Surprisingly, this is just how Richard Swinburne (whom Huffling characterizes as a traditional theist committed to God being morally good), exonerates God for permitting horrendous evil consequences in the world. According to Swinburne, the same moral principles that apply to God and ourselves allow God to permit horrendous evil consequences while not doing so for ourselves. Swinburne's justification for this difference is that God is a super benefactor while we are not. Now, I do not believe that Swinburne's argument works here, but the relevant point is that Huffling is thinking here just the way Swinburne is thinking, and everyone engaged in this discussion, Huffling included, agrees that Swinburne is a traditional theist. The upshot is that Huffling's views here are inconsistent with his professed commitment to classical theism.

7. Michael Beaty

Michael Beaty thinks that he and I agree that goodness is being ascribed to God in a univocal sense, but disagree on the much more important issue of whether the God of traditional theism is logically possible. Actually, we disagree on both issues. I never say anywhere in my book that goodness is attributable to God univocally. I never, in fact, ever employ the term univocal anywhere in my book. Instead, like the good Thomist I once was, I maintain that all the claims I make about God including claims about his goodness are made by analogy to features about ourselves and the rest of what is assumed for the sake of argument to be God's creation. However, Beaty goes on to use an interpretation of

Scotus that I do not think I accept—to identity Scotus's understanding of univocity with Aquinas's and the subsequent Thomistic understanding of analogy.

Beaty notes that central to my argument against God is my use of the standard of what an ideally just and powerful state would do. However, Beaty objects to my use of this standard, maintaining that "Christians don't, nor should they, regard a head of government of a political liberal society as an adequate analogy for God's governance of the universe." However, here, Beaty is not sufficiently taking into account the widespread use of analogy that compares God and Christ to an earthy king throughout the history of Christianity. In my book, I just draw out the moral implications of this widespread use for the God of traditional theism.

It seems appropriate, therefore, that the main objection that Beaty raised to my argument is that I fail to take into account one important disanalogy between earthly heads of state and God. Earthly heads of state, Beaty points out, have only a limited amount of time in which to show themselves to be just rulers. By contrast, God, Beaty claims, has all eternity to show himself to be a perfectly good ruler, and he can do this because given all eternity, God can succeed in compensating for all the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of the moral wrongdoing that God, if he exists, would have been permitting throughout human history. On Beaty's account, therefore, God would not fail at all to measure up to the standard of an ideally just and powerful state. Rather, God would adequately meet that standard because of the compensation God would be able to provide throughout all eternity to those who have suffered unjustly in this life. The crucial problem with Beaty's defense, however, is that even given an eternal future it is not logically possible for God to adequately compensate for all the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of moral action that God, if he exists, would have to be permitting in this world. Here is why.

First, God's restoring us to exactly the way we were just before we were wronged by having horrendous evil consequences inflicted on us in this life, which is the ideal for restorative justice, would never be better for us, given the lost time and opportunity the wrongdoing would entail compared to God's preventing those consequences from being inflicted on us in the first place combined with the provision of all the goods that God could provide to us without permitting the infliction of especially horrendous consequences on anyone. Moreover, it may not even be logically possible for God to restore us to exactly the same way we were before we were wronged. Even God, it would seem, cannot erase the past. Second, any goods that are not logically connected to God's permission of horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoing would be goods that God could and should have provided without permitting especially horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on us if he provided them to us at all. Third, for any goods that are logically connected to God's permission of horrendous evil consequences, the would-be beneficiaries of those goods would morally prefer that God had prevented the consequences rather than that they be provided with those goods through God's permission of them. Hence, the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, would, if he exists, have prevented the horrendous consequences of evil actions in the first place, as needed, rather than being put in the unfortunate position that human wrongdoers find themselves of having to restore the victims of their wrongdoing, as much as possible, to the status those victims had before they were wronged while further trying to compensate those same victims by providing them with goods that could, and should, have been provided to them without their first being wronged, if those goods were provided to them at all.

At the very end of his paper, Beaty notes that early in Chapter 2 of my book, I say that I am not contesting the possibility of the moral justification for God's permitting horrendous evils being that it secures some other good or goods in this life or other goods in an afterlife, but only contesting, at that junction of my argument, that God's justification for doing so could be secured in terms of the freedom it secures. Yet here Beaty should have noted that the passage also has a footnote which says that that the possibility of their being some good other than freedom that would justify God's permission of evil in the world will be

taken up in subsequent chapters, and when it is taken up in those subsequent chapters, it is rejected. So, no real concession to Beaty's view is to be found in this passage or elsewhere in my book.

I might add here that in an earlier version of my book, there actually were two initial chapters where I provisionally defended theses that were friendly to theism before I turned, in the greater part of this earlier version of my book, to a defense of atheism. As it turned out, reviewers of this earlier manuscript, most probably theists, had so much difficulty getting their heads around the idea that I might first be defending theism on a couple of topics before turning conclusively against the view, that I thought it best to cut those chapters out of my book manuscript altogether. Those two chapters entitled "Solving Darwin's Problem with Natural Evil" and "Eliminating the Problem of Hell" were then published as separate articles.[7] Still, I think they are profitably read along with the book as published, especially the second one.

8. Bruce Reichenbach

Bruce Reichenbach thinks that what constitutes significant suffering is relative to the other suffering we are experiencing. Thus, in a world where we normally experience pains at level 3, pains at level 8 would be very significant, but in another world where we normally experience no pains, pains at level 1 would be thought to be very significant, if not horrendous. Because of this, Reichenbach thinks that if God were to prevent all what we take to be horrendous evil consequences in the world, then, what he does not prevent would be the new horrendous evil requiring God to prevent that as well.

Just suppose that God were to prevent all the serious diseases and illnesses to which we are subject and the only thing that bothered us was the common cold, which lasted for a week or two and then went away. I do not see how any of us would regard the inconveniences of the common cold just as we now regard horrendous evils in our world. Or consider the serious harm inflicted by a brutal assault and the disappointment you cause when you forget a friend's birthday. In our world, we are willing to incarcerate people for doing the former but never the latter. So, would we change our views about incarceration if the harms people did to each other were no more significant than forgetting a friend's birthday? I think not.

Reichenbach also thinks I face a dilemma. Somewhat reconstructed, his dilemma is this: If God were to permit only trivial evils to occur, we would not develop moral character. Alternatively, if God were to permit more than trivial evils to occur, he would be in violation of the Pauline Principle and so not morally good. Nevertheless, in my book, I argue that both God and ourselves can justifiably violate the Pauline Principle, but not my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III whose requirements are more restricted. I further argued that the scope for moral development permitted by MEPR I–III is just what an ideally just and powerful state would provide and so should be all that is needed.

In my book, I defend a Principle of Disproportionality that places limits on when we could favor human over nonhuman interests. According to this principle:

> Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems.

Paralleling his objection to an objective specification of horrendous evil consequences, Reichenbach objects to this principle with respect to the specification of basic versus nonbasic needs. He points out that many of his university students in Liberia would consider even having a functioning bicycle to be a luxury whereas most people in the developed world would not. However, much of the practical variability in people's expectations about social goods is due to the fundamental injustices in the distribution and availability of those goods worldwide. Eliminate those injustices and then, I contend, that what counts as basic versus nonbasic needs will be the same for people everywhere who are living in the same natural environments.[8]

9. Elizabeth Burns

Elizabeth Burns begins her paper with an accurately detailed exposition of my argument that the existence of all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Along the way, she criticizes my argument with regard to natural evil. However, she does not regard her criticism as undermining the overall success of my argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. Nevertheless, in the last sections of her paper, Burns does sketch an account of God inspired by Charles Hartshorne's work that she claims is not defeated by the resources of my argument. Now while a Hartshornean conception of God was not the main target of the argument of my book, I think my argument still does have the resources to defeat it. However, before I explain how, I want to address the criticism that Burn raises against my argument from natural evil.

Burns notes that I claim that the solutions to the problems of moral and natural evil are different because our world is such that "it is not possible to avoid all significant natural evil." For example, in a flood, there is a conflict of interests between possible victims of the flood and scavengers who would feed on their dead bodies. On this account, I claim that God is not morally required to prevent all the significant or even horrendous evil consequences of natural evil in the world. Burns, however, objects to this asking why would it not be possible for God to provide an alternative source of food for the scavengers. She notes my objection that "miraculous interventions that would always keep the lion from eating the zebra or any other living being would change the lion into something else; it would not be consistent with the lion's nature," my view being that God's interventions should not go that far.

Here, Burns counters with the following argument: If, in a trolley case, God could, for example, intervene by causing a distraction so that the first person is not on the track when the trolley passes by, why could God not create lions who thrive on an exclusively herbivorous diet? Unfortunately, this response just ignores the relevant difference I am highlighting: some interventions would only "succeed" by changing the natures of the creatures that are in conflict. Thus, while interventions in trolley cases do not require a change in nature of those whose interests conflict, interventions that would always save zebras and other comparable prey from lions would have to change the natures of lions, something similar to what happens in zoos.

Now turning to Burns's defense of a Hartshornean conception of God, she claims that Hartshorne does not need to appeal to a Greater Good Defense or to a skeptical theist argument, as he sometimes does, to support his view, recognizing, as she does, that my argument also provides a strong counter to using such defenses. What will work, she thinks, is Hartshorne's conception of God having "as much power as it is possible for God to have." Still, this Hartshornean God cannot prevent the causes of the suffering in the world. He can only offer strength and support to those who suffer. Even so, Burns claims that Hartshorne has provided a range of arguments s for the existence of God to which she has added one herself. Yet note that none of these arguments, even if any of them worked, would support the existence of a moral God, and Burns and Hartshorne are only able to retain the possibility that God is all-good because they deny that God is powerful enough to intervene and prevent the horrendous evil consequences in our world. Yet here the problem arises that for this to be consistent, God has to be extremely weak since there are many occasions where we ourselves could prevent horrendous evil consequences if we were significantly stronger than we are. Yet why then should theists defend such a weak God? Would their efforts not be better served trying to find a fatal flaw in my logical argument from evil against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism? Surely it cannot be that the real fatal flaw in my argument is my failure to realize that God, while all-good, just so happens to be weak enough that he cannot prevent any of the horrendous evil consequences that occur in our world. That is just too convenient to be true.

10. Ronald Hall

Ronald Hall defends what he calls "Compassionate Deism." Hall appeals to deism in order to save God from the problem of evil. He claims that there is no problem of evil on his account because once God creates a world in which we are free in certain ways and creates a natural order governed by chance that gives us the opportunity to be virtuous in certain ways, he cannot intervene in the world to prevent the moral or natural evil that thereby happens to result without changing the world that he initially created. But while this is true, it is also true that changes in the world that God would have initially created are just what good people would expect an all-good and all-powerful Creator God to do. Moreover, any God who is powerful enough and good enough to create our world in the first place would also be powerful enough and good enough to be responsive, after he creates, to the moral preferences of his creatures, and so prevent not all evil consequences, but rather prevent just the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions from being inflicted on people, as needed, which would just restrict our freedom to some degree without eliminating it. Any Creator God who then fails to so act after he initially creates would not be an all-good, all-powerful Creator God.

Now Hall wants to call his all-good, all powerful Creator God "compassionate," and this does seem to be an improvement on some earlier forms of deism that described God as indifferent to the suffering of his creatures.[9] In virtue of being compassionate, Hall tells us that the Creator God is "loving" and that he "takes a deep and abiding interest in our lives, that he has hopes for each of us, and that he suffers with us [which] is testimony to his goodness." Yet, unless Hall's Creator God is not all-powerful as well as being all-good, then, if he exists, he would be responding to the moral preferences of good people to prevent the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions from being inflicted on people, as needed. Yet we know this has not happened.

Hall also wants to model his Creator God after the engineer of a suspension bridge who designs the bridge and then just "lets it be," but even in our morally unjust world, engineers of bridges generally have to take out insurance to cover possible design flaws that would necessitate costly repairs before serious harm is done. All the more, then, should an all-powerful Creator God be responsible for preventing the especially horrendous evil consequences in our world, much the way we would expect an ideally just and powerful political state to do so, as needed.

11. John Bishop

John Bishop believes that 'logical' arguments from evil in the 'Mackie tradition,' such as my own, are limited by their dependence on ethical assumptions that others may reasonably reject. He thinks this holds even for his own attempt at a logical argument against the existence of God, which he claims only works for those who accept the nonconsequentialist ethical assumptions on which it rests; those who begin with consequentialist ethical assumptions will not find his argument compelling. On the basis of his assessment of his own and other logical arguments against the existence of God, Bishop judges that my own logical argument will be subject to a similar fate. Its conclusion, too, will be "normatively relativized" and so depend on ethical assumptions that others may reasonably reject.

Unfortunately, Bishop never actually examines the ethical assumptions of my argument to see whether his overall assessment of logical arguments against it holds. Accordingly, he fails to realize that the ethical assumptions of my argument, unlike those of the arguments that Bishop considered, are not normatively relativized because they have been constructed so as to be acceptable to both consequentialists and nonconsequentialists, and so they hold for any possible ethical perspective.

Even so, Bishop thinks that my argument can still be faulted because it relies on the assumption that God is a moral/rational agent. Bishop contends that the classical theist tradition rejects this assumption, as do some contemporary defenders of that tradition today, most notably, Brian Davies. Yet, even without this assumption, it still would follow that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be in violation of my moral evil

prevention requirements (MEPR I–III) by permitting all the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions when he could have easily prevented them. Would it not be good for God not to do this? If not, why not? Surely there is something that is good for God to do or bad for him not to do.

In addition, while Bishop denies that God is a moral/rational agent, he still allows that God can be "said to be rational, as well as knowing and willing"—but he understands these ways of speaking as "an analogous extension from the human personal context in which they are at home where their meaning is clearly understood." Thus, Bishop thinks, "talk of God as exercising rational agency is apt . . . through an analogous extension of the language of agency and of beings and their properties." Furthermore, he holds, "even our referring to God as something that can be the subject of (analogous) predication is itself a significant piece of analogizing".

If all these terms—being rational, knowing, willing, and simply being—are all said to be predicated analogously of God, why cannot the term of being a moral/rational agent also be predicated analogously of God? If the former terms can be analogously applied to God, so should the latter. Again, can we not speak of what would be good for God to do and bad for him not to do? That is all that is required to reach my conclusion.

Bishop also thinks that the classical theist tradition eschews talking about God in personal terms, but this may have something to do with the fact that at least from the First Council of Nicaea in 325 onward, God was understood in Christianity to be three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one God. Thus, while the doctrine of the Trinity shows no reluctance from the 4th Century on to analogously employ the term person, thinking of God as three persons in one person would have been a much more difficult doctrine to defend. Hence, Bishop has not uncovered anything in the classical theist tradition that would undermine my argument that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

12. Brett Wilmot

Brett Wilmot is generally sympathetic to my argument that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Accordingly, he wants to provide an account of a nontraditional God who is not all-powerful, such as the God of traditional theism, yet unsurpassably powerful and not all-good, including being morally good, such as the God of traditional theism, yet who is still morally relevant to human life in a way that, unlike the God of traditional theism, is logically compatible with all the evil in the world.

Wilmot's God is said not to be a moral agent because, unlike ourselves, who have a choice between acting in accord with or in opposition to the standard of maximizing value, Wilmot's God necessarily acts in accordance with that standard. Wilmot's God is also said to be morally relevant to human life because the standard of maximizing value that Wilmot's God necessarily pursues is the same standard that our reason tells us that we should be pursuing and because Wilmot's God also acts to lure us to act in accord with that standard.

Nevertheless, the standard of maximizing value is not always the one that our reason tells us we should be pursuing. This is because, at least in certain contexts, that standard can be seen to conflict with the requirements of fairness, and so it is best understood to be constrained by those requirements.

What is most significant is that Wilmot's God is said to never override our powers locally. Here, Wilmot thinks, the analogy of the conductor of an orchestra might prove useful. Let me quote him at some length:

> There are things that the conductor can do in terms of ordering the actions of the individual players in an orchestra in ways that integrate their efforts into a harmonious whole. No one of the individual players can accomplish this, and in this sense, the conductor's power is unsurpassed by any of the other members of the orchestra. That being said, the conductor cannot prevent an

> individual performer from playing a sour note or missing her entrance, each of which mars the beauty of the whole production. A good conductor does all that a conductor can to encourage excellent musicianship, both in setting the conditions for performance generally and when engaged in conducting a particular performance. In both cases, the conductor exercises powers of influence and persuasion unavailable to the other members. If she is a good conductor, then she does all that is proper to her to promote musical excellence (value) and minimize disharmony (evil) as these relate to the musical performance of the orchestra through her unique influence on the other members. Still, the conductor does not play the instruments for the players, and the conductor's ultimate achievement involves her influence on, and response to, the decisions freely made by the individuals in the orchestra.

Now the first thing to note about Wilmot's God is that he really is a moral agent, just one who does not always act according to the best moral standard. Yet the problem with Wilmot's God is not that he necessarily acts to maximize value, and so, at least in certain contexts, does not act in accord with the highest moral standard. Rather, the problem with Wilmot's God is that he is incapable of preventing especially horrendous moral or natural evil consequences in the world.

Think about what this means for Wilmot's conductor analogy. Suppose the second violinist for years has been seething with envy of the first violinist. Suppose that right in the middle of a sold-out performance at Carnegie Hall the second violinist begins to violently attack the first violinist. What does our conductor do? Does he attempt to stop the attack himself? Suppose our conductor wants to act morally or even just wants to maximize value, but paralleling Wilmot's God, he would be unable to come to the aid of the violinist who is being attacked. Such a conductor, and more importantly, such a God, would thus be so much weaker than we typically are in such circumstances. So why suppose such a being exists? True, the existence of Wilmot's God would be logically compatible with all the evil in the world, but that is only because Wilmot's God, despite his good intentions, is assumed to be incapable of preventing any of the evil that occurs in the world. That is just too convenient. We need some good reason to assume that such a deity exists, and Wilmot does not provide us with any such reason. I really do not think he can.

13. Toby Betenson

Toby Betenson begins his paper by noting that the title of my book "Is a Good God Logically Possible?" might cause raised eyebrows amongst a generation of philosophers educated under the consensus that "logical" formulations of the problem of evil are untenable. Actually, I began my book noting that very same consensus. It is this consensus that Betenson wants to show is deeply mistaken. He not only thinks the consensus has failed to recognize the appropriateness of logical arguments from evil such as my own, but he also thinks that it has failed to recognize that all arguments from evil are best understood as logical arguments. Now while I have considerable sympathy for Betenson's general approach to the problem of evil, I think it would help to explain more why philosophers embraced the consensus in the first place and why it has remained in force up to the present day.

As Betenson recognizes, the pivotal event that led to the consensus was the debate between John Mackie and Alvin Plantinga over the problem of evil. Yet here it is important to recognize that when Mackie failed to derive a contradiction by joining together purportedly logically necessary normative or metaphysical premises with the assumption that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism exists and the empirical premise that evil exists (without which there would be no problem of evil), it was not as if philosophers working on the problem of evil at that time or since had other suitable, logically necessary, normative, or metaphysical premises waiting in the wings ready for them to deploy. After Mackie lost his debate with Plantinga, it was not clear how anyone inclined to defend atheism could continue to approach the problem of evil as Mackie had done. This helps

explain why philosophers who wanted to defend atheism turned their attention to a new strategy—that of developing an explicitly evidential argument for atheism. Here, of course, William Rowe led the charge. Nor does the argument of my 2019 book show there really were resources generally available for philosophers of religion, while the consensus held sway, to construct viable Mackie-style arguments against the existence of their own. This is because I did not construct my argument out of resources readily available to philosophers of religion. For most of my career, I worked in moral and political philosophy. It was only when I got a grant from the John Templeton Foundation in 2013 to bring yet untapped resources from moral and political philosophy to bear on the problem of evil that I was able to draw on my work in moral and political philosophy and eventually come up with minimal, but logically necessary, moral requirements of the Pauline principle to formulate a Mackie-style logical argument against the existence of God. If during the years following the Plantinga/Mackie debate, while the consensus held sway, I had been working in the philosophy of religion, rather than in moral and political philosophy, I, too, would probably have followed Rowe's lead and attempted to work out an explicitly evidential argument for atheism. Hopefully, at this point in time, the resources I have now been fortunate enough to deploy from my work in moral and political philosophy will allow us to more convincingly resolve the age-old problem of evil.

Now Betenson correctly points out that philosophers who followed Rowe and attempted to come up with explicit evidential arguments for atheism could still have given their arguments a logically deductive formulation. Some, such as Bruce Russell, did just that.[10] It is just that when the heart of one's argument against God does not utilize logically necessary, normative, or metaphysical principles, but rather is fundamentally evidential, then Michael Tooley's recommendation to give one's argument an overall evidential or probabilistic structure, a recommendation that Betenson discusses but rejects, does seem to be good advice.[11]

In the conclusion of his paper, Betenson considers two ways my own argument that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world might be countered. The first is to argue that God's goodness need not accord at all with our sense of goodness, even our sense of moral goodness. This is to allow that the moral goodness of God could be equivalent with the morally evil behavior of all the tyrants and villains that existed throughout human history and worse. However, this is not a "solution" to the problem of evil that is available to the traditional theist. Nor is it a solution to the problem of evil as it has been historically understood. Rather, it is more a way of defining the problem of evil out of existence rather than actually dealing with it. Traditional theists have to do better than this and they know it.

Betenson's second way of countering my argument is directed at my analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state. Here, Betenson claims that for us the grounds of legitimate political authority are the will of the people while nothing similar holds, he claims, with respect to God's legitimate authority. However, as I see it, the two authorities are completely analogous. Legitimate divine authority is grounded in the will of God and in order for the will of the people or the will of God to ground legitimate authority, they have to accord with the constraints of morality, morality must provide the final justification in both cases. Moreover, this is just what we would expect to be the case for my analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state to work.

14. Edward Feser

Edward Feser spends most of his paper setting out in admirable detail his Thomistic perspective on how to approach the problem of evil. As a result, it is only in the last quarter of his paper that he actually gets around to raising particular objections to my argument that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

Now Feser recognizes that when we apply predicates to God and ourselves, such as being just or merciful or permitting evil, claiming our assertions are true, we have to be speaking analogically. Even metaphorical statements made about God such as the

Psalmist's claim that The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer (or statements made by scientists that the atom is similar to our solar system (claiming that its nucleus is like the sun and its electrons are like the planets orbiting around the sun)) which also purport to be true have to be conveying their truth, when they are true, through nonliteral, analogical language. Yet what Feser fails to recognize is that I am always using the same analogical language of which he approves, as is illustrated, for example, by my repeated appeal to "the analogy of an ideally just and powerful state" throughout my book.

Feser goes on to raise four objections to my argument. His first objection is that God, if he exists, cannot be faulted for permitting all the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world because, Feser claims, the beatific vision that God provides us with in an afterlife can outweigh all those consequences. Here, Feser understands, as do I, the beatific vision to be friendship with God. However, I also argue that God's offer of friendship cannot be logically dependent on his permission of horrendous evil consequences because if it were, his power would be impossibly limited. So, it must always be logically possible for God to offer us his friendship without first permitting horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on ourselves or anyone else, and if God were all-good, then he would always be doing just that.

Feser's second objection is directed at my claim that a world where God prevents all the significant and especially horrendous evil would be a world with more significant freedom. Feser's objection is that from a Thomistic perspective, even in a world such as our own, where God, if he exists, would be permitting all the horrendous evil consequences that victims suffer, those victims would still have their free wills and so would not be deprived of the only significant freedom that really counts.

Yet the failures of even the most brutal and oppressive dictators to take away the inner freedom of their subjects does nothing to exonerate them for the evil they do by depriving their subjects of their external freedom. Why should it be any different for God who could prevent all horrendous evil consequences, as needed, and thereby secure our external freedom as needed?

Feser's third objection is that I fail to see that God's relationship to us is best captured by the relationship of a novelist to his characters in his novel. Given that we do not hold a novelist morally responsible for what the characters in his novel do, Feser thinks that we should not hold God morally responsible for what we do in the real world. No doubt an author who chooses to fill his novel with an endless string of holocausts each worse than the last has not done anything morally wrong. Yet it does not follow that a God who permits the horrendous consequences of a similar endless string of holocausts which he could have easily prevented without loss of greater good consequences or prevention of greater evil consequences has likewise not done anything morally wrong.

Lastly, when I argued that the moral law, which included the Pauline Principle, applies to ourselves and to God in virtue of us both being rational beings, Feser responded that the moral law only applies to us in virtue of our being rational animals which, of course, God is not. Yet, earlier, Feser recognized that certain virtues, such as being just and merciful, which do not make any direct reference to our appetites, do apply to God. Likewise, here, the Pauline Principle, which does not make any direct reference to our appetites, applies analogically to God in the same way that being just and merciful apply analogously to God.

15. Robin Attfield

Turning to the first distinctive objection raised by Robin Attfield to my argument, Attfield echoes a claim made earlier by Michael Almeida that I fail to distinguish between the political freedom that a just political state would be concerned to protect and the inner metaphysical freedom of choice that God, if he exists, would be concerned to protect (Almeida 2020, pp. 245–49). Yet what both Almeida and Attfield fail to realize here, as I point out in my book, is that if God were only concerned about protecting our inner metaphysical freedom, he could do that while still preventing all the horrendous evil consequences of our actions. Hence, appealing to freedom in this sense provides no grounds

at all for why God does not intervene to prevent all the horrendous evil consequences in the world.

Attfield also maintains that we need a regular world without frequent interventions by God if we are to freely live our lives and develop moral character. Yet throughout most of human history religious leaders and theologians have been telling us that God and other supernatural forces, both good and bad, have been actively intervening in our lives on a regular basis, and it was only after the development of modern science that the idea that God simply created a law-like universe and then for the most part did not intervene with its workings began to take hold. Yet why should natural laws take precedence over morality? For an all-good, all-powerful God, when moral requirements come into conflict with laws of nature, I contend that for such a God, moral requirements would have priority over the laws of nature unless someone had a right that that those laws not be violated. Moreover, God's meeting such moral requirements would create new regularities, ones that would, when introduced, truly conform to morality, and which, when taken together with the remaining natural regularities, we could count on obtaining while living our lives.

Attfield goes on, this time echoing the views of Keith Ward, to maintain that there are many things, including presumably many very evil things, that happen in our world without God intending them (Ward [1990] 2007). However, this contradicts the widely held view that everything that happens in the world is either something God directly wills or something God permits. So even if God would just permit evil, not directly cause something, he would still have to be doing so intentionally. When God chooses to permit rather than to prevent evil, he has to be acting intentionally.

Again, endorsing the views of Ward, Attfield tells us that a baby may only have supreme happiness if it were born into a world where it is tortured. However, if we just substitute "the opportunity to be friends with God" for "supreme happiness" into Ward and Attfield's claim, surely a fair substitution, we know that the claim is false. This is because we know that the opportunity to be friends with God has to be a free gift and so not logically conditional on God's permission of the torturing of anyone, certainly not a baby.

16. Scott Coley

Scott Coley argues for two claims in his paper. The first is that my argument does not work against the skeptical theist. The second is that skeptical theism itself can be dismissed because it leads to moral skepticism.

In his discussion of my argument, Coley fails to recognize that with respect to the moral evil in the world, my argument employs the following fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us:

1. Goods to which we have a right that are not logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
2. Goods to which we have a right that are logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions.
3. Goods to which we do not have a right that are not logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
4. Goods to which we do not have a right that are logically dependent on God's permission of significant and especially evil horrendous consequences of immoral action.

Instead, Coley focuses on just goods of type 1 and tries to undermine my argument that for goods of that type, the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would not permit horrendous evil consequences in order to secure goods of that type, which themselves are goods of the prevention of other horrendous evil consequences. Accordingly, Coley argues that it could be just logically impossible for both God and ourselves to secure such goods without permitting horrendous evil consequences while at the same time, it is causally impossible for us but not causally impossible for God to do the same. As a consequence, Coley claims, God could still be more powerful than we are because he is causally able to

secure such goods when we are not causally able to do so. However, Coley's argument fails because neither God nor anyone else could be causally able to do what is logically impossible for them to do. Coley's rejection of my argument is based on the possibility of an impossibility and so does not work.

Nor do I think that Coley continues his argument against skeptical theism far enough to draw the right conclusion. Now my argument against skeptical theism considered each of the fourfold ways God, if he exists, could provide goods to us and then showed that for each type of good, God's permission of horrendous evil consequences to secure that type of good would be morally objectionable because it would be in violation of one or another of the morally exceptionless minimal requirements of the Pauline Principle (MEPR I–III) and so not something that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, if he exists, could do.

Coley's argument against skeptical theism begins with The Fact: Every single day, according to relatively recent estimates, roughly 29,000 children under five years of age perish for want of life-sustaining necessities such as food, shelter, and basic medical remedies. He then entertains The Conjecture: No good is such that God would realize that good rather than realizing an optimal pattern of human flourishing. Joining The Fact, The Conjecture, and theism together, Coley arrives at The Implication: A world in which 29,000 children per day perish for lack of life's basic necessities conforms to a pattern of human flourishing no less optimal than that of a world in which on average, less than a single child per day dies under such circumstances. He thinks that skeptical theists cannot consistently deny that The Implication is true; and if The Implication were true, it would follow that we do not know very much at all about the realm of value.

However, I think Coley should have continued his argument as follows. We know that the only good that could justify God in permitting 29,000 children per day perish for lack of life's basic necessities would have to be logically dependent on that natural evil. This means that it would have to be the soul-making opportunities that would be provided by God's permission of that natural evil. However, here, appealing to my NEPR II, we know that the would-be beneficiaries of these opportunities would morally prefer that God prevent this evil to their being provided with it. This is because these beneficiaries can have a decent life without it and, assuming God exists, God's giving them the opportunity to be friends with himself could not be logically dependent on his permission of this or any other moral or natural evil. It follows then from this continuation of Coley's argument, a continuation that incorporates elements from my argument from the natural evil in the world, that any God that exists is not the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. This is the conclusion that Coley's own argument against skeptical theism was pointing toward, but sadly not explicitly deriving.

17. The End

Sixteen contributors are surely a lot to respond to in one paper, but I have done my best. It has been quite a challenge. While responding to the contributors of this Special Issue has led me to change my argument in various ways, the main conclusion of my argument has remained unchanged. I still hold that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

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Notes

1 Confirmed through e-mail exchange.

2 One relevantly smaller issue concerns what I am including under "consequences", particularly in MEPR I. This is taken up at the end of my discussion of William Hasker's contribution to this Special Issue.

3 See (Ekstrom 2021).

4 Hasker, "On Regretting the Evils of This World," p. 159.

[5] I owe this even more troublesome counterexample to Cheryl Chen.

[6] "God is Not a Moral Being," p. 45.

[7] See "Solving Darwin's Problem of Natural Evil" Sophia (2019) and "Eliminating the Problem of Hell." Religious Studies (2018).

[8] See further discussion, see my (Sterba 2013, chp. 6).

[9] It is interesting to note that some early forms of deism were most concerned to defend a God whose existence and nature was established by reason rather than by revelation and authority. For these early deists, that did not preclude thinking of God as benevolent. See BBC https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000n47b (accessed on Day Month Year).

[10] See (Russell 2017, pp. 90–107).

[11] See (Tooley 2015).

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Essay

James Sterba's New Argument from Evil

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Abstract: This article addresses the main argument in James Sterba's book, an argument which claims that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the evil in the world. I claim to show that his main premise, MEPRI, is implausible and is not a secure foundation for such an argument.

Keywords: Sterba; problem of evil; John Hick; divine intervention; rights

My thanks to James Sterba, and to the editors, for inviting me to reply to his book[1] and to his novel argument from evil against the existence of God. Sterba deserves credit for having introduced a new and ingenious argument into a very heavily-worked sector of the philosophical landscape. I shall argue, all the same, that his argument does not succeed.[2]

My focus will be on what I take to be Sterba's main argument, an argument that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the existence of certain kinds of evils that are prevalent in the world in which we live. In particular, I will criticize the main premise of that argument, the *Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I:*

> (MEPRI) Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, (a good to which we have a right) when, without violating anyone's rights, that can easily be done. (p. 126)

Sterba maintains that (MEPRI) is an exceptionless moral principle, such that any deviation from it by any person would show that that person is not perfectly good. (There is a similar, parallel, principle dealing with natural evil; we shall return to this later.) He argues that there clearly are many instances in which a good God, if God existed, could prevent such consequences; it follows, then, that God does not exist.

The objective of an atheological argument from evil is to show that there is something rationally defective about the theist's belief in a good God who is the creator and governor of the world. In view of this, a successful argument from evil needs to proceed from premises which either are already accepted by the theist, or are such that it can be shown that she rationally ought to accept them. Now, Sterba maintains that theists generally will in fact accept his principle, though they will maintain that there are good reasons why God might not be able to satisfy the principle in certain sorts of cases. However, he also provides some positive reasons why we all ought to accept the principle. He claims that the principle is readily acceptable both by teleological and by deontological ethical systems. With regard to teleological systems this is evident: we are asked to prevent "the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences" of certain actions when this can "easily" be done—that is, when the costs of doing so are small. It might seem plausible that deontological theories also would accept the principle; respect for the persons who will suffer these consequences would plausibly require that the consequences be averted when the cost of doing so is slight. There are, however, possible reasons for questioning this, as we shall see.

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[1] (Sterba 2019); page references in the text are to this volume.

[2] Previous discussions between Sterba and me have occurred at meetings of the Society for Philosophy of Religion, as well as in an issue of "*International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*" 87: 3 (June 2020) devoted to Sterba's book. I will not assume the reader's familiarity with that issue of *IJPR*; however, readers of the issue will find here some repetition, as well as considerable new material.

It seems relevant to note here a certain asymmetry in the application of (MEPRI) as between human agents and God. With regard to human agents, the principle is rather undemanding, because it is only rarely that we have it in our power *easily* to prevent significant or horrendous evil consequences. In most cases, preventing serious evils requires from us commitments of time, energy, and resources; it is just for this reason that the Good Samaritan is a powerful moral example. Sometimes, furthermore, preventing serious evils requires us to assume risks to ourselves. Where God is concerned, however, many things are "easy" for an omnipotent being, so the principle will come into effect far more frequently than is the case for human agents. This may lead us to suspect that, contrary to what has been implied, the principle has been specially devised as a weapon to be employed in an argument from evil, rather than being a principle of general ethics that is only subsequently applied in this atheological argument.

However this may be, Sterba does provide some additional arguments in support of his principle. He makes much of the claim that the principle accords with what we should expect of an "ideally just and powerful state"; if so, then should we expect less of a divine government? I believe this comparison is less forceful than Sterba takes it to be, because the analogy between human and divine government is weak. Their purposes need not entirely coincide: for example, we do not expect a secular state to have a major concern for bringing about the moral and spiritual development of its citizens. But the most striking disparity is the enormous difference in power between God and any human government. Furthermore, we should rightly be reluctant to allow to any human government a degree of power that would make it a plausible analog to divine government in this respect. (Readers of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* will recall that both Gandalf and Galadriel (beings of exalted status, far superior to humans in power and goodness) refused to accept the Ring of Power when it was offered to them. The Ring would enable either of them to do enormous good and to stamp out terrible evils—but eventually, they would themselves be overpowered by it, and even greater evil would be the result.)

To be sure, where divine government is concerned, we need not fear the corrupting influence of power. But this merely underscores the vast difference between the two sorts of governance. It means that the theorist is free to start out with his own conception of a relatively good and benign human government (Sterba is an admirer of the Scandinavian democracies), and then add variations as desired in order to arrive at a preferred version of divine governance. The analogy thus conceived may offer a congenial method for expounding the theorist's own preferences, but it has little if any argumentative force.

In his reply to me Sterba offers another, ad hominem, argument for his principle. He cites a principle from a writing of mine, termed the *No Gratuitous Evil* principle:

> (NGE) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being (i.e., God) would of necessity prevent the occurrence of any evil state of affairs it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.[3]

Sterba points out, reasonably enough, the similarities between NGE and his own moral requirements for divine governance: seemingly, one who affirms NGE has little room to dispute Sterba's principles.

Unfortunately, Sterba seems to have stopped reading too soon in the source he has quoted. On the very next page I say, "It is my belief that NGE is false, and this entire discussion is on the wrong track. In this paper . . . I shall argue . . . that NGE should be rejected by theists, since it comes into conflict with other, better-entrenched elements of the theistic worldview".[4] That argument will not be repeated in full here, but parts of it will become relevant later in this discussion.

[3] See (Hasker 2004, p. 80).

[4] (Hasker 2004, p. 81).

Whatever may be the case concerning Sterba's arguments for (MEPRI), the principle deserves consideration in its own right. In thinking about this principle, it occurred to me that there are two main ways it might be amended, in the process arriving at a principle that might be more plausible as an exceptionless moral requirement than the original.[5] One of these ways is captured by the following emended principle:

> Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (a good to which we have a right), when, without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities, that can easily be done.

The phrase, "without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities," subsumes the original "without violating anyone's rights". If someone has a right against me, I have a responsibility to observe that right, but the converse does not necessarily hold. For instance, I think I have a responsibility to care for the earth so as to preserve it as a habitat for future generations of humans. But I doubt that those future generations, who do not now exist and who, for all I now know, may never exist, have rights against me in the present time.

Sterba, it turns out, thinks that those non-existent future generations do have rights against us now, and he thinks that, in general, all of our obligations can be cashed out in terms of rights. So he thinks the emendation is unnecessary. (At worst, however, it does no harm, since if Sterba is right the phrase substituted is equivalent to the original.) This disagreement turns out to be not very important in the present discussion, since Sterba accepts that God has the particular responsibilities I wish to call to our attention.

One such responsibility is *the responsibility to maintain an environment in which the morally significant exercise of free will is possible and required.* This is a responsibility human governments do not have, except for the need to avoid legislating in a way that would excessively constrain the ability of citizens to make choices of their own. And it appears plausible that it is inconsistent with the exceptionless prevention of significant and horrendous evils envisioned by Sterba; preventing such evils might well involve large constraints on the ability of the citizens to exercise free will. However, his account includes a feature which is designed to alleviate this inconsistency. (MEPRI) requires only that the *consequences* of immoral actions be prevented, not the actions themselves. So the immoral actor could make her choice and perform the action in question, but the evil consequences of the action would be prevented in some way she could not have anticipated. Such a strategy might indeed be successful in a particular case. But if *all* the significant evil consequences of *all* immoral actions were thus prevented, agents would surely become aware that actions that would seriously harm other persons would fail to accomplish their ends; exercise of that sort of free choice would then become impossible. And humans who become aware that God can be counted on to prevent evils as required by the principles, will suffer a serious loss of motivation to prevent the evils themselves.[6]

Sterba, however, introduces yet another complication which, he claims, prevents these results. In cases where human beings have failed to fulfil their duty of preventing the harmful consequences of moral evil, God will prevent *part* of the evil consequences, but will leave another part to occur. This will not be as much of a deterrent for malefactors who intend harm to others, nor will it deprive persons of goodwill of motivation to intervene to prevent evils. He illustrates this with an example featuring a child abduction, where a bystander has the opportunity, and therefore the obligation, to prevent the abduction before it occurs. If the bystander fails in this responsibility, God arranges for police officers to arrest the abductors before they have killed or physically harmed the child. This prevents the worst consequences of the abduction, but may well leave the child traumatized from the experience. So people who have the opportunity to save others from harm will still realize that, even allowing for divine intervention, things will be worse if they fail in their responsibility to act.

[5] Note that I do *not* say that the principle as emended would in fact be an exceptionless moral requirement. That is a question for separate investigation. However, it seems to me that the principle without the amendments is not plausibly regarded as an exceptionless requirement.

[6] On this see "Can God Prevent 'Just Enough' Evil?" in *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (Hasker 2004, pp. 80–94).

This example is problematic, I believe, especially in the stipulation that the bystander can "easily" have prevented the abduction. How much time, we might ask, elapses between the moment when it becomes clear that an abduction is under way, and the moment when the abduction has been completed? Well-planned abductions are likely to take place very swiftly. Are the abductors armed? Or are they physically menacing? In either case, intervening to prevent the abduction might involve very significant risks to the intervener, with no guarantee of success.

But accepting the example as proposed, there remains another problem. The requirement is that an agent prevent "significant or horrendous" evils. This wording is vague, but in any particular case there will be a threshold, such that harm falling below that threshold is relatively insignificant and can be permitted, whereas harm above the threshold would violate the sufferer's rights and must be prevented. Now, if a human intervenes in such a way as to keep the evil consequences below the threshold, well and good. If the human being fails in her responsibility to intervene, but God acts so as to prevent harm above the threshold, then once again there is no violation of the sufferer's rights. But if God, as suggested by Sterba, prevents only part of the "excess harm," leaving some harm above the threshold to occur, then the sufferer's rights have been violated, and God has failed in his obligations, which is surely impossible.

Sterba, however, demurs. "In cases of this sort [like that of the child abduction as described], there is a residue of evil consequences that the victims still do suffer. This residue is not really a significant evil in its own right, but it is harmful nevertheless, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible". Once again, the example is problematic. Would the trauma inflicted on the child victim of a forcible abduction not be a "significant evil," one that anyone able easily to prevent it would be obligated to do so? But leaving the example to one side, it is clear that the "residue of evil consequences" left in cases of the sort described by Sterba would be very much less severe than what would occur without the proposed divine intervention, and the motivation for bystanders to prevent the morally wrong actions would be correspondingly less.[7] In this situation, God would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, allowing us to develop our characters by arguing over the Legos, but ready to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt. Actually, the comparison with a kindergarten may be too favorable. In an ordinary kindergarten children are being trained for later lives in which they will not be under constant supervision—but in Sterba's world, this adult stage is never reached.

There is, I believe, a second sort of responsibility on God's part that would in many situations keep God from preventing evils that, according to Sterba's principles, he might otherwise be required to prevent. This is *the responsibility to maintain a natural order which is rule-governed and generally reliable*. This is necessary if free will is to be meaningfully exercised within the natural world; indeed, it is necessary in order for sentient creatures, both humans and other animals, to be able to act at all within nature to obtain their ends. The difficulty of this on Sterba's scheme becomes apparent if we attend to another alleged moral requirement, as follows:

> NEPRI Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on rational beings (a good to which they have a right), as needed, when one can easily do so without causing greater or comparable harm to other rational beings. (p. 165)

(NEPRI) has so far been lurking in the background, but at this point it needs to be discussed. Preventing such evils in a Sterba-world would require even more instances of divine intervention than would be needed in ours: the greater unpredictability of natural processes in such a world would mean that humans and other animals would be much less able to anticipate potentially harmful events and avoid them. The number of interventions will be greatly multiplied if not only humans, but also sentient animals, are included among

[7] This is precisely the point made in my essay, "Can God Prevent 'Just Enough' Evil?"

those entities who are to be spared the significant and horrendous consequences of natural evil. (This is required by another of Sterba's principles, (NEPRIV); see p. 165).

John Hick has eloquently described a similar world:

> [N]o one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer's knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air . . . No one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground . . . To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work by 'special providences' instead of running according to general laws that we must learn to respect on penalty of pain or death.[8]

Sterba maintains, however, that there would still be regularities in such a world, provided God intervenes in a rational, consistent way rather than capriciously. No doubt this is correct, but those regularities would be exceedingly complex: in addition to taking account of the physical antecedent conditions, they would also include in each case a very complicated set of moral considerations. It is open to question how successful we could ever be in learning these regularities and in applying them in practice. Natural science is *hard*; of all the world's great civilizations only modern Europe has made serious headway in understanding nature's ways. But the effect on motivation might be even more striking. Would we ever have had agriculture, if shortages of food never threatened human life and well-being? But if no agriculture, then no cities, and if no cities, little progress in learning and the arts. And that is only the beginning. It is universally recognized that young humans, especially males, take excessive risks because they feel themselves to be invulnerable. In a Sterba-world, they would be right! It is, I submit, very far from obvious that a world with these characteristics would be especially well-suited to fulfill divine purposes for the creation.

The second major qualification I think is needed for (MEPRI) is that the right to be spared the consequences of evil may not hold when the person threatened by those consequences is himself or herself the instigator of the evil in question. (This is the reason why I suggested that a deontological ethics might have reservations about accepting the principle.) So I propose:

> MEPRI* Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to those who are not themselves the cause of those actions (a good to which we have a right), when, without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities, that can easily be done.

Once again, Sterba demurs, holding that no such change is required. As an example of my point, I proposed a case in which the dictator of a small nation starts a malicious war of aggression in order to extend his territory. The offensive fails, but results in huge amounts of suffering and death, and the dictator's palace is surrounded by an angry mob. On Sterba's unmodified principle, he has a *right* to be transported to a remote location where he can live out his life in luxury and safety; he has this right against anyone who is able easily to do this for him. I believe that many of us will share the opinion that this dictator does not by any means have a right to be saved from the consequences of his own evil decisions.

It turns out that Sterba agrees with this; however, his reason why this is not a counterexample to his original principle is extremely interesting. He writes, "Hasker thinks my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I entitles a dictator to be spared the harsh punishment that would otherwise be inflicted on him by those he had previously oppressed. Yet, in his example the dictator has no right to be spared that punishment, and so Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I does not require its prevention".[9] Now, I have no doubt that almost all of us will agree with Sterba that, in my example, the dictator has no right to be

[8] (Hick 1983, p. 47).

[9] "Afterthoughts" (Sterba 2020, p. 238).

spared his punishment. But in making his point, Sterba has in effect *seriously compromised,* if not actually *undermined,* the force of the principle (MEPRI). As this principle was originally presented, we naturally understood the role of the phrase, "(a good to which we have a right)", to be one of emphasis: it underscores the fact that, according to that principle, we have a *right* to be spared the consequences of morally evil actions.[10] As applied by Sterba to the dictator's case, however, that phrase takes on a different role altogether. Now it must be *independently established* that the prospective sufferer has a right to be spared this suffering, before the principle becomes applicable. Clearly, the prospect for establishing this in the case of the dictator is far from promising. But equally, there may be innumerable other cases in which the right in question can be challenged, so the overall application of the principle becomes extremely problematic. Sterba's reinterpretation of the phrase in question does a lot to protect (MEPRI) from counterexamples. By the same token, however, it greatly reduces the utility of the principle in supporting an argument from evil against the existence of God.

Finally, we return to Sterba's claim that theists in general will accept (MEPRI), holding only that in some cases it is impossible for God to comply with this requirement. Now, even if this is true, that does not secure (MEPRI) as a basis for Sterba's atheological argument. His claim, remember, is that certain instances of evil are *logically incompatible* with God's existence. But such a claim, if it is to succeed, must prove triumphant over the *best possible* theistic defense; it is not sufficient to win the argument by taking advantage of an unwise concession made by some opponents.[11] However, I do not believe the principle will in fact be widely conceded, at least not by theists who have their wits about them. At most, some may concede it as a *prima facie* moral requirement, but this is very different from accepting it as an exceptionless requirement, which is what Sterba needs. The reason I do not think they will accept it is that, when applied to a certain kind of situation, it produces a result that will be categorically unacceptable to all traditional theists, Christians included. To see this, consider the passage in Deuteronomy 30, where the Lord says to the Israelites, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity". The entire chapter rehearses the blessings that will come to them if they fulfill their covenant with God, as well as the calamities that will result if they are unfaithful. From Sterba's perspective, the reasonable and appropriate response from the Israelites would have been along these lines: "Lord, it is nice that you are thinking of us, but we would like to renegotiate this covenant you are talking about. Of course we have no objection to the 'life and prosperity' you promise us if we keep your commandments. But if we do not keep them, we would morally prefer that you intervene to prevent any horrendous consequences that might ensue. In fact, if you consider the matter fairly, you will recognize that we have a *right* to be treated that way".

Sterba does not side with the protesting Israelites in this situation. His reasons for this stance, however, are extremely interesting. He states that the requirement under (MEPRI) "applies only to harmful consequences we are entitled to have prevented. Hasker has the Israelites applying it to harmful consequences they are not entitled to have prevented because those consequences would be rightfully inflicted on them if they had broken their purported covenant with God".[12] *Purported* covenant with God? Either the covenant is in effect already or it is not. If it is not, it has no effect on what the Israelites deserve from God. But even if it is in effect, the Israelites in my little satire are asking for the covenant to be renegotiated. Is it Sterba's view that in this case (unlike, presumably, that of an ideal human government), the terms of the "social contract" are immutably fixed, not subject to revision?

[10] This is certainly what is suggested by the grammatical placement of the phrase: the "good to which we have a right" can only be the prevention of evil consequences that is the main point of the principle.

[11] By the same token, I believe the NGE principle stated previously is a mistaken concession. Theists who grant the principle may have difficulty in their defenses of theism, but that does not imply the failure of the theistic position.

[12] (Sterba 2020, p. 238).

But the more important problem is sitting here in plain view. The requirement under (MEPRI) "*applies only to harmful consequences we are entitled to have prevented*". This is, once again, the same fatal qualification we saw in the case of the dictator. The stated requirement is no longer an exceptionless requirement that applies to all persons in all situations. Instead, it applies only when it can be *independently established* that the prospective sufferer has a right to be spared this suffering. This protects the principle against counterexamples, but by the same token it weakens it to the point of near-uselessness.

We have seen that Sterba's principle, (MEPR1), is subject to a number of serious objections. We can conclude that an argument based on this principle does not offer a promising foundation for an argument against theism. The God described in James Sterba's book—the God who is bound by Sterba's principles of Moral Evil Prevention and Natural Evil Prevention, and who follows the policies we might expect from an ideal human government—this God does not exist. That should not be a surprise; this God was devised precisely in order to show that he does not exist. This, however, has little or nothing to do with the existence of the God in whom Christians believe—Yahweh, the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ.

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Article

God, Moral Requirements, and the Limits of Freedom

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Abstract: This article addresses James Sterba's recent argument for the conclusion that God's existence is incompatible with the degree and amount of evil in the world. I raise a number of questions concerning the moral principles that Sterba suggests God would be required to follow, as well as with respect to the analogy he draws between the obligations of a just state and the obligations of God. Against Sterba's proposed justified divine policy of constraint on human freedom, I ask: What would motivate a perfect being to create human beings who imagine, intend, and freely begin to carry out horrific actions that bring harm to other human beings, to nonhuman animals, and to the environment? I argue that the rationale is lacking behind the thought that God would only interfere with the completion of the process of human beings' bringing to fruition their horrifically harmful intended outcomes, rather than creating beings with different psychologies and abilities altogether. I end by giving some friendly proposals that help to support Sterba's view that God, by nature, would be perfectly morally good.

Keywords: problem of evil; James Sterba; divine obligations; Richard Swinburne; free will

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Is the God of traditional theism logically compatible with all the evil in the world? That is our question. One might suggest that, at least on initial reflection, it seems consistently imaginable that God exists, and yet, the facts about evil in our world are as they are; it may seem *logically possible* that God has justifying reasons for permitting every instance of evil in the world and that there are God-justifying reasons for the facts about evil in our world, including its intensity, amount, and apparently unfair distribution.

James Sterba (2019), however, has recently presented a new argument for the contention that God is not logically compatible with the "significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions" and that God is not logically compatible with the world's natural evils, either. Sterba expresses the question on which he focuses as whether or not God "is compatible with the degree and amount of evil that actually exists in our world" (Sterba 2019, p. 1). Later in the book, he expresses his position as the view that "the existence of God is logically incompatible with fundamental requirements of our morality" (Sterba 2019, p. 111)—though what he means is that God's existence is incompatible with the moral requirements that Sterba identifies along with observed facts about evil in our world.

Sterba supports this position by appealing to the analogy of a just state and to the following moral principle: "Pauline Principle—Never do evil that good may come of it" (Sterba 2019, p. 2). Sterba maintains that this principle is true, while noting that "there clearly are exceptions to it" (Sterba 2019, p. 2), such as when the evil in question is "trivial," "easily reparable," and "the only way to prevent far greater harm to innocent people" (Sterba 2019, pp. 2–3, 49–50). Through his discussion, we see that Sterba interprets the phrase "do evil" in the Pauline Principle as "intentionally do evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 8, n. 5). Other interpretive matters are somewhat less straightforward, including the question of which evils are trivial and which are nontrivial, what counts as being "easily reparable," and what qualifies as far greater harm to innocent people. Crucially, there is also the matter of interpreting the term "that" in the principle. At one point in the book, Sterba writes:

> In both traditional and contemporary ethics, there is a moral principle that seems to be in direct conflict with God's permitting evil and then making up for it later. That moral principle . . . is frequently referred to as the Pauline Principle, because it is endorsed by St. Paul (*Romans* 3:8). The principle holds that we should never do evil that good may come of it. (Sterba 2019, p. 44)

Notice the phrase "and then making up for it later" in this passage, which is characterizing the Pauline Principle. The principle that we should "never do evil that good may come of it" seems not to be directed at cases—at least, not only at cases—in which we intentionally commit an evil action merely with the plan of making up for it later, as in the case of a man who violently strikes his wife (or allows another man to strike her without attempting to intervene) with the plan of giving her a fancy piece of jewelry the following day. Rather, the principle seems centrally to be enjoining us to refrain from performing evil actions *in order that* good may come from them; that is, we should not perform evil acts with the aim of, through those acts, bringing about goods, unless those evils are trivial, easy to repair, and necessary to the greater good of preventing greater harm. Although Sterba says that the Pauline Principle "has been virtually ignored by contemporary philosophers of religion despite its relevance to the problem of evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 2), when we attempt to interpret the principle, it seems closely related to the idea, and to me seems most plausibly construed as the idea, that one should not intentionally cause or allow evil (even in order to bring about good) unless that evil is necessary to bringing about a greater good, which could include preventing a worse evil. However, this principle is widely discussed in contemporary debates over William Rowe's influential arguments from evil for atheism.

1. Sterba's Proposed Moral Requirements

Sterba works to make more precise the moral requirements he thinks would apply to God by delineating the following three particular moral principles (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

Sterba's Moral Evil Prevention Requirements:

(I) Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done.

(II) Do not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

(III) Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

With these proposed moral requirements in hand, the following is Sterba's logical argument from evil, suggested as a correction to J. L. Mackie's argument (Mackie 1955):

1. If God were to exist, then necessarily God would be adhering to the moral evil prevention requirements I–III because these are "exceptionless, minimal components of the Pauline Principle that are acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists and are, or should be, acceptable to theists and atheists as well" (Sterba 2019, p. 189).
2. If God were adhering to these evil prevention requirements, then "necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission" (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90).
3. Such consequences do obtain all around us.
4. Therefore, God does not exist.

Sterba also has a sixteen-step way of setting out his argument from moral evil (Sterba 2019, pp. 185–88).

One might find it difficult to determine whether or not Sterba's argument demonstrates the logical incompatibility between the proposition that God exists and the proposition that the degrees and amount of evil in our world are as they are, because one might find

it difficult to interpret his proposed moral evil prevention requirements. If one finds it difficult to interpret Sterba's proposed moral requirements, then it will be difficult to assess the claim that, if God were to exist, God would be obeying the proposed moral evil prevention requirements and also difficult to assess the claim that our observations of the world are such that we see clearly that the prevention requirements are not being obeyed or adhered to.

Here are some questions we might have concerning the principle that one should "prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done". Do we have a right to the prevention of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, including immoral actions of our own? Whether the right to the prevention of such consequences is said to apply to our own immoral actions or instead only to the immoral actions of others, what is the case for the existence of this right? What does "as needed" refer to, and why is it there in the principle? (Sterba notes that this phrase is there "to indicate that whether God acts in this regard and the degree to which he does act depends on what we do" (Sterba 2019, p. 192, n. 2). This refers to Sterba's views regarding the appropriate policy of constraint on others' freedom, which I address in Section 2 below. In that context, we see that the phrase "as needed" means something similar to "when, to one's best estimate, one sees that no one else will succeed in preventing the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of the immoral actions in question". It seems it could be difficult for us, and for God, depending on one's views about divine omniscience, to know when to step in, in attempting to act in accordance with this principle.) Further questions include these: How do we assess the relative ease or difficulty of preventing significant evil consequences without violating anyone's rights? Does "anyone" (in "without violating anyone's rights") include a freely acting wrongdoer—does the wrongdoer have a right to God's noninterference in his execution of his intentions, no matter how nefarious those intentions? Does the proposed moral requirement imply that no one would go to hell as a consequence of their immoral actions? It may seem to (depending on how we interpret the range of the right to prevention), because eternal suffering may be thought to be a horrendous evil consequence of immoral actions. However, would a murderer's annihilation or placement in heaven, rather than hell, violate the rights of the murdered person or the victim's loved ones? Importantly, which evil consequences are significant, and which are too insignificant to warrant prevention? It seems that any evil caused by immoral actions—pain, suffering, loss, premature death, disability, injury—could be significant to the victim and to those who care about her. (Notice that the pain from a paper cut accidentally caused by a coworker's handing you a piece of paper does not count as an evil consequence of an immoral action. For the cut to count as such, it would have to be the result of her deliberately trying to cut you—which seems to give it significance.) Perhaps, on Sterba's view, God's existence is logically compatible with the existence of the pain of discovering that one has been betrayed by someone one trusted but not with the traumas of sexual assault and genocide. However, the former still hurts, and we might sensibly inquire about whether or not there was a God-justifying reason to allow it to occur.

With respect to the second principle, that one should "not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have", we might ask: What does "morally prefer" mean? Questions arise, too, concerning the third principle that one should "not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods". To which goods, if any, do we have a right? What grounds our right to any goods to which we have a right? How do we assess the moral objectionability and moral non-objectionability of various ways of

providing goods? How many ways are required for countlessness? Can we tell when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing certain goods?

Sterba works in his book to clarify the meaning of the proposed principles by the discussion of examples designed to answer some of these questions—for instance, he thinks we have a right to freedom from assault and a right to enough resources to satisfy our basic needs (though there is not a case in the (Sterba 2019) book grounding the existence of these rights and corresponding obligations on God's part), and he holds that the trauma a child suffers from being grabbed by kidnappers is not significant and especially horrendous, though his being killed by the kidnappers is—but one might nonetheless be left puzzled, unable to discern conclusively whether or not the principles are true and accomplish the work intended.

I agree with Sterba that God's existence is not compatible with all the evil in the world—that is, with the facts about evil in our world including its amount, intensity, and distribution. In the remainder of this paper, I will take up certain aspects of Sterba's discussion in his thought-provoking book, matters that I think are worthy of further exploration, critique, or defense. In particular, I want to inquire further into some issues concerning human freedom, including its nature and its value. I will also make some suggestions about why God might be thought to have moral obligations towards us. As Sterba is, of course, aware, his argument depends on the premise that God is essentially a morally good agent so that the moral requirements he identifies, if correct, would apply to God. As part of his defense, Sterba argues against Brian Davies' case for thinking that God is good but not morally good. Sterba might wish to go on in further work to rebut at length Mark Murphy's recent extended arguments (Murphy 2017, 2019) for the view that an absolutely perfect being need not be morally good. In Section 3 below, I will offer some friendly proposals for grounding the claim that God is essentially morally good.

2. The Nature and Limits of Human Freedom

One of the most interesting aspects of Sterba's book is his view on God's proper role in granting and constraining the freedom of created beings. On this matter, Sterba writes:

> A world where everyone has unlimited freedom is not an ideal world by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, such a world could easily become a war of all against all, or a war of the thugs against the rest. By contrast, what would be ideal from the perspective of freedom is a world where everyone's freedom is appropriately constrained . . . But when are constraints on freedom too much and when are they appropriate? (Sterba 2019, p. 53)

Notice that "unlimited freedom" is quite strong language—one might wonder if it suggests that the hypothetical created beings have freedom with respect to all logically possible actions, such that they would be able to turn water into wine without adding chemicals and could part the Red Sea on their own power and could jump over buildings in a single bound unaided. One might legitimately ask why God would not create beings with such powers. I think Sterba is concerned, given the context of the passage, with freedom concerning actions that are, in fact, physically possible for us human beings and that range across a moral spectrum from amazingly good to horrifically evil. He is concerned with the question of when God would interfere with a created being's exercise of free will with respect to the badness or wrongness of the potential act. The question is an important one concerning which limits are appropriate on the moral range of options we can carry out.

Sterba suggests that on a "justified policy of constraint" (Sterba 2019, p. 53), God "would be allowing evildoers to bring about the evil consequences of their actions for a broad range of cases where the consequences, especially for others, are not significantly evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 55). In addition, he says, "God would be allowing would-be wrongdoers to imagine, intend, or even take the initial steps toward carrying out their seriously wrongful actions, and just stopping wrongdoers from bringing about significantly and especially horrendously evil consequences of those actions" (Sterba 2019, p. 55).

Sterba clearly values freedom and sees it as something that God would give to created beings. He observes that a just state interferes with one person's freedom to assault another person—more precisely, intervenes when possible to prevent the execution of one person's intention to assault another person—in order to protect the other person's freedom from assault (or the other person's right to live and move about without being assaulted). On analogy to the constraints put on a person's freedom by a just state, Sterba argues that God would put constraints on the range of actions created persons are free (or able) to carry out.

Sterba's view on this matter contrasts with that of Richard Swinburne, whose treatment of the problem of evil includes the contention that our being able to do really terrible things is a good thing. In order to have free will of especially high value, Swinburne argues, the range of actions with respect to which we are free must be broad, including not only somewhat-good and somewhat-bad actions, but also actions that are very bad, even acts that are dreadfully wrong. If we are free to perform wrong actions, then we have what Swinburne calls "very serious free will", and that, he contends, is better than our having mere (nonserious) free will (Swinburne 1998, p. 84). Swinburne holds that our having very serious free will requires that wrong actions be live options for us, so he also thinks that in giving us very serious free will, God would also need to give us bad desires.

For Swinburne, central to a successful theodicy is appeal to the good of libertarian free will—that is, free will understood in such a way that its possession by us is incompatible with the truth of causal determinism—but there must be other elements, as well, among which is the value of "being of use". We can appreciate the need for this additional proposed value by reflecting on some instances of freely chosen wrongdoing while taking into account the situation of the victim of the wrong act. In cases of betrayal and violence, for instance, the free will of the person who betrays another and the free will of the person who acts violently toward another are meant to justify God in allowing the betrayal and the violence to take place. However, the victims of the betrayal and of the violence do not, in those instances, acquire something of high value themselves. Rather, they suffer the deep pain of being betrayed and treated violently. One might attempt to defend the claim that in such cases, the overall situation is still good, given the presence of the very serious libertarian free will enjoyed by the perpetrators, and one might allege that we need not be concerned with respect to theodicy beyond that. Or one might suggest that the victims themselves do experience, whether they realize it or not, the value of being of use. Swinburne suggests that it is *good for a person* to contribute to the wider good "even by being used as the vehicle of a good purpose" (Swinburne 1998, p. 101). A person might *be of use* in his suffering for the general (allegedly greater) good of the existence of libertarian free will in created beings. Or he might be of use in suffering for the benefit of the opportunity for character growth or for connection with God on the part of others. However, these thoughts of Swinburne's concerning "being of use", when we apply them, for instance, to persons who are tortured and to victims of sexual abuse and slavery, are to my mind morally abhorrent.

Sterba, I think, would agree, because suffering torture, sexual abuse, and slavery are horrendous evil consequences of immoral choices that God, if God were to exist, should have prevented.

Now, the question I want to pose is this: Why would God create persons with the power of libertarian free will and allow them freely to imagine, intend, and take initial steps toward carrying out seriously wrongful actions (intervening only to prevent significant and especially horrendous consequences)? What would be good about granting people such power? I am not sure it is good. Recall that Sterba's case for the obligations of God is made by reference to the analogy of the obligations of a just state. Notice, however, that a just state has to deal with people as they are, with the characteristics and tendencies, the physical and psychological abilities, of human beings already largely fixed. However, God gets to do the "fixing" at the start. God does not have to manage and govern human beings as God finds them (as the state has to do). Rather, God gets to create whatever beings there

are, however God chooses to create them, with whatever physical and psychological traits and abilities he wants for them to have.

In other words, the political state comes in after the facts about creation are settled. It gets human beings as they are. God, though, establishes what beings there are and what physical traits and proclivities, inclinations, urges, drives, and powers they have. What would motivate a perfect being to create human beings who imagine, intend, and freely begin to carry out horrific actions that bring harm to other human beings, to nonhuman animals, and to the environment? What is the rationale behind the thought that God would only interfere with the completion of the process of human beings' bringing to fruition their horrifically harmful intended outcomes rather than creating beings with different psychologies and abilities altogether?

In short, this is the question on which I think it is important for us to reflect: On what grounds should one think that free will is a good worth giving us and a good worth respecting (by noninterference) in some cases and to some degrees? That is, why would a perfect being grant and respect the power of free action to and in created beings *at all*?

One suggestion is that God's creation of beings with free will enables there to be moral goodness in the world, and the existence of moral goodness is the God-justifying reason for permitting evils in the world that result from the creaturely misuse of the power of free will. A problem for this suggestion arises when we consider Alvin Plantinga's influential definition of moral goodness: Moral goodness is goodness brought about by an agent with significant freedom, where significant freedom is defined as the power to act freely with respect to actions that matter morally, that is, which are either right or wrong for the agent (Plantinga 1974, p. 30). Plantinga's understanding of free will is as follows: "If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it" (Plantinga 1974, p. 29).

Libertarian free will, though, is not required in order for *goodness* to exist. There can be kindness, and knowledge, and mutual understanding, and meaning in life, and creativity, and love, and beauty in the world without any kind acts, or acts of acquiring and disseminating knowledge, or creative acts, or loving acts being acts that are performed with free will as Plantinga and other libertarians conceive of it (Ekstrom 2016, 2021). Libertarian free will is required for moral goodness as Plantinga defines moral goodness, but that is only because by the term "moral goodness", he *means* goodness brought about by beings with libertarian free will. An appeal to the value of "moral goodness" as a proposed (or possible and for all we know true) God-justifying reason for the existence of evil (or for the facts about evil) thus involves an appeal to the alleged value of libertarian free will, a value that is sufficiently high to make it worth its costs. By way of examining various proposals concerning the alleged intrinsic value and extrinsic value of libertarian free will, I argue that it is not at all clear that libertarian free will is sufficiently valuable (Ekstrom 2016, 2021). On Daniel Howard-Snyder's proposed success condition for a defense against the logical problem of evil, a defense succeeds only if it is not reasonable to refrain from believing the propositions that constitute it (Howard-Snyder 2013, p. 24). I argue that it is reasonable to refrain from believing that libertarian free will is worth the costs of the evil it brings into the world. Thus, I think that the free will defense is not successful.

Sterba thinks that human freedom is good but that our having the freedom to carry out seriously evil actions (or to bring about seriously evil consequences by way of our actions) is not good. In support of the idea that human freedom is good, he points to its enabling character development that makes us fit (less unfit) for a heavenly afterlife with God (Sterba 2019, pp. 52, 61–62). Sterba does not give attention to varying libertarian and compatibilist conceptions of free will. (He refers to libertarian free will as "contra-causal freedom", but there are many libertarian accounts of free will that are not contra-causal, including event-causal indeterminist accounts) (Ekstrom 2000, 2019a).

However, I think it is crucial in addressing the problem of evil that we attend to different libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will, because it is through doing so that we can see that various goods we may have thought we needed libertarian free will to achieve in fact require only compatibilist free will. For instance, we could form and maintain friendships—and grow in knowledge of and love for our friends, as well as grow in knowledge of and love for strangers, and in this sense, develop our characters through time—with only compatibilist free will, and God could set the parameters of the way our psychology works and the way the physical world works so that such development would be enabled without the need for our having libertarian free will and without the facts about evil in our world being what they are. So, the human ability to imagine, intend, and undertake horrifically harmful actions is not justified by its being needed for friendship, love, knowledge, and growth in our relationships and personalities. Moreover, it is not clear that temporally extended moral character development by way of libertarian free choices in a world full of evils is a good in the first place, and it is not clear that we should need to make ourselves "fit for" a heavenly (after)life with God. Why would God make beings that are "unfit" to be in the presence of and in harmony with God? If they need to have certain sorts of characters in order to be in the presence of and in harmony with God, then why not create them with characters that are sufficiently fit to enjoy friendship with God to begin with?

What I have asked is why God would create beings who are free to form inclinations to subject others to torture, sexual abuse, and slavery, and why God would enable those beings to begin to carry out those inclinations, intervening only to prevent the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of those inclinations and choices. I do not think that the case Sterba has provided is sufficient to defend the moral goodness of God's so acting.

3. Divine Requirements

In addition to the three moral evil prevention requirements enumerated above, Sterba also proposes nine "natural evil prevention requirements". He sets out his argument from the natural evil in the world as follows:

1. Natural Evil Prevention Requirements I–IX would have to be met by God, if he exists. (See Sterba 2019, pp. 184–85).
2. Accordingly, the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil that exists in the world would be logically incompatible with God's existence (Sterba 2019, p. 188).

Here, we might ask this question: What is the basis for Sterba's contention that God would prevent the horrendously painful consequences of natural forces (such as hurricanes and diseases) on human beings? What positive case could we give in favor of the position that God, by nature, would do so? Likewise, why should we think that we have a right not to be assaulted that is correlative with a duty on God's part to protect us from assault? Why think that God has an obligation to us to intervene in the execution of other persons' evil intentions to harm us in serious ways?

Here are two arguments I defend (in Ekstrom 2019b, 2021) for the view that God, by the nature of God, would promote our welfare and prevent pointless setbacks to our welfare, whether those pointless setbacks derive from natural forces or from an agent's actions. These are arguments in support of the position that a perfect being would be essentially morally good. Let us call a setback to an agent's welfare or an instance of suffering (or the risk of the setback or suffering) "pointless," following Rowe, just in case that setback or suffering (or risk of the setback or suffering) is not logically necessary for bringing about a greater good or preventing an evil as bad or worse.

The argument from the intrinsic value of persons is as follows. First, persons have intrinsic value. Second, any agent who knows of some being that it has intrinsic value and also knows of herself that she is capable of promoting that being's welfare and preventing pointless setbacks to the welfare of that being has a pro tanto requiring reason to promote

that being's welfare and to prevent pointless setbacks to the welfare of that being. Third, God is an agent. Fourth, God, as an omniscient being, knows which beings have intrinsic value and knows what God is capable of doing. Fifth, God, as an omnipotent being, is capable of promoting the welfare of, and preventing pointless setbacks to the welfare of, any persons in existence. Therefore, for any person in existence, God has a pro tanto requiring reason to promote promote that person's welfare and to prevent pointless setbacks to that person's welfare.

Suppose the argument from intrinsic value just given were to fail because it is not the case that persons have intrinsic value, either in the sense of nonderivative value or in the sense of non-instrumental, final value. Still, I think we could provide a successful argument for the conclusion that a perfect being would have a requiring reason to prevent our pointless suffering. The second argument is as follows. First, any rational agent who intentionally brings into existence a sentient being—or allows that being to evolve when that agent could have instead prevented its existence—has a pro tanto requiring reason to prevent that sentient being from suffering pointlessly, so far as that agent is able to do so. Second, God is essentially omnipotent and hence is able to prevent the pointless suffering of sentient beings. Third, God is essentially a rational agent. Therefore, if God were intentionally to bring into existence a sentient being—or allow that being to evolve when he could have instead prevented its existence—then God would have a pro tanto requiring reason to prevent that sentient being from suffering pointlessly.

4. Argument from the Facts about Evil

Here is an argument related to Sterba's, one that I find more it a more straightforward matter to contemplate:

(1) If God were to exist, then God would have justifying reasons for allowing the facts about evil in our world to obtain. (2) If God were to have justifying reasons for allowing the facts about evil in our world to obtain, then we would be able to discern those reasons. (3) Despite collectively trying very hard, we do not discern God-justifying reasons for all the facts about evil in our world. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that (4) There are not God-justifying reasons for the facts about evil in our world. Therefore, (5) God does not exist.

Some theorists, Mark Murphy, for one, deny the first premise. Murphy alleges that God may allow some facts about evil in our world, including facts about human suffering and death, to obtain for no reason at all, because God has no requiring reason to prevent them (Murphy 2017, 2019). Skeptical theists, such as Michael Rea and Michael Bergmann, deny the second premise. They emphasize the chasm in knowledge and understanding between human beings and God, alleging that we are not justified in believing of any fact about evil (or instance of evil) that there is no God-justifying reason for it to obtain, even given our failure to discern such reasons. Theodicists, including John Hick and Richard Swinburne, deny the third premise. They present reasons for which God is justified in allowing the facts about evil in our world. "Defenders", such as Peter van Inwagen (2006), suggest God-justifying reasons that are possible and for all we know true.

I argue against all of these theorists and in defense of the argument from the facts about evil in my recent book (Ekstrom 2021).

Sterba (2019) book can be read as a partial defense, according to which some evils—those that are not significant and especially not horrendous consequences of immoral actions or of natural forces—are such that it would be justified for God to permit them, if there were a God, because those evils are necessary for the greater goods of human freedom and for the process of moral character development ("soul-making") allegedly needed to make humans beings less unworthy of a heavenly afterlife with God. In other words, God's existence is logically compatible, on Sterba's view, with evils that are not significant and especially not horrendous. I have questioned the success of this partial defense. However, Sterba's case remains for the incompatibility of God's existence and the degree and amount of evil in the world. On the matter of that incompatibility, we agree, although we make the case in different ways.

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Article

The Sovereignty of Humanity and Social Responsibility for Evil Prevention

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Abstract: In this paper, I suggest that James Sterba's recent restatement of the logical problem of evil overlooks a plausible theistic interpretation of the divine–human relation, which allows for a theodicy impervious to his atheological argument, which boils down to God's failure to meet Sterba's "Evil Prevention Requirements". I argue that such requirements need not apply to God in a world under full human sovereignty, which presupposes that God never intervenes to change the natural course of events to prevent evils, as God has a decisive "greater good justification" for not intervening, namely respecting human sovereignty. This non-interventionist view of divine providence can be made tenable by the great good and dignity of the God-granted human God-like self-creativity implied by human sovereignty (a concept inspired by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola). The Mirandolian theodicy can both accommodate and complement Dostoyevsky's Russian Orthodox view of "beneficial suffering", predicated against the background of the conception of "collective selfhood", overlooked by Sterba despite "featuring" on the cover of his book, no doubt due to his libertarian–individualistic assumptions about human agency and human flourishing, which a proponent of a theistic theodicy may do well to resist.

Keywords: logical argument from evil; James Sterba; Mirandolian theodicy; the sovereignty of humanity; Dostoyevsky on evil; relational conceptions of selfhood

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> "No fixed seat, no special look, nor any particular gift of your own have we given you, Adam, so that what seat, what look, what gifts you choose for yourself, those you may have and hold as you wish, according to your purpose. For others, a definite nature is confined within laws that we have prescribed. With no strictures confining you, you will determine that nature by your own choice, which is the authority under which I have put you. I have set you up as the center of the world so that you will be better placed to survey what the world contains. And we have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that on your own, as molder and maker, specially appointed to decide, you may shape yourself in the form that you prefer. You can sink back into lower forms that are beasts; from your own resolute spirit, you can be born again to higher forms that are divine. O the supreme generosity of God the Father! This is man's supreme and astonishing good fortune, to whom it is given to have what he chooses, to be what he wants". (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Copenhaver (2019, pp. 460–61))

1. James Sterba's Dostoyevsky Riddle

The cover of James Sterba's magisterial study of the problem of evil (Sterba 2019) confronts the reader with one of the most heart wrenching examples of gratuitous evil in all of the world's literature. In Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the atheist brother, Ivan, tells a story of a little serf boy who in play threw a stone and unintentionally hurt the paw of the master's favorite hound. The next day, in front of his mother, the boy is, upon the order of the master, torn to pieces by the master's pack of dogs (cf. Dostoyevsky 1993, pp. 205–6). Sterba reports the story at the high point of his dispute

with sceptical theists (cf. Sterba 2019, pp. 72–3), contemporary philosophical defenders of God's justice who argue that God has good reason for permitting every evil that actually occurs in the world, however, we are unable to discern it due to our epistemic limitations (cf. Bergmann 2011, pp. 375–99). Sterba, like Ivan Karamazov, considers cases of such horrendous evils—no doubt occurring daily throughout human (and animal) history—the ultimate test of the rationality of the belief in "a good God". Having considered the wide range of candidates for the justification of God in the face of such evils, Sterba comes up with a new formulation of the logical problem of evil, which implies that theism—understood as a belief in the existence of God that is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful—is necessarily false, because God fails the test of moral goodness miserably (and not just perfect goodness, but even goodness that would be expected from every human agent). Yet, the cover of Sterba's book points to a riddle and invites a question, "Why Dostoyevsky himself, by no means a man of easy faith, did not consider his charge against God, which he put in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov just months before his own death, a sufficient reason for abandoning his own Christian faith?". "What theodicy (understood here as intellectual resources to make sense of apparently senseless evils, in the apparent absence of divine intervention to prevent them) allowed Dostoyevsky to overcome the problem of evil which haunted him throughout his life?". When his first child, Sonya, died of pneumonia three months after her birth, Dostoyevsky's wife has recorded that he "wept and sobbed like a woman in despair" (Kjetssa 1989, p. 219). Ten years later, his son, Alyosha, died before reaching the age of three. Seeing his anguish, his philosopher friend, Vladimir Solovyov, took him to the Optina Monastery where Dostoyevsky was consoled by the charismatic monk Ambrose, the prototype of Father Zosima, the holy monk in *Brothers Karamazov*.

I begin my engagement with Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*—which has every chance to become a classic of the philosophy of religion, even if my argument against him holds—by drawing attention to his omission of the theodicy implicit in *Brothers Karamazov,* because I sense this may be highly revealing of what kind of response to the problem of evil Sterba may have overlooked in his near comprehensive treatment of the recent philosophical attempts at theodicy. I will incorporate into my reply to Sterba, in particular, these ideas about the possibilities for the defeat of evil found in Dostoyevsky, which presuppose an anti-individualistic religious anthropology and, thus, remain in stark contrast to Sterba's own account of selfhood, which is robustly libertarian. These individualistic assumptions underpin, in obvious ways, all Sterba's arguments, even though they are not explicitly stated in one place (a libertarian–individualistic account of human agency is also taken for granted in his earlier major publications, Sterba (2014); Sterba (2020)). Thus, when Sterba regularly uses phrases like "the fundamental requirements of our morality" (Sterba 2019, p. 6), one is tempted to doubt whether the phrase "our morality" truly refers to the entire human race. In any case, I wish to draw the reader's attention to the fact that disparate fundamental anthropological assumptions may have radically divergent implications for the analysis of the problem of evil.

Indeed, it is my conviction that Sterba's cumulative atheological argument from evil is essentially valid, and if one grants Sterba his assumptions, one will be forced to accept that his new logical argument is also sound. For this reason, I wish to deconstruct his argument by challenging two of his assumptions (or two sets of assumptions), namely, one pertaining to the nature of human agency and human flourishing, the other pertaining to the nature of the human–divine relation. As it will be only in the last section of the paper that the implications of my knock-down argument against Sterba will be presented (and only then we will be able to integrate Dostoyevsky's theodical insights into my "Mirandolian theodicy"), it may be good to sum up, at this stage, the crux of my response to Sterba.

I submit that throughout his work, Sterba takes for granted that theism entails that God, having created the world, retains full sovereignty over the Earth with all its inhabitants. If that assumption is granted, God must be treated as a moral agent in the world who must be held responsible, directly or indirectly, for everything that happens in the terrestrial realm. It is this conceptual concession that opens the door to Sterba's application

to the analysis of the problem of evil of (a) his analogy between God and "ideally just and powerful state" (which prescribes the state intervention to limit the freedom of citizens to act out their evil intentions that would cause significant evil to the innocent would-be victims, thus limiting the victims' more significant freedom), as well as of (b) his so-called "Pauline Principle" (i.e., St. Paul's apparent rejection—in Romans 3:8—of the idea that it is acceptable to do evil, so that good could come out of it). Yet, it is the application of these two principles that generates the main support to Sterba's conclusion that a good God is logically impossible. Therefore, I purport that the soundness of Sterba's new logical argument from evil rests ultimately on a tacit assumption (no doubt tacitly presupposed by most participants in the debate about the problem of evil) of a feudal conception of divine sovereignty, as supposedly logically implied by theism, according to which God, as the only genuine sovereign, exercises his full sovereignty over his creation, while humanity is assigned the role of vassals or stewards, expected to obediently execute divine will, in all its details. However, Mirandola's scenario of God giving up his sovereignty over humanity in the act of creation, and granting full sovereignty to humanity, makes enough sense to dispense with such feudal social imagery, and, as a consequence, block Sterba's application of his evil prevention requirements to God. Not more needs to be said at this stage about the sovereignty of humanity, as the concept of full sovereignty (or "Westphalian sovereignty") is self-explanatory, in that it excludes legitimate intervention by other sovereigns in the realm under someone's sovereignty (cf. Philpott 2020).

However, apart from disarming Sterba's argument, the Mirandolian theodicy affirms the possibilities of the defeat of undeserved evils (by identifying the great good of human sovereignty exercised by humans in common) in a way that makes it less vulnerable to Sterba's criticism than Plantinga's free will defence (precisely because the latter is predicated on the exercise of free will individually). Thus, in order to reveal the full potential of the Mirandolian theodicy to resist Sterba's argument from evil, a social or relational conception of human agency and human flourishing has to be expounded, which I will do on the example of Dostoyevsky's "Russian Orthodox view" of selfhood, although I presuppose that a range of such relational conceptions of selfhood, bearing a family resemblance, can be identified in the cultures, philosophies, and religions of the world.

Indeed, understanding the religiously defined goal of life in collective terms is something we are familiar with, not just from Christian theology (with the idea of the Church as the people of God whose spiritual interdependence extends even beyond "this world"), but also from the traditional Jewish view of God forging a covenant with the people of Israel (and forgiving on Yom Kippur the sins of "all the people of Israel"). Similar sentiments are expressed in the Buddhist idea of the possibility of sharing the karmic merits with others, captured especially powerfully in the "Bodhisattva vow" to liberate all sentient beings, which is taken by Mahayana Buddhists. Corrigan (2017) also stresses that while appropriated and shaped by Dostoyevsky's highly original mind and the modern sensitivities of his time, these insights were drawn by the writer from diverse theological and philosophical sources (including Schopenhauer, who drew the attention of his contemporaries to Buddhism), the same sources that also made Tolstoy—who did not subscribe to any religious orthodoxy—emphatically reject modern individualism. Influenced in his youth by Rousseau's vision of the primitive utopia, Tolstoy, well versed in the South Asian and East Asian philosophical and religious sources, attributed such non-individualistic ideals of selfhood to all great spiritual traditions of humanity, especially to simple people uncorrupted by the temptations of individualism generated by the competitive spirit of modernity. More recently, Craig Ihara applied Western ethical resources to explain why, in the Confucian ethics, the language of rights is out of place. A simple analogy that captures the logic of the Confucian ethics as using the language of duties, instead of the language of rights, is between an ethical community and a sport team, for which the only sure path to victory (i.e., achieving the good each of the players seeks) is cooperation, which makes claiming rights by team members against each other meaningless (cf. Ihara 2004, pp. 11–30). Similar ideas have been explored by a group of Western scholars of East Asian studies in a

book bearing an apt title, *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self* (Ivanhoe et al. 2018). In the context of this paper, it is imperative to acknowledge the global popularity of this communitarian conceptualisation of the proper human relations as it is likely to yield an understanding of good and evil akin to that found in Dostoyevsky, rather than that presupposed by Sterba. Before moving into details, an explanation may be in place, why, given that my argumentative strategy pace Sterba involves two arguments, namely, (a) an argument from the divine non-intervention ("the Mirandola theme") and (b) an argument from the plausibility of a non-individualistic account of human agency and human flourishing ("the Dostoyevsky theme"), the bulk of the paper will be devoted to the exposition of the latter, while the former is more central from the point of view of the refutation of Sterba's argument from evil. There are two reasons warranting such a structure of the paper. Firstly, in this argumentative counterpoint—to use a musical metaphor—the more important argument ("the Mirandola theme") presupposes the other argument ("the Dostoyevsky theme") in such a way that, without establishing the plausibility of the latter (i.e., a non-individualistic view of "collective selfhood" and the related "social responsibility" for good and evil), the former (i.e., granting full sovereignty over the Earth to imperfect humanity) will be judged by Sterba to be morally impermissible, as it is bound to lead to violations of the individual autonomy of many victims of significant evil resulting from the immoral behavior of others, which God might have prevented by not granting humanity full sovereignty. In other words, without calling into question the indispensability of his libertarian–individualistic account of human agency and human flourishing, Sterba will be able to establish that God must not grant such sovereignty to humanity. However, it must be stressed that in order to undermine the conclusion of Sterba's argument that a good God is logically impossible, a weaker version of my argument should suffice, that is, I am not under obligation to prove in this paper that God never intervenes in the human affairs to prevent evil or to produce good (how could one do such a thing?), nor do I have to prove that Dostoyevsky's relational view of the self is necessarily the only plausible one on offer. It suffices for me to suggest that the accounts of selfhood and of the human–divine relation entailed by the Mirandolian theodicy are perfectly plausible (rather than necessarily true). However, I also need to show that these views are broadly compatible with at least some "traditional" interpretations of theism. That is why, apart from wanting to encourage James Sterba, as the author of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, to see himself in the mirror of his cover, I move now to Dostoyevsky, whose views about evil emerge uncontroversially from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, an ancient religious tradition that has an undisputed claim to theistic orthodoxy, and has shaped the beliefs about good and evil of hundreds of millions of people over centuries. Indeed, there are volumes of work by mainstream contemporary Eastern Orthodox thinkers, such as Vladimir Lossky or John Zizoulas, who defend a radically communitarian vision of inter-personal, as well as divine–human, relations akin to that found in Dostoyevsky, and define them as central to the entire religious tradition, grounded in the Byzantine patristic sources.

2. Selfhood Integrated into Other Selves and Vicarious Suffering

Dostoyevsky clearly intended *Brothers Karamazov* to be his religious opus magnum, written under the impression of the above-mentioned visit to the Optina Monastery and the question of how evil might ultimately be defeated within the framework of the Christian worldview lies at its heart. While not suggesting that my preferred philosophical solution to the problem of evil aligns perfectly with what Dostoyevsky might have thought on the matter, I submit that the theodical intuitions scattered in his writings can be incorporated into my own Mirandolian theodicy, which I believe can resist Sterba's impressive analytic onslaught. Two motives relevant to the discussion of the problem of evil emerge repeatedly throughout Dostoyevsky's oeuvre. Both are well attested in the Russian Orthodox religious thought, which has inspired the writer. His first theodical idea links the experience of intense suffering to that suffering individual's potential for metanoetic transformation (the term "metanoia"—literally "change of mind" in Greek—in the New Testament refers

regularly to "change of heart", "turning to God", and "true conversion"), which leads in the direction of the deification (*theosis*) of the person as the condition of her participation in the Divine life (*koinonia*). This transformation presupposes "a completion of one's unfinished personality" through the realisation of the relational nature of one's selfhood and the achievement of "selfhood integrated into other selves" (Corrigan 2017, p. 18). The second theodical idea to be found in Dostoyevsky links undeserved suffering to the concept of "vicarious suffering"—suffering for others or in place of others (cf. Terras 1987, pp. 58–64). In both cases, evil is seen as either directly beneficial, enabling suffering individuals to make progress on the path towards the completion of their personality, or as indirectly beneficial, being an unavoidable consequence of the communitarian nature of the human collective to which the following divine commandment applies: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Following the Orthodox Christian tradition, Dostoyevsky takes for granted that innocent victims of evil will ultimately be rewarded by God and that their sacrifice is seen as contributing, on the model of Christ's own sacrifice, to the good of "his body, that is, the church" (Collosians 1:24). Evil is, on such a picture, seen as either a manifestation of the ordinary human condition (of being an "unfinished personality"), or as an opportunity for metanoetic transformation and completion, or as an occasion to contribute to such transformation of other persons (with whom we are all intimately connected as members of "one body of Christ"), or as a result of the failure of some to integrate themselves into the selves of others, which makes them, willingly or unwillingly, able to inflict evil on others. For this reason, the consummate individualist, the Underground Man of Dostoyevsky's early masterpiece *Notes from the Underground*, is also portrayed as the ultimate egoist, and is arguably the most negative human type in his entire oeuvre, more removed from the writer's ideal of humanity than any in his long catalogue of dark characters (cf. Scanlan 2002, p. 81). One might also recall that Raskolnikov, at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, is portrayed as a totally isolated individual unable to forge any close human relationship, a consequence of his rampant rationalism, resulting from the negative influence of the contemporary Western currents. He is thus depicted as a victim of the "epidemic" of individualism imported to Russia from the West, which Dostoyevsky encountered during his visit to England and against which he wants to warn his compatriots and humanity at large. Raskolnikov will also, at the end of the novel, face the task of seeking purification through suffering in a penal colony. The second of our theodical motives is also present in *Crime and Punishment*, namely at the turning point of the whole story, when Sonya (no doubt bearing such a name to indicate connection with "sophia", the Divine Wisdom of the Eastern Orthodox theology) instructs Raskolnikov that having committed murder he must first, even before beginning expiation through suffering, "stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!' Then God will send you life again". This is a remarkable idea that, one is tempted to say, could cross only a Russian writer's mind, that evil cannot be redeemed without reconciliation with "all the world" and "all men". Evil is not solely an issue between the perpetrator and God, who can offer pardon to the perpetrator; not even between the perpetrator, the victim, and God—evil is a social issue, indeed, a global issue, an issue that concerns humanity as a whole.

The impact of these two ideas on theodicy can be appreciated only when the reader suspends the tacit, ordinary, modern individualistic assumptions about human flourishing and considers how communitarian the anthropological orientation of some religious worldviews may be. That such a strongly communitarian vision of human existence constitutes the core of Dostoyevsky's message is made plain by Yuri Corrigan in his recent in-depth study of the philosophical presuppositions of Dostoyevsky's work. He sums it up as follows: "As an enemy of individualism, Dostoevsky categorically rejected the concept of a self that was not inherently integrated into other selves. He conceived of the Christian ideal as the overcoming of the 'I', the development of an ability 'to annihilate this I, to give it wholly to all and everyone, undividedly and selflessly', and he persistently criticized

the European bourgeois conception of selfhood). 'In Christianity', he once remarked in his notebook, the attempt to 'determine where your personality ends and another begins [. . .] is unthinkable.'" (Corrigan 2017, pp. 3–4).

Corrigan's entire book is devoted to the explication of this anti-individualistic conception of "open-ended, relational self" (p. 28), which he also refers to as "extended self", "collective self" (p. 18), "collective personality" (p. 30), and "intersubjective selfhood" (p. 18). All of these terms presuppose that "fullness of being exists only within human relationships" (p. 24). "The self is rooted in other worlds, (. . .) the worlds of other consciousnesses. Thus, the personality in Dostoevsky is thought of (. . .) as an activity, event, or point of view that constitutes itself outwardly through relationships" (pp. 17–18). As a result of the relational nature of personhood, Dostoyevsky's "characters apprehend their depths outside of themselves, in the souls of others" (p. 17). This belief in the absolute need for the completion of the initially unfinished selfhood in relationship with the other is captured by Dostoyevsky in terms of "discovering a principle outside of the self—a transcendental anchor for selfhood" (p. 9). Corrigan already finds, in a short story, *A Weak Heart*, written by Dostoyevsky in his 20s, such "paradigm of the collective self" and description of "the conflation of self and other and the problem of collapsed interiority that will resonate throughout Dostoevsky's career" (p. 8). Human personality is, thus, in Dostoyevsky's works, constituted by two aspects: "inward self" (or "indwelling self") on the one hand, and "relational self" on the other (p. 14). Referring to these two modes of the existence of the self, Corrigan speaks about "tension between interiority and intersubjectivity" and about "the indwelling and relational models of selfhood", the former designating the "unfinished personality", and the latter the "collective personality" (p. 18).

It is my contention that such a conception of selfhood generates an entirely different set of questions and possible answers regarding undeserved and horrendous evils, than an account of the self as autonomous, self-sufficient, and atomistic, capable of self-realisation and flourishing alongside and without entering into communion with others who do not flourish. It seems to me that the heart of the matter lies in the possibility of formulating the goals of human life in diverse ways. Dostoyevsky does not presuppose that the goal of life is "having a good life" or "enjoying life", which might be consistent with the Aristotelian vision of human flourishing as an actualisation of our *natural* (as opposed to supernatural) potentialities for good (let us call it a "welfarist" vision of human flourishing), which ideally would encompass moral and intellectual goods (virtues), as well as what Sterba calls "consumer goods, that is, experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling, and all encompassing" (Sterba 2019, p. 37). Such an individualistic and welfarist perspective on the goals of life justifies Sterba's rights-talk about "goods to which we are entitled" and "goods to which we have right", which gives rise to his atheological argument, as one of the main problems with God's inaction to prevent significant and horrendous evils is that it results in a violation of the rights of the victims, as is evident from the following formulation of the Evil Prevention Requirement III: "Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions [or of natural evils—JS] on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods" (p. 84). Conversely, envisaging personal transformation from an atomistic personality to a personality integrated into other selves as the main goal of human life, which makes it, in an important sense, a collective goal, makes the language of rights (including the distinction between the goods to which we have a right and those to which we have no right) out of place in the analysis of the inter-personal relations, and by extension, in the analysis of evil, for at least three reasons. Firstly, the completion of personality as the goal of life takes place in the inter-personal space within which all of the relevant goods have the nature of a gift to which nobody has a right, as nobody can claim an inalienable right to the love, friendship, or cooperation of any particular person (such rights can be claimed only after being first established by way of a social contract or on the ground of solidarity governed by the logic of mutual

gift giving). Secondly, no particular moral, intellectual, or consumer goods to which we might have a right, other than our existence itself, are presupposed as a condition of the successful process of the completion of personality, as the metanoetic transformation is an inner transformation to which the language of entitlement does not apply, and which cannot be granted by someone or otherwise affected by use of any external goods. Thirdly, and more generally, the collectivist account of selfhood presupposes the agathological interdependence of individuals (from "to agathon" for "the good" in Attic Greek), therefore the analysis of good and evil must take place within the collective agathological drama and, strictly speaking, cannot at all be "analysed" (in the Greek sense of the term "analysis" originally denoting "a breaking up"; cf. Harper 2001–2012).

Thus, from the point of view occupied by Dostoyevsky, controversial as it might sound on the welfarist view of human flourishing, the relation between the life-chances to achieve the goal of life (defined in personalist terms) and the circumstances of life (which might be described in terms of the availability or depravation of some goods), is essentially ambiguous (which explains why Dostoyevsky, knowing full well the conditions of life of the Russian peasantry, was not impressed by the material achievements of the Western civilisation he witnessed first-hand during his prolonged stays in Germany, England, France, and Italy). It is as if the main problem with evil, for Dostoyevsky, is that it is an expression and the proof of the failure of some individuals to undergo successfully metanoetic transformation, rather than that it deprives someone his rights. I cannot but think at this point about the remarkable unanimity between Dostoyevsky and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn about the potentially beneficial role of suffering. Having spent years in a Stalinist labour camp and working on a book intended as a tribute to the millions of victims of the Gulag, the Nobel Prize winning author was able to write the following words: "Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul" (Solzhenitsyn 2007, pp. 312–13).

The account of the human good that is presupposed in such a non-welfarist and "participatory" model of life of the members of the community of persons within which goods, including goods brought about by way of intense suffering, are exchanged between persons, cannot be dismissed out of hand as a viable anthropological alternative. Yet, it also cannot be transposed onto an individualistic account of human flourishing. For this reason, Sterba is right when he dismisses John Hick's soul-making theodicy to the extent Hick shares (which I presume he does) with Sterba a libertarian-individualistic conception of selfhood. As such a conception implies little or no connection between the soul-making of individual X ('the assaulter') and the soul-making of individual Y ('the assaulted'), Sterba's following argument, pace Hick, appears obviously plausible: "Could it be that God's permitting all the evil in our world is justified by the opportunity for soul-making it provides? Not if having the opportunity for significant soul-making in our world is dependent on having significant freedom such that a net loss of significant freedom in our world would result in a net loss of the opportunity for significant soul-making as well. Unfortunately, this does seem to be the case. Moreover, whenever serious assaults occur, what happens is that the particular opportunity for soul-making of the assaulters, an opportunity for soul-making that no one ideally needs to have, is exercised badly at the expense of the opportunity for soul-making of their victims, an opportunity for soul-making that all would-be victims should have" (pp. 35–36). However, the whole point of my laborious exposition of Dostoyevsky's "Russian Orthodox view" of collective, extended, relational selfhood is that it undermines the apparent obviousness of Sterba's above argument and offers a more collectivist vision of soul-making immune to Sterba's criticism. How so? Firstly, on the collectivist account of selfhood, soul-making is not an individualistic affair, but is, rather, intimately linked to soul-making of others, including the soul-making of one's assaulters (Socrates' ban on harming one's enemies and Jesus' call to love one's enemies readily comes to mind as an indication that this thought is not senseless). Secondly, if instead of making a tacit assumption that the only way to conceive

of human flourishing is the Aristotelian one, we accept a more inclusive formula that human flourishing is about the actualisation of the human potentialities for producing good, then agathologically successful may be also a person who, in the course of her life, produces goods in the lives of others, without experiencing them (an idea parents, teachers, or physicians are familiar with). Indeed, such agathological interdependence of individual persons has a similar logic as welfare interdependence, which underlies socialist approaches to socio-economic policy, close to James Sterba's heart, as is evident from his numerous publications in political philosophy (cf. e.g., Narveson and Sterba 2010; Sterba 2010). Against the background of such a relational view of a good life, the strict opposition between the soul-making of the assaulters and the soul-making of the assaulted, implied by Sterba in the above argument, becomes less obvious.

On the face of it, Hick's soul-making theodicy is capable of accommodating an "extended" or "relational" view of soul-making, as Hick sees soul-making as a God-granted opportunity for "human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort (…) in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realising of the most valuable potentialities of human personality" (Hick [1966] 2007, pp. 256, 258). However, Sterba seems right by assuming (throughout Chapter 3 of his book) that speaking about "potentialities of human personality", Hick presupposes an individualistic account of selfhood, which makes his theodicy vulnerable to an obvious line of attack, implied in Sterba's above argument against Hick: what about the soul-making of the serf boy from Ivan Karamazov's story? If Hick would respond that God will simply grant the serf boy the fullness of eternal life, irrespective of the boy's failure to undergo the process of soul-making in "this life", one might remark that Hick's insistence on the great importance of soul-making, supposedly justifying even horrendous evils, does not square well with Hick's allowance for the possibility of achieving life's ultimate goal without significant progress in soul-making attained in this life. Furthermore, such a move would open the theodicy of soul-making to a charge, formulated by Marilyn Adams, quoted approvingly by Sterba, of the lack of unity between goods produced and evils experienced by a person in this life and the goods granted by God in the afterlife (cf. Sterba 2019, p. 37). However, the collectivist corrective to the soul-making style of theodicy makes these charges less critical, as then the agathological success of the individual victims of evils is differently conceived (perhaps on the analogy of the contribution of the victims of the defensive war to the freedom and long-term flourishing of the nation). Needless to say, theistic traditions that presuppose such a collectivist account of selfhood may point to some form of divine reward for the victims as their solution to the problem of evil, but then, unlike Hick, they will be able to argue that the unity between what happens in this life and the next is preserved precisely because of the collectivist nature of their interpretation of something like the Hickian soul-making. In short, Sterba's arguments against the soul-making theodicy do not apply to the collectivist variation on it, a theodicy of metanoetic transformation of the selves under the relational account of selfhood, which I purport is implied by Dostoyevsky in *Brothers Karamazov* (and is presupposed by my Mirandolian theodicy).

Another theodicy that Sterba (Sterba 2019, pp. 71–110) successfully challenges is "sceptical theism", defined earlier, a theodicy I also reject (cf. Salamon 2017). Here, the limitations of the theodicy implied by Dostoyevsky must be acknowledged (and therefore must be supplemented by the sovereignty component of the Mirandolian theodicy), as, to the extent Dostoyevsky, following the Russian Orthodox tradition, is likely to accept that God on occasion does intervene in the human affairs to produce good or prevent evil, he may be forced to retreat to some form of sceptical theism. Dostoyevsky may need to resort to sceptical theism in order to answer the question that Sterba might put to him in the following manner: what exactly might justify divine non-intervention to prevent, rather than permit, the horrendous evil consequence of the immoral action of the boyar resulting in the serf boy being torn to pieces by dogs in front of his mother, when that could easily be done by God (something that must be presumed, if one accepts that God does act on

occasion to prevent evils)? I am inclined to agree with Sterba that theists who accept that God does intervene on occasion in the human affairs to prevent evils have no good answer to that question (and, needless to say, the cruel murder of the serf boy may be substituted by any number of horrendous and cruel mass-murders and genocides). When Sterba's logical argument from evil is directed against theism of this kind, I think his argument is both valid and sound. Therefore, the only way to block Sterba's logical argument from evil is by dropping the assumption that God does intervene on occasion in human affairs to prevent evils, and providing a plausible justification for such a move. This is, in a nutshell, the motivation for the Mirandolian theodicy to be outlined in the coda of this work.

3. Kenosis as a Condition of Bearing Fruit in the Lives of Others

The two theodical motives about suffering and evil: a transformative suffering (potentially beneficial for the suffering person) and vicarious suffering (potentially beneficial for others) are present in the entire Dostoyevsky's oeuvre, but they culminate and interlace in Dmitry Karamazov's acceptance of the sentence to years of hard penal labour for the crime of patricide he has not committed. This makes Dmitry, rather than his atheist brother, Ivan, or the saintly ascetic brother, Alyosha, the main hero of *Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky presents Dmitry's katorga in Siberia (something the writer himself was subjected to) as an opportunity for Dmitry to undergo "purification through suffering", but at the same time as an opportunity to suffer vicariously for his father and brothers (including the actual murderer, half-brother, Smerdyakov) to expiate for their sins (Dostoyevsky 1993, pp. 648–49). Both forms of suffering are ultimately beneficial and thus are instances of evil defeated. The centrality of this idea of beneficial suffering in the overall design of the novel is signalled early on, in the second of the thirteen scenes of the book, when during the meeting of Karamazovs with Father Zosima, the holy monk having a premonition of Dmitry's future in a penal colony, kneels before him and kisses his feet as if acknowledging the sanctity of his future suffering (Dostoyevsky 1993, p. 62). Incidentally, the scene is clearly inspired by the Russian Orthodox idea of "sanctification of suffering", which is fundamental to the entire Russian spiritual tradition, going back to the first Russian martyrs, "innocent" princes Boris and Gleb murdered by their "evil" brother Sviatopolk. Both these motives about beneficial suffering are also alluded to in the motto put on the top of the first page of *Brothers Karamazov,* the quote from John's Gospel (12:24): "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Dostoyevsky 1993, p. 1) There can be little doubt that Dostoyevsky chose this quote to highlight the core message of *Brothers Karamazov.* However, here, again, the message becomes clear only when the fragment will be read against the background of the spiritual communitarianism presupposed by the Russian Orthodox tradition, which Dostoyevsky contrasts with the individualistic orientation of the Western liberal tradition, rooted in Protestantism which he designates 'Geneva idea'. He is highly critical of this tradition of thinking about human relations, since he is convinced that in it, "the vision of social harmony is sacrificed to "a principle of individualism, a principle of isolation, of intense self-preservation". In a social order in which each personality "fights for what it wants, ... demands its rights", and "desires to separate", social cohesion, insofar as it exists, is dependent on contracts between calculating individuals rather than on mutual love." (Ward 1986, p. 74).

Now, given such philosophical instincts of the author of *Brothers Karamazov*, it should be clear that the aforementioned employment of the biblical image of the seed that has to die in order not to stay alone, but instead bear much fruit, is intended to convey a certain ideal of human flourishing, according to which the appropriate way of "bearing much fruit" is by bearing it in the lives of others. So here, again, the central objection against Sterba's more individualistic approach to the analysis of the impact of evil on human flourishing suggests itself: the goods and evils that take place in the lives of various individuals may, in the horizon of a theistic worldview, be interconnected in such intricate ways within human communities (including trans-generational communities, such as nations or humanity as

a whole) that the evil experienced by some individuals may be "defeated" by the good experienced by other individuals. As controversial as moving in this direction may appear at first, there can be no doubt that Dostoyevsky's favourite biblical quote about the grain of wheat that bears much fruit implies that "death" is a precondition of a fruitful life, and "death"—even if what is meant here is only the "death" of our ego, overcoming our self-centred existence—involves suffering, undoubtedly experienced at the time as evil, perhaps even significant or horrendous evil. There is just no other way to bear much fruit than by first dying, and this "mechanism" of bearing much fruit by paying a high price of suffering and self-denial (kenosis is the Greek biblical term used in Flp 2:7 to capture this dimension of Christ's self-sacrifice) manifests itself not only in the life of finite creatures, but in the suffering and death of Christ, and is also revealed as characteristic of the Divine mode of existence.

An arguably even more challenging component of this biblical message embraced by Dostoyevsky as central to his Christian anthropology is the implicit warning that the worst of all possible options is "to remain alone". How to understand this warning? Why is remaining alone the most negative state of affairs? Is not a lone individual always in the presence of God, as Luther saw it, and thus never alone? It is here, I submit, that a truly radical view of all good and evil as a reality that is social or relational, rather than individual, is implied. However, how can good and evil not be at its core individual in nature? Do not terms "good" and "evil" ultimately pertain to states of mind(s) of conscious individuals (human or animal) and only by extension to some states of affairs in the world, which causally contribute to the content of these mental states that are perceived by conscious creatures as good (desirable) or evil (undesirable)? I think they do, but still, the content of these mental states we call "good" or "evil" may be such that they are always intimately connected to the analogical mental states of other conscious creatures.

The question that is hanging in the air at this point, and which James Sterba might raise even earlier, on the first mention of "collective selfhood" or "spiritual communitarianism", concerns the place of individual freedom, autonomy, self-ownership, and self-direction in the larger scheme of Dostoyevsky's vision of human life. Dostoyevsky thought very hard about this issue, which he framed in terms of reconciliation of the "I" and the "all". That he considered the preservation of freedom essential to a genuinely "Christian life" is clear from one of his most famous literary creations, namely the Grand Inquisitor Scene from *Brothers Karamazov,* the message of which boils down to denunciation of Catholic Christianity for the distortion of the ideal of humanity revealed by God in Christ, precisely by sacrificing human freedom on the altar of the provision of welfare (Ward 1986, p. 158). However, given everything said so far about Dostoyevsky's view of selfhood, the freedom he has in mind cannot be a libertarian, "negative freedom"—perfect freedom from interference by others. Indeed, Dostoyevsky's search for reconciliation of the "I" and the "all" must be restricted to some version of "positive freedom", freedom to be able to realise human potentialities for producing good, "agathological freedom", one might say. However, for Dostoyevsky, "bearing much fruit"—fruit of the good, and not just for oneself, but for others too—presupposes Christ-like consent "to die". Otherwise, the seed will stay alone and barren of the good. Therefore, far from being a passive victim, resigned to whatever comes his way, Dostoyevsky envisages a suffering individual as potentially a co-redeemer of the imperfect humanity. So, Dostoyevsky searched for his conception of freedom in the vicinity of what he considered to be the essence of Christ's freedom, who at once represents paradigm of the highest realisation of personal existence, and yet also "emptied himself" or "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7, in New International Version), "by taking a form of a servant"—a servant of the others' good. Corrigan detects in Dostoyevsky a passionate effort to reconcile these two goals of personal development that seem opposed to each other, namely achieving ultimate selflessness and achieving the ultimate completion of one's selfhood: "In the very same passages where Dostoyevsky espouses the annihilation of the 'I', he fervently advocates the necessity of 'becoming a personality, even at a much more elevated level than that which has now been defined in

the West' (5:79). The 'annihilation' of the 'I', for Dostoevsky, depends, in fact, upon the 'very highest development of the personality', the "fullest realization of one's I" (20:172)." (Corrigan 2017, p. 4). In Dostoyevsky's own words, with "the appearance of Christ (…) it became as clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual (…) is to seemingly annihilate it, to give it wholly to each and every one whole-heartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness. In this way the law of Christ merges with the law of humanism, and in the merging both, both the 'I' and the 'all' (in appearance two extreme opposites) mutually annihilated for each other, at that same time each apart attains the highest goal of his individual development. This is indeed the paradise of Christ" (Dostoyevsky 1973, pp. 39, 96).

Do these "dialectical" investigations yield Dostoyevsky a conception of freedom that may address Sterba's legitimate concern with the consent of an individual victim of evil as an indispensable requirement of free acceptance of undeserved suffering and thus a condition of "bearing much fruit"? As Sterba puts it convincingly: "It should be pointed out that any greater moral good that would serve as a justification here [i.e., in the context of an attempt at a 'Greater Moral Good Defense' of God's permitting evil—JS] must also have freedom as one of its components because that is the way all moral goods are constituted for us" (p. 33). I think the only sensible option open to Dostoyevsky is to resort to a notion of "implied consent" or "tacit consent", which is used regularly in political philosophy, in the context of social contract theories. What such theories presuppose is a general acceptance by a citizen of the overall legal framework of the state, which provides beneficial, on the whole, conditions for human agathological development and human flourishing. So, on Dostoyevsky's picture, such general consent as a condition of freedom would have to amount to acceptance, en bloc and in advance (be it with inner strife), the necessity of suffering as divine will, on the model of Christ in Gethesemane: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42) However, is it plausible to assume that the serf boy torn into pieces by his master's dogs might have given such a tacit, en bloc consent to divine will to suffer and die? A positive answer would stretch credulity. However, again, Dostoyevsky's implicit theodicy fails on this point only if the writer presupposes (as I think he does) that there is no way to avoid a conclusion that God must have permitted this particular case of evil. Indeed, such a conclusion cannot be avoided, if one assumes that God does intervene on occasion to prevent some evils, as on such an interventionist interpretation of divine providence, God must decide when to intervene or not on case by case basis. That is why the non-intervention clause of the Mirandolian theodicy, which denies this premise is necessary to fix this problem inherent in Dostoyevsky's theodicy (and arguably in any other theodicy considered by Sterba in his book).

4. The Mirandolian Theodicy and Social Responsibility for Evil Prevention

The Mirandolian theodicy, while presupposing the relational conception of selfhood explored so far, provides an answer—absent in Dostoyevsky—to the question about human freedom and autonomy. On the Mirandolian picture of the divine–human relation, God does not interfere with human freedom at all. Humans are left to their own devices, to realise their potential for freedom, to expand their freedom, to discover new ways of being free in more meaningful ways. It is only that the social dimension of human existence and of human consciousness makes individuals inescapably dependent on each other in their understanding and exercise of freedom. Mutual interference in each other's freedom is the order of the day. Apparently, one may be free only with others, not free from others. However, debating the nature of freedom is not the main subject of this study. What is its subject, is the question whether Sterba is right that the facts about all the evils of the world testify that if God existed, he would be constantly violating human freedom by failing to prevent significant evils.

The Mirandolian theodicy denies that theism necessarily entails that God exercises absolute sovereignty over the Earth, and thus nothing can take place in the human realm

without God's permission. Instead, the Mirandolian theodicy presupposes that God granted humanity full sovereignty and thus human freedom that is restricted only by natural human limitations and by humans themselves. This sovereignty may be best understood on the Rousseauian model of "popular sovereignty" (i.e., the sovereignty of the populus, exercised by the people in common), according to which citizens are free only when they themselves shape their destiny by legislating in common and executing in common their own laws, which facilitate the production of good and the prevention of evil in the realm under their sovereignty (cf. Philpott 2020).

Some theists may worry that a denial of the possibility of God's intervention to prevent evils in the human world due to the non-intervention clause implied by the Mirandolian conception of human sovereignty leaves us with a God of deism rather than with God of "traditional theism". I beg to differ, as the only "traditional" theistic belief about God that the defender of the Mirandolian theodicy questions is that God intervenes in the natural course of events in the terrestrial realm to prevent evils and to produce goods, and one does not get from theism to deism just by denying that God acts in the world to prevent evils and produce goods. Unlike in the case of theism, there seems to be no scholarly consensus regarding what the minimal conceptual requirements are that a deistic God is supposed to satisfy, but two beliefs about God seem to be shared by deists, namely, (a) the denial of any form of religious revelation and (b) a view of an absentee God (cf. Byrne 2013, pp. 52–78). Neither of these beliefs are entailed by the Mirandolian concept of human sovereignty, as plenty of scope is left for God to be present to human consciousness, and thus engage with and inspire human beings in the course of history (see, e.g., Bernard McGinn's multi-volume definitive account of the history of Christian mysticism; McGinn (1995)).

In the culminating point of a devastating criticism of Alvin Plantinga's classic "solution" to the logical problem of evil, namely his free-will defence, James Sterba states (p. 26): "Plantinga needs to provide a greater good justification, or possible justification, particularly for God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoing other than by simply appealing to the freedom of the wrongdoers, given that these are consequences that God, and you or I on occasion, could easily prevent. And Plantinga has not done this". I submit that a God-granted full sovereignty of humanity over the human affairs (indeed, over the Planet, with all its inhabitants, for whose well-being humanity incurs responsibility) provides such a possible "greater good justification" required by Sterba. Now, I must and can be brief in outlining the main advantages of the Mirandolian theodicy when compared with other theodicies that came under Sterba's scrutiny.

Firstly, on the Mirandolian view, the greatest dignity of humanity comes from the God-granted right and ability of human persons to be self-creators and thus co-creators with God (God providing a wide range of possibilities, some of which human beings realise by tracing this rather than that path of possible human development). Importantly, such a scenario is capable of accommodating global value pluralism, as it presupposes that God, out of the divine plenitude of the infinite good, "creates" the myriad of agathological possibilities (possibilities for realisation of various goods leading to creaturely flourishing), while various parts of humanity, in its history of evolution and progress, realise only some of these possibilities. This "multi-realisability of the good" (which has its ultimate source and ultimate fulfilment in God, whose very nature is to be the Infinite Good) makes the idea of the "best possible world" (and hence the Leibnizian theodicy of the best possible world) incoherent. Having granted full sovereignty to humanity, which includes freedom of human beings to develop their potential for good in the direction chosen by them, God cannot have one particular idea of the optimal realisation of the agathological potential of human nature, as this potential is, of its nature, pluralistic. Consequently, God may not intervene in human affairs, as an intervening God would forestall and preclude human choices regarding the direction of their agatological development (individual and social), more than one of which may be good (that is what is meant, in this context, by "value

pluralism"). It follows, therefore, that Sterba's justifiable criticism of "the best possible world" style of theodicy misses the target in the case of the Mirandolian theodicy, according to which the question why the state of affairs in the world is less than optimal cannot even arise.

Secondly, the Mirandolian theodicy is designated in such a way in recognition of Mirandola's suggestion that God could not be more magnanimous and generous towards his rational creatures than in lavishing upon them the sovereign right, that is full and "supreme authority" over every aspect of their life and everything that is happening "within the territory" they inhabit (Philpott 2020). However, the sovereignty of humanity, stretching in time for millennia and presupposing evolution, development and progress, cannot be conceived differently than as exercised in common, with all the consequences that such a non-individualistic vision of human agency entails, including the well-researched "problem of collective action", which illustrates the unavoidability of suboptimal outcomes (i.e., "evil"—in the vocabulary of this paper) (Reisman 1990). Indeed, the problem of collective action provides a serious challenge to Sterba's individualistic approach to the analysis of evils, as it makes precise attribution of responsibility for particular evils impossible (making all evil essentially social).

The idea of social nature of good and evil, which gives rise to social responsibility for evil prevention, is given credence by the increasing volume of research on deviant, destructive, and evil behaviour by empirical psychologists and cognitive scientists. Philip Zimbardo, in his classic *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (Zimbardo 2007), characterises with impressive lucidity the two hypotheses explaining evil behaviour as the "dispositional view" (the "bad apple" approach) and "situational view" (the "bad barrel" approach). Zimbardo, like many other psychologists, while not denying the influence of individual dispositions and choices on an individual's behaviour, ascribes much greater weight to the situational factors in shaping human behaviour (in short, bad barrels often turn good apples into bad apples). It does not require much philosophical imagination to notice the relevance of such a conclusion to our current debate. If evil behaviour of individuals is in a significant way causally related to a myriad of factors, events, and circumstances, each of which are not a result of a deliberate decision of the agent under consideration or even any particular agent, but rather an outcome of a cumulative impact of countless actions and events over time, there are only two coherent scenarios available to a theist trying to conceptualise how an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God relates to the realm of human action and human experience. One envisaged by Sterba and the other presupposed by the Mirandolian theodicy (the third one is brooding in the mists of sceptical theism which is the same as evading the question).

On Sterba's "traditional" account of the divine–human relation, a good God, if he existed, would be required, among other things, to prevent all significantly evil consequences of human actions. Sterba does not see a problem with God doing just that and also making space for the significant moral freedom of human agents. I suspect Sterba finds such a scenario coherent, only because he overlooked both the problem of collective action (which describes a situation when well-disposed individuals acting collectively produce unintentionally significant evil) and the impact of situational factors on evil behaviour. Sterba appears to ignore the fact that Dostoyevsky's boyar behaves as he does because he is a feudal lord, so, presumably, instead of just preventing the serf boy from feeling pain and dying when attacked by the boyar's dogs, God would do better by fixing the socio-economic system of the feudal Russia in which such human relations as the one between the boyar and the serf boy and his mother are thinkable. As disagreeable as it may sound, the boyar may be thought of as a victim of feudalism (Hegel's master-slave dialectics springs to mind), as, to take a hint from Socrates, by committing such a gross injustice, the boyar commits moral suicide and he presumably would not have done so, were he not born into a family of feudal lords (equally plausibly, Adolf Eichmann would not end up being complicit in the murder of 200,000 Hungarian Jews, if he would be born in 21st Century Denmark—even though, we would probably still prefer to avoid

his company). The point is that if Sterba would acknowledge the decisive impact of the situational factors on the behaviour of individuals, he would have to require God to make sure that all individual agents are placed in a "barrel" of circumstances that would have no negative impact on their behaviour. I suspect that would, in the end, mean no less than placing each individual agent in a perfect world, surrounded by perfect agents (and not just morally perfect agents, but cognitively perfect and perfect in just about every possible way, otherwise they are bound to create an environment conducive of evil behaviour—so we are back in a "bad barrel"). That would, to my mind, require God to create, right from the start, a species homo deus (to use Yuval Harari's half-joking term) and to place it in paradise.

Conversely, the Mirandolian theodicy is capable of accommodating fully any deliverances of human sciences, including empirical psychology, as it has no problem with accepting the evolutionary and developmental nature of the human and animal world, with all its imperfections and limitations, as well as its potential for improvement and endless progress. The Mirandolian theodicy takes into consideration both the collective action problem and the decisive impact of situational factors on human behaviour. On the Mirandolian view of human condition and of the divine–human relation, evil is a natural consequence of the sovereignty exercised by imperfect humanity in common and, as such, does not need to be explained or justified by reference to human free will, which—as the case of Eichmann and countless other examples of "ordinary" people contributing to the causal chain resulting in unimaginable evils testify—is a very implausible candidate for accounting for the actual nature and distribution of evils in the world. In this way, the Mirandolian theodicy dispenses with the free-will defence, which fell easy prey to Sterba's argumentative assault. The Mirandolian theodicy dispenses also with sceptical theism which, as mentioned earlier, was dimissed by Sterba as insufficient rubbutal to his logical argument from evil. I argued elsewhere (cf. Salamon 2017) against sceptical theists in somewhat different fashion than Sterba, suggesting that in the absence of the ability of affirming what divine goodness must minimally imply and what it may not imply, the human God-talk cannot take off the ground, as without being able to affirm divine goodness in a positive (or kataphatic) manner, we are left without any positive reason for acknowledging God as worthy of worship or as an anchor of human agathological hope for the fulfilment of human desire for the infinite good. Negative (or apophatic) theology may be appropriate when reporting mystical experiences or when referring to implications of divine omnipotence and divine omniscience, when divine goodness has already been affirmed. Without a minimal positive agathological component, the reference to a theistic God is not possible, as the object of one's religious commitment might as well turned out to be an omniscient and omnipotent evil being, or an absolute without agathological attributes, thus irrelevant to the human agathological concerns, such as Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. I call this combination of affirming minimal agathological implications of the concept of divine goodness, while at the same time affirming human inability to formulate similar implications in the case of divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, "theistic scepticism". Theistic scepticism is an antithesis of "sceptical theism", as it allows for affirming that God must not act in a manner that is entirely opposed to fundamental human agathological intutions, while at the same time affirming that we may not know how God will bring about the realisation of an eschatological scenario within which the agathological promises of a given religious tradition regarding the achievability of the greatest good will be fulfilled. Such theistic scepticism is presupposed by my Mirandolian theodicy.

Lastly, the Mirandolian theodicy also has something interesting to say about the "natural evils". Sterba does not define "natural evil", but limits himself to pointing to some paradigmatic examples (cf. Sterba 2019, p. 157): "They include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, diseases, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, lightning strikes, and floods". Throughout the book he reiterates that "natural evils" should be clearly distinguished from "moral evils". However, on the Mirandolian assumption of human sovereignty over the Earth, the distinction is blurred for two different reasons. Firstly, the above-mentioned empirical

research into the psychology of human behavior casts doubt on the clear-cut differentiation between "moral" and "non-moral" aspects of human agency (in addition to calling into question the clear-cut distinction between its individual and social dimensions). This problematizes Sterba's analysis of evil behavior in purely individual and moral terms, at the cost of the social and natural/non-moral considerations. Secondly, and more importantly, with humanity's extraordinary technological progress, humanity gradually incurs new moral obligations to prevent "natural evils", such as deadly or painful diseases, as well as the natural disasters enumerated by Sterba. If 'ought' implies 'can', then 'can' often implies 'ought', and humanity's growing capability of preventing "natural evils" and limiting human and animal suffering puts the responsibility for the occurrence of such evils increasingly on the shoulders of the sovereign humanity, thus transforming natural evils into moral evils.

Appreciation of the social and situational dimensions of evil behavior of individuals, as well as the acknowledgement of the growing responsibility of humanity for the prevention of all sorts of evils happening in the realm under human sovereignty, calls for solidarity in the face of all the evils of the world. The Latin etymological root of "solidarity"—the Roman legal term: obligatio in solido—captures the sentiment underlying the Mirandolian theodicy well: the obligation of humanity as a whole to cooperate in the work of evil prevention, as only in common—in solido—humanity will be able to fulfill God's will to defeat evil.

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Article

Heaven and the Goodness of God

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that we should take fully seriously the doctrine of heaven when dealing with the problem of evil in our world. The hope of heaven is integral to Christian theism so it cannot be neglected in any substantive discussion of the problem of evil. Indeed, heaven provides resources to respond to even the worst of evils and to fully redeem them in such a way that the victims of those evils can fully affirm the goodness of their lives. Anyone who achieves heaven will experience a good of such significance and value that the ultimate beauty and goodness of their life could not be questioned. The Christian doctrine of the afterlife also provides resources to make sense of ultimate accountability. The perpetrators of horrendous evil cannot escape and will be called to account for their actions. However, even those who have committed such evil evils can be fully transformed in such a way that they can be fully reconciled with their victims and heartily embraced by them. This shows the doctrine of heaven to be not only profoundly hopeful, but also starkly honest and realistic.

Keywords: horrendous evil; incommensurate good; optimal grace; sanctification; forgiveness; Marilyn Adams; William Hasker

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James Sterba lays down an interesting challenge in his recent article, "Is a good god logically possible?" Acknowledging that he was formerly not only a theist, but a Christian, he informs us that he would happily give up his atheism if anyone can poke a hole in his argument. This is a great reminder that issues of theodicy, and of philosophy of religion generally, are not mere academic debates, but rather issues of pressing existential concern. What is at stake in this debate is of enormous significance for every single human being. No informed person can rationally be indifferent to the issues that are on the line here. The problem of evil is very much an existential issue for all of us.

I shall respond to Sterba not so much by trying to poke holes in his argument, but rather by showing a way that God can be vindicated as perfectly good, even though he allows the horrific evils of this world. In saying God "allows" horrific evils, I am assuming that creaturely free will is a good thing, although it has been abused, and that such freedom accounts for much of the evil in our world. This does not mean that those who abuse their freedom by committing such evils are justified, or that the evils themselves are justified. But it does mean that God's perfect goodness will be vindicated in the end and he will be seen as justified. I begin by telling a true story of a horrific evil that happened to the sister of one of my former students.

1. Moral Absurdity or Profoundly Moral Aspiration?

Sixteen years old Suzy Holliman was home alone one day, missing school because she had the flu. That was the day Ricky Lee Sanderson chose to burglarize the house, seeking money to support his drug habit. Finding Suzy at home, he raped her and then locked her in the trunk of his car, before killing her. As he dug her grave, she scratched on the locked trunk of the car, desperate to escape the horrific fate she no doubt realized awaited her. After digging the grave, Sanderson strangled and stabbed her to death.

Not long afterwards, Sanderson was arrested and then pled guilty to the charges of kidnapping and murder. Two years later, he was sentenced to death for his heartless crime.

However, that is not the end of the story. He was converted to Christianity after he was imprisoned and became an outspoken witness for his faith in the years leading up to his execution. He was encouraged to make further appeals but refused to do so and requested that he be executed because he claimed to be concerned that further delays would cause unnecessary suffering for the Holliman family. When he eventually went to his death thirteen years after committing murder, he claimed to be at peace and even went so far as to say that he was prepared to face his victim in the life to come. "I think about facing Suzi Holliman when I'm executed. What's that going to be like? I'm ready to do it. I'm going to be with Christ." (Walls 2002, p. 128).

Suzi's father was understandably dubious about Sanderson's claim to conversion. Despite the facts that he is a practicing Christian, Hugh Holliman made no attempt to hide his true thoughts or to masquerade his honest feelings. Rather, he was brutally honest about his own deeply conflicted feelings about the man who had ruthlessly murdered his daughter, and then professed to be a follower of Christ who anticipated meeting his victim in the life to come. "The hopes and dreams he took away from us and the world—I tried but I can't forgive him. You know there is forgiveness there, but I can't see God totally forgiving him for something like that." (Walls 2002, p. 115).

Hugh Holliman's doubts that even God can forgive such a heinous act are reminiscent of one of the most famous passages on the problem of evil in the literature, namely, Ivan Karamazov's rejection of theodicy. Ivan comes to his despairing conclusion after rehearsing a series of horrendous abuses of children including that of a peasant boy who hurt the paw of a powerful general's dog with a rock he had thrown. The general stripped the boy naked and then forced the mother to watch as he set loose his dogs on the child, who was torn to pieces. Speaking for these victims, Ivan announces that he does not wish to see the mother forgive the general on behalf of the child in the final harmony at the end of the world.

> She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she wants to, let her forgive the tormentor her immeasurable maternal suffering; but she has no right to forgive the suffering of her child who was torn to pieces, she dare not forgive the tormentor even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, then where is the harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who could and would have the right to forgive? I don't want the harmony; for the love of mankind I don't want it (Dostoyevsky 1992, p. 254).

As Ivan sees things then, his very love for humanity requires him to reject the promise of the life to come and the hope it offers that the evils of this world might be redeemed. Indeed, as he sees things, some evils are so egregious that they can never be forgiven, and this means some relationships are so badly shattered that they can never be healed, even if there is life beyond the grave. Notice, moreover, that Ivan registers his protest precisely on behalf of the victims of horrendous suffering. It is, he claims, his very love for these persons that requires him to reject the hope of heaven, and to resign himself to the hopeless despair of endless moral indignation.

The promise of heaven is a frontal challenge to the despairing resignation of Ivan. One of the most moving, and memorable, descriptions of what will happen when heaven comes to earth, and God makes his home with his children, is that "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). As beautiful as this description is, it is no less staggering. Heaven will no doubt be filled with not only persons who have wept many tears, but also with those who have caused those tears. If heaven is real, there will no doubt be many former thugs, racists, rapists, murderers, adulterers, terrorists, and schemers there along with their victims. Is the hope of such a place realistic, or is it pious nonsense? Is heaven a moral absurdity or is it a profoundly moral aspiration?

2. Who Has the Moral High Ground?

Let us begin to explore these questions by asking who really has the moral high ground in this dispute. Atheists often assume the moral high ground in the problem of

evil debate, contending that belief in an all powerful and perfectly good God is a morally insensitive thing to hold in view of the terrible evil in our world. Indeed, this is just the sort of stance Ivan takes in the famous passage cited above. It is precisely his love for mankind that will not allow him to believe in a perfectly powerful and good God and in a heaven that will redeem the tears of little children who have suffered so terribly at the hands of heartless tormentors. His protest against heaven is fueled by moral indignation.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that the perception of such heartless evil that inspires the passionate response of Ivan may well call forth a radically different response, and indeed, a response that is no less sensitive to the horror of terrible evil. Peter van Inwagen no doubt speaks for many when he remarks that he has "never had the least tendency to react to the evils of the world by saying 'How could there be a loving God who allows these things? My immediate emotional reaction has rather been: 'There *must* be a God who will wipe away every tear; there *must* be a God who will repay.'" (van Inwagen 1994, p. 97).

Van Inwagen's response is very much characteristic of what I mean by an existential response to the problem of evil. His response is very much that of one who is personally invested in the issue, not only for himself but for others as well. He does not approach the matter merely as an interesting puzzle to solve. He realizes that his own life as well as that of others depends on whether or not there is a God. He cannot approach the matter with objective indifference given what is at stake.

Of course, this hardly settles the matter of whether there is a God or not. Still, it is worth highlighting the fact that a keen sense of the horror of evil may elicit from some a strong conviction that there *must* be a God as surely as it elicits from others a passionate conviction that there *cannot* be a God.

In any case there is a further point to be made here. It is arguable that if one is truly concerned for the suffering of innocent persons as Ivan eloquently claims to be that one should at the very least strenuously hope that there is a God and an afterlife that will set things right rather than reject that hope. Richard Creel urges this hope upon us and presses the limits of how far we should take this.

> Why hope that there is a God? Because of compassion for those who have suffered innocently; because of desire that their suffering not have been useless and terminal, i.e., redeemable after death. As long as it is logically possible that evil be defeated, that innocent suffering is not meaningless and final, it seems to me that we have a moral obligation to hope that that possibility is actual. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to hope that there is a God because, if there is a God, then innocent suffering is not meaningless or final (Creel 1986, p. 149).

Again, this is not a dispassionate response. It is motivated by compassion for those who have suffered, and "desire" that their suffering is not the last word on their lives.

By contrast, Ivan's protest "for the love of mankind" has the ironic effect of writing off the terrible suffering of the very people for whom he claims to be concerned. His rejection of the hope of heaven pronounces a sort of finality upon the suffering of the very people he claims to care so much about. The losses they have sustained are permanent and can never be redeemed. The little boy who was torn to pieces spent his final few moments in utter terror. At best, the story of his life will remain as a testament to the absurdity of life. His dying cries will forever remain unanswered by a pitiless universe and we shall never again hear from him. Moreover, there are countless innocent sufferers never acknowledged in history books or classic novels, and their tears too soak the earth but no one will ever know them or personally care about them.

In view of all this, Ivan's claim of the moral high ground is dubious to say the least. Indeed, his atheism has far less concern for innocent sufferers than it may initially seem. Perhaps this better helps us to understand van Inwagen's emotional response to the evils of this world. Perhaps we too can understand Creel's insistence on why we have a moral obligation "for the love of mankind," to hold fast to the hope that God exists and that heaven can redeem even the worst of evils.

Christians in fact believe that such hope is not only existentially demanded, but also rationally warranted, and that we are not in fact reduced to desperately clinging to the mere logical possibility that God exists. Rather, we have ample warrant to believe not only that God exists, but that his perfect love and goodness will be fully vindicated.

3. An Incomparable Good

Marilyn Adams has attempted to show this in response to the problem of horrendous evil by appealing to some central themes in Christian theology. It is important to emphasize here that she is not required to invent some novel ideas to respond to evil, but only to take seriously the resources of classical Christian belief.

In the first place, Adams has developed the idea that an intimate relationship to God is an incommensurate good, and that recognition of this good is an essential resource in a satisfactory theodicy. That is to say, God is a good of such overwhelming value that he is simply incomparable with respect to any finite good, however extraordinary and attractive. Any attempted comparison would utterly fail to compute. Here it is important to recognize that it is simply fundamental to Christian theism that an intimate relationship with God is not only the greatest possible good for created beings, but that it is the one essential thing for deep and lasting happiness and satisfaction.

Given the supreme nature of this good, any person who achieves it will ultimately be perfectly happy regardless of how much or how grievously he suffered in this life. By contrast, any who does not achieve it will end up miserable regardless of how much pleasure or satisfaction he enjoyed in this life. A loving relationship with God is the greatest possible good and the loss of this relationship is the worst possible evil. The radical significance of this and the implications of it can hardly be overstated. Adams spells out the profound implications for the problem of evil.

> If a face-to-face vision of God is an incommensurate good for human beings, that will surely guarantee, for any who has it, that the balance of goods over evils will be overwhelmingly favorable. Indeed, strictly speaking, there will be no balance to be struck. And no one who received such benefits would have any claim against God's justice or complaint against his love. God will have bestowed on those who see him 'up close' as great a good as such a finite container can take (Adams 1992, p. 183).

Notice the last line: this represents the greatest possible good for these persons. The happiness envisioned simply could not be surpassed.

It is important to stress that this supreme good is incommensurate not only with other goods, but also with evils. There simply is no way to compare or measure the joy of this supreme good with finite goods or evils. The beauty and goodness of God as experienced "up close" is of such incomparable value that it will utterly swamp any evils we might have experienced. The apostle Paul seems to have had some such thought in mind when he wrote that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

There is a second point Adams develops in addition to the fact that an intimate relationship with God is a good of such value that it cannot be compared to any finite goods. God also has the supreme power and creativity that will enable him to fashion of any of our lives something of extraordinary beauty regardless of the harm and damage we have experienced in this life. One of the devastating things about evil is its power to shatter our lives in so many ways. It can crush our spirits as well as mangle and distort our bodies. It can shred our psyches and mutilate our emotions.

This is a most distressing reality for the likes of finite beings like ourselves. The hard truth is that such evil is altogether beyond our capacities to repair. As Adams puts it, our "meaning making capacities" are completely overwhelmed by such horrendous evil, and we are forced to consider the unhappy conclusion that "lives marred by horrors can never again be unified and integrated into wholes with positive meaning." (Adams 1999, p. 148).

This is perhaps even more of a challenge for those who have experienced long term suffering, which can be more painful and difficult to heal in significant ways than even intense short term suffering. In such cases, there may be far more damaged pieces, and perhaps more extensively damaged ones, to unify and integrate into a beautiful whole. Indeed, to finite creatures, again, it may seem inconceivable and utterly impossible.

Consider again the little boy who was torn to pieces when the heartless general set loose his dogs on him. It is not only his body that was torn to pieces, his very life was also ripped apart. We may understandably doubt that his body, let alone his life, could ever be put back together again. However, here is where belief in God makes an enormous difference. We may rationally hope that where human imagination and resources utterly fail, God's infinite capacities do not. Not only can God put this little boy's life back together, he can make it of it something extraordinarily beautiful.

So let us recall Ivan's protest against heaven, one that he registers "for the love of mankind." Is it really objectionable to think God should put this boy's life back together since he allowed it to be shattered in the first place? Is there something objectionable in believing that God should shower upon him the sort of love that he never knew in this life since God allowed the general to commit such atrocities against him in this life? Is it really better that his tragic life should stand forever as a monument to heartless cruelty than that God should pick up the pieces of his broken life and put them back together as something of stunning beauty and positive meaning?

I do not see how anyone who cared for this young boy could maintain this protest or presume to hold the high moral ground that Ivan seems to claim. Quite to the contrary, it is not only better, but immeasurably better to hope that heaven is real and that God has the resources to overwhelmingly defeat whatever evils have been suffered in this life.

Indeed, this case brings into sharp relief the ultimate difference between Christian theism and atheism with respect to the problem of evil. We can opt for despair or we can believe, or at least hope, that there is a God with infinite power and creative resources, as the Christian tradition affirms. If there is such a God, he is ultimately responsible as its creator to fix the evils of our world, whether those evils are excruciating short term tragedies, or cases of enormously complicated long term suffering. While God's creative redemption does not justify evil, God himself is justified if he redeems evil and restores creation to a condition more glorious than we can imagine. In any case, this is simply the logic of Christian theism, and we should not fail to bring all of its resources to the table when we deal with the problem of evil.

4. Not Just Forgiven, Utterly Transformed

Now here it may be objected that Ivan's complaint is as much about the perpetrators of treacherous crimes as it is their victims. Even if there is some way God can redeem the lives of those who have suffered greatly, the perpetrators of these horrific crimes should not be forgiven, ever. So it would be wrong for the mother whose son was torn to pieces to forgive the general and it would likewise be wrong for Suzy Holliman's father to forgive Ricky Lee Sanderson. If this is so, the moral objection to heaven remains intact.

Raising these questions does point up the radical claims of the Christian gospel. Recall Ivan's pointed question: "Is there in the whole world a being who could and would have a right to forgive?" The Christian answer to this question, of course, is that there is indeed such a person, namely Jesus Christ. He has the right to forgive first and foremost because he is God, the one against whom all sins are ultimately committed. Moreover, he is the one person who is sinless, who is fully perfect, and who offered his life as atonement so that sinners could be forgiven.

So this is the hopeful, yet disconcerting good news of the gospel. Not only is it the case that all other persons need to be forgiven, but all of them can be, even the worst among us. Moreover, this stunning claim has a large practical implication. Since all of us need forgiveness, and Christ offers forgiveness to all, none of us are in position to withhold

forgiveness from others. "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Colossians 3:13 NRSV).

However, there is another important point we need to make here pertaining to forgiveness, and that point is that forgiveness alone is not sufficient to get to heaven. Forgiveness is only the beginning of a saving relationship with God. It is also crucial that we actually come to achieve "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14 NRSV). This is crucial to help us understand why it is not absurd to think Suzy Holliman's father could heartily embrace Ricky Lee Sanderson in the life to come.

Here is why. Everyone in heaven will not only be forgiven, but utterly transformed into the image of Christ. I am in no position to judge the sincerity of Ricky Lee Sanderson's conversion and his anticipation of meeting Suzy in the life to come. However, if he truly placed his faith in Christ, if he honestly faced the horror of his sin and sincerely repented of it, and underwent the sanctifying process that actually makes us like Christ, then there is an important sense in which he will not be the same man who heartlessly murdered Suzy Holliman. He will be the same man numerically of course, but his character, his heart, his feelings etc. will be radically transformed. He will have come to see the horrific crime he committed through the eyes of Christ, and will not only see with full clarity the pain he caused, but he will also hate his sin as God does, and profoundly regret that he ever committed it. Indeed, to embrace Sanderson would be like embracing Christ himself, for every redeemed and transformed person there will be in this sense nothing less than a "little Christ," as C. S. Lewis put it (Lewis 2001, p. 199).

It is important to emphasize here that Ivan's protest against heaven loses its moral force when we grasp that our final salvation is not merely a matter of forgiveness, but also a matter of thorough transformation. Heaven without the purgatorial fires of radical moral transformation may be vulnerable to Ivan's protest, but heaven preceded by total transformation holds the moral high ground against Ivan's protest.[1]

5. Embracing the Joy

Our discussion thus far has shown that Christians have some distinctively powerful resources to deal hopefully with tragedies of the past. However, even if we have reason to hope that such tragedies can be redeemed, it is natural to regret that they ever occurred in the first place. Natural though this feeling may be, it raises serious difficulties as William Hasker has shown in a fascinating discussion of the implications of such regret. So let us turn now to consider some of these issues.

Hasker's analysis of these issues involves some rather precise definitions of what it means to regret something on the whole, on the one hand, and to be glad on the whole that something is the case, on the other. As he notes, the notion of being "glad on the whole" is a rather strong attitude of preference. It requires that one takes all relevant factors into account and still prefers the state of affairs in question to be the case. Being glad on the whole is thus distinct from what he calls being "circumstantially glad," which is a weaker form of preference.

Here is an example from Hasker. Suppose I am glad that Indiana won the NCAA Championship in basketball, defeating North Carolina in the final game of the tournament. Though I am very pleased they won, I might nevertheless prefer that there was no tournament at all because I regret the existence of the NCAA with its vulnerability to corruption, its tendency to detract from academics, among other problems. If I am only glad in the qualified sense that Indiana won, *given the existence of the NCAA*, then I am only circumstantially glad of that fact. By contrast, suppose I am glad Indiana won the championship regardless. That is to say, I prefer this state of affairs to no tournament at all, despite whatever drawbacks the NCAA represents. In this case, we can say that I am glad on the whole for Indiana's championship.

The question Hasker wants to pose to his readers is the far more personal one of whether they are glad that they and their loved ones are alive. This is a "person-relative" question in the sense that each person must answer it for himself. While some may return

a negative answer because of the harsh reality of severe suffering, Hasker believes most would readily agree that they are glad that they and their loved ones are alive.

Now this question is a philosophically interesting one for several reasons. Hasker's main concern however, is with issues which arise from the fact that for many, if not most of us, our very existence is inextricably connected with tragic events in the past. Hasker illustrates this by sharing the contingencies involved in his own birth. His parents came from widely separated parts of the country and they happened to meet through a series of large scale events that involved several other people as well. The most significant of these events was nothing less than World War I, which sent his father to France and led his mother to move to our nation's capital to work for the government. In short, Hasker has excellent reason to believe that had there been no war, he would never have been born. Moreover, there are no doubt similar complexities that brought together many of his progenitors of earlier generations. In view of all these considerations, Hasker formulates the following general principle.

> Had major or significant events in the world's past history been different than they were, then in all probability neither I nor the persons whom I love would ever have existed (Hasker 1981, p. 156).

Here it is important to notice that Hasker's argument hinges on a particular thesis about personal identity, namely, that each of us is initially individuated by his body. That is to say, if the particular body of Hasker's had not been conceived and born, then Hasker would never have existed. On this view, each soul is correlated to a particular body in a manner like that suggested by Aquinas who held that the soul is the form of the body. That is to say, each particular soul is individuated by the particular body which it informs. Consequently, if the man who is Hasker's father had married a different woman, or even have impregnated his wife at a different time, then Hasker would not be here formulating arguments along this line.

Now it is quite interesting to see what follows from Hasker's view of personal identity, along with his definition of what it means to be glad on the whole. In the first place, consider the significant implication of what it means to be glad on the whole that something is the case.

> If I am glad on the whole that P, and I know that if Q did not obtain neither would P, than I rationally must be glad that Q (Hasker 1981, p. 159).

When we combine this implication with his thesis about personal identity, we get this striking result:

> If I am glad on the whole about my own existence and that of those whom I love, then I must be glad that the history of the world, in its major aspects, has been as it is (Hasker 1981, p. 159).

Here it is important to see that this consequence is not only striking, but also disconcerting. In view of it, we may even be tempted to reconsider our previous claim about being glad of our existence. Hasker finds this reaction understandable. "Perhaps, indeed, your reaction is one of bewilderment—you may feel, as a colleague suggested, that when you lump your life together with whole past history of the world, you don't know *what* to say about it." (Hasker 1981, p. 162). In this case, one may simply have no "on the whole" attitude about his existence and find himself entirely perplexed. As Hasker contends, the person who is merely bewildered is not properly situated to press the problem of evil as an objection against the existence of God. In order to make that argument effectively, one must positively regret his existence as well as that of those he loves.

My primary aim here is neither to defend nor to criticize Hasker's central argument although I am inclined to think it is sound. What I do want to highlight, however, is that the doctrine of heaven is a powerful resource to relieve the perplexity engendered by Hasker's argument. So let us proceed by first spelling out a bit more fully the nature of this perplexity. This perplexity is due, I think, to a sense that we have no moral right to be glad

for our existence if our existence is contingent in some way on events which have brought terrible suffering and misery to other persons. Indeed, to be glad in such circumstances may seem obliviously self-centered or even clueless. It is hard to say exactly why, but it is almost as if those who have suffered before us, and with whom our own existence is inextricably and undeniably connected, have a moral claim against us and our happiness. To be rightly happy, it seems almost as if we somehow need their blessing or approval, perhaps even their forgiveness.

Since we cannot have this, we may feel that we owe it to them to regret our own existence. However, this is at best a rather vague and perhaps undefined feeling. Exactly what would be involved in regretting one's own existence in this sense? Would we be required actually to prefer that we, as well as those we love, did not in fact exist? And, if we were truly sincere and not merely engaging in empty hand wringing and guilt mongering, should such a preference lead us to suicide or even murder? Or should it merely involve a determined choice not to be happy, a choice to bear the suffering of others in our heart in such a way that we never experiences any real joy or take any deep satisfaction in life?

In any case, there is one thing it cannot mean and that is wishing we had never been born or wishing that past tragedies had not occurred. The reason is simple. What we can wish for must at the very least be possible, but it is not coherent to wish, strictly speaking, that the past were different than it is.[2] We can regret the past, but once a thing has happened, we cannot wish it away as never having happened. Our only real hope is that the past might somehow be redeemed. And, this is precisely the key to relieving the bewilderment Hasker identifies. More specifically, the doctrine of heaven represents our best hope that the past might be redeemed in such a way that we can be fully glad for our lives even if our existence is somehow implicated in some of the worst tragedies of human history. Heaven holds out the promise that persons who have suffered in terrible ways and died premature deaths have not been consigned to oblivion. The countless persons who have died in wars are not merely the waste product of human history who had to be sacrificed so that later generations could enjoy lives for which they are truly grateful.

Elsewhere, I have defended the notion of optimal grace, the notion that God will do everything He can, short of overriding freedom, to save all persons (Walls 2002, pp. 83–88). Indeed, God will compensate for lack of opportunity to receive salvation in this life and make sure that all persons have not only a fair, but a full opportunity to freely receive the eternal life for which all persons were created. And, if this is so, then all persons, without exception, will have the opportunity to experience full satisfaction and happiness. The only ones who are not finally saved will be those who simply will not accept what God freely offers, who persistently and decisively refuse his offer of grace.

Indeed, this is the final issue for all persons who have ever lived, whatever their fate may be in this life. The only hope for true happiness and full satisfaction for those who have suffered greatly and tragically is precisely the same as that of persons whose temporal lives in this world have been marked by joy and pleasure.

In view of all of this, I do not think anyone has reason to refuse the joy of life, or worse, regret his very existence. This is not to deny that in this life there are many occasions to grieve and mourn, but the mourning of the believer in heaven is set in the larger context of hope for a day of redemption that will dry all tears and heal all hurts. This is the essential hope that relieves the perplexity and bewilderment of being glad of our existence even while recognizing that our existence is contingent on tragedies which would otherwise be unspeakable.

6. Conclusions

In her book, *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Neiman tells the story of how modernity attempted to resolve the problem of evil. The Lisbon earthquake, shocking to a world that believed in a good God, was eventually thought not be an evil, but merely an unfortunate natural event. Moral evil, by contrast, was harder to domesticate and think about rationally. Neiman recognizes that even in our contemporary world, theodicy is tempting for those

who want to make sense of evil and to feel like there is reason to go on with the challenges of life. While Neiman feels the temptation of theodicy, she resists the hope that truth, beauty and goodness will ever converge in our world. The conflict between our hopes and reality is one that will never be resolved, and we must be satisfied with more modest expectations. As an example of what we may realistically hope for, she pointed to the courageous passengers on Flight 93 who resisted the terrorists on 9/11. "They proved not only that human beings have freedom; we can use it to affect a world we fear we don't control. This is not theodicy. It is not even consolation—though it is all the hope we have." (Neiman 2002, p. 288).

Given the rational constraints on hope imposed by her atheism, Neiman's stance is altogether understandable. I have argued in this essay, however, that there is reason to hope for much more, even for those who face the horrors of this world with wide eyed clarity and honesty.

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Notes

1 I have defended a Protestant account of purgatory in (Walls 2012).

2 Certainly it is logically possible that the past was different. There are possible worlds in which the past is different and in which our existence comes about with less suffering. However, alas, in the actual world, it remains incoherent to wish the past was different. We are stuck with the actual world, including its actual past.

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Article

God and the Playpen: On the Feasibility of Morally Better Worlds

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Abstract: According to the free will defense, God cannot create a world with free creatures, and hence a world with moral goodness, without allowing for the possibility of evil. David Lewis points out that any free will defense must address the "playpen problem": why didn't God allow creatures the freedom required for moral goodness, while intervening to ensure that all evil-doing is victimless? More recently, James Sterba has revived the playpen problem by arguing that an omnipotent and benevolent God would have intervened to prevent significant and especially horrendous evil. I argue that it is possible, at least, that such divine intervention would have backfired, and that any attempt to create a world that is morally better than this one would have resulted in a world that is morally worse. I conclude that the atheologian should instead attack the free will defense at its roots: either by denying that the predetermination of our actions is incompatible with our freely per-forming them, or by denying that the actual world—a world with both moral good and evil—is more valuable than a world without any freedom at all.

Keywords: problem of evil; free will defense; Alvin Plantinga; David Lewis; James Sterba; Molinism; Open Theism; theological compatibilism; Hugh McCann; J.L. Mackie

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1. Introduction

How is the evil that exists in this world consistent with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God? This is the "logical problem of evil." Alvin Plantinga sets out to solve it by describing a possible scenario in which God and evil co-exist (Plantinga 1974, pp. 24–28). In order for our actions to be morally good, we have to perform those actions freely. But if we are genuinely free, then we are also capable of performing morally evil acts. God cannot, therefore, create a world with free creatures, and hence a world with moral goodness, without allowing for the possibility of evil. While there are possible worlds with free creatures who never do anything wrong, such morally perfect worlds may not in fact be actualizable by God. Not all *possible* worlds are *feasible* worlds.[1] It is possible that any attempt to actualize a world with free creatures would result in a world in which those creatures commit at least some morally wrong acts (Plantinga 1974, pp. 188–89). But a world containing free creatures who do both good and evil things is better and more valuable than a world without freedom that does not allow for the possibility of any moral good whatsoever (Plantinga 1974, pp. 166–67).

David Lewis points out that any free will defense must address the "playpen problem" (Lewis 1993, p. 155). Perhaps free creatures will commit at least some evil acts no matter what. But an omnipotent God has the power to prevent the causal consequences of evil-doing (Lewis 1993, p. 154). So why didn't God put each free creature in a playpen, so to speak, to ensure that all evil is victimless? This would allow us the freedom required for moral goodness, while eliminating the suffering that results from wrongdoing. James Sterba has revived the playpen problem in his recent book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*

[1] The term "feasible world" was coined by Thomas Flint. A world is feasible just in case it is a member of the galaxy of worlds determined by the true creaturely world-type (Flint 1998, p. 51), i.e., the type of world God could actualize given the true counterfactuals of freedom (Flint 1998, p. 48).

(Sterba 2019). Sterba argues that God has a moral obligation to protect the kinds of political freedoms that would ideally be preserved in a just state, such as the freedom from assault, or the freedom to pursue a decent life for oneself (Sterba 2019, pp. 14–15). This requires intervention to prevent—or at least mitigate the consequences of—the horrendous evils that would undermine such freedoms. In effect, God should limit the freedom of those who would commit such evils by confining them to a playpen. The fact that evil-doers are clearly not so confined is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God.

I will argue that if morally perfect worlds are out of God's reach, then so is the playpen. The upshot of the free will defense is that this world may be among the best worlds God was in a position to actualize. I conclude that the atheologian should instead attack the free will defense at its roots: either by denying that the predetermination of our actions is incompatible with our freely performing them, or by denying that the actual world—a world with both moral good and evil—is more valuable than a world without any freedom at all.

2. Two Versions of the Playpen

After introducing the playpen problem, Lewis goes on to propose a possible solution. The reason God did not put free creatures in playpens is because freedom is only significant when something is at stake. The significance of freedom depends, not only on the "good or evil intrinsic character" of our actions, but also on the good or bad outcomes that follow from them (Lewis 1993, p. 154). Lewis is ambivalent about this solution, insofar as it values the significance of Stalin's freedom over the well-being of his prisoners in the Gulag. But he also thinks it will do for the purpose of a defense, and that in any case, it is where the free will defense will inevitably lead (Lewis 1993, p. 155).

As Lewis imagines the playpen, God arranges it so that *all* evil is victimless. No matter what anyone does, no one suffers as a result. Now Sterba allows that if God were *always* to intervene then "the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name" (Sterba 2019, p. 52). If all evil were victimless, then we would lack the conditions required for "soul-making"[2] (Sterba 2019, pp. 52–53). The acquisition of the virtues requires that we face challenging situations. We cannot become virtuous if confined to Lewis's playpen. But Sterba thinks there is nevertheless room for a less extreme version of the playpen. "Playpen freedom," he says, "is a problem only where freedom is constrained too much" (Sterba 2019, p. 52). In Sterba's playpen, our freedom is *appropriately* constrained. God intervenes only when the consequences of an evil act are, in Sterba's words, "significant and especially horrendous" (Sterba 2019, p. 53). This is because those significant and especially horrendous consequences interfere with the freedoms of victims.

Here it will be helpful to distinguish, as Michael Almeida does in his review of Sterba's book, between *political* freedom and *metaphysical* freedom (Almeida 2020, p. 246). Metaphysical freedom is the freedom of choice we must have in order for our actions to count as morally significant. This is the notion of freedom at play in the free will defense. Political freedoms, on the other hand, are fundamental rights protected by a just state, such as the freedom from assault, or the freedom to pursue a certain standard of living. Sterba contends that political freedoms are more important, and therefore worth protecting even if it means restricting metaphysical freedom, at least when it comes to especially horrendous evil (Sterba 2019, p. 29). (Here Sterba seems to share the discomfort Lewis feels about Stalin and the Gulag: is the significance of Stalin's freedom more significant than the freedom of his prisoners?) We expect a just state to restrict the freedom of would-be wrongdoers, say by preventing assaults, to protect the political freedoms of its citizens (Sterba 2019, pp. 12–14). If this is what we would expect of a just state, then we should expect the same of God. An omnipotent and benevolent God would have prevented the significant and horrendous consequences of evil acts. The fact that we are not confined to Sterba's playpen is inconsistent with God's existence.

[2] The concept of a "soul-making" theodicy is originally due to John Hick (1981).

3. Plantinga's Reply

While Plantinga does not address the playpen problem explicitly, he does argue for the possibility that God cannot create a world that is *morally better* than the actual world (Plantinga 1974, pp. 190–91). If successful, this would effectively solve the playpen problem. After all, the playpen problem assumes two things: first, that the playpen world—though morally imperfect—is still morally *better* than the actual world, and second, that the playpen world was within God's power to create. This means that if morally better worlds had been out of God's power to create, then so was the playpen world.

Plantinga's treatment of morally *better* worlds follows closely his treatment of morally *perfect* worlds. Remember that a morally perfect world is a world with free creatures who always choose the good. Plantinga begins by assuming that God cannot "strongly actualize" such a world, in the sense of *directly causing* it to be actual. God cannot *directly cause* free agents to choose the good, because in doing so their so-called "choices" would not be free after all (Plantinga 1974, p. 171). To actualize a morally perfect world, God must do so *indirectly* or "weakly" by relying on "counterfactuals of freedom": truths about what free agents would do in various circumstances (Plantinga 1974, pp. 172–73). For example, God cannot strongly actualize Curley's rejection of Smedes's bribe. But suppose God knows that Curley would freely reject the bribe if Smedes is sweating when he makes the offer. Then God can weakly actualize Curley's rejection of the bribe by causing a heatwave in Boston on the day of their meeting. More generally, God is able to weakly actualize a world, W, just in case the counterfactuals of freedom are such that GT → W[3], where T includes everything God strongly actualizes in W. But what if, for any morally perfect world, it is *not* the case that GT → W? Plantinga argues that God would be in that position in the event that all creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity.[4] In that case, God would have been unable to actualize a world with free creatures who always choose the good. No matter what free creatures God creates, and no matter what the circumstances, those creatures would inevitably go wrong in one way or another (Plantinga 1974, pp. 188–89).

It should be clear how to apply this machinery to the case of morally better worlds. Let W* be a possible world that is morally better than the actual world, and let T include everything God strongly actualizes in W*. Suppose that one of the creatures in W* freely performs some action, A. But suppose also that it is true of this creature that if God were to strongly actualize T, then the creature would *not* have performed A. In that case, God would not have been able to actualize W*. To actualize W*, God would first need to strongly actualize T, which would result in a world other than W*. It would then be false that GT → W*. Now suppose the same is true of every world that is morally better than the actual world. Then God would not be able to actualize any world that is morally better than this one (Plantinga 1974, p. 191). Since what we are supposing is at least possible, it follows that the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God is compatible with the amount of moral evil that actually exists in the world. While the actual world is not the best of all possible worlds, it could be among the best of all *feasible* worlds.

Here is the crucial point, and one which, as far as I am aware, Plantinga does not himself emphasize. Suppose that the true counterfactuals of freedom are such that, for any morally better world, W*, it is false that GT → W*. Then, if God were to attempt to actualize a morally better world by strongly actualizing T, the result would be, not W*, but rather a world that is morally worse than the actual world. Any attempt to create a world that is morally better than this one would result in a world that is morally worse. Let

[3] This is shorthand for "If God were to actualize T, then W would have been actual".

[4] Plantinga defines transworld depravity as follows: "An essence E suffers from transworld depravity if and only if for every world W such that E entails the properties significantly free in W and always does what is right in W, there is a state of affairs T and an action A such that (1) T is the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes in W, (2) A is morally significant for E's instantiation in W, and (3) if God had strongly actualized T, E's instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to A" (Plantinga 1974, p. 188). Following Otte (Otte 2009), Sterba notes that Plantinga does not actually need to assume that it is possible that every creaturely essence has transworld depravity; instead, it is enough to assume that, for any morally perfect world, if God were to strongly actualize T, then at least one creature would perform at least one wrong act (Sterba 2019, p. 25).

us use the term "degenerate" to describe this unfortunate combination of counterfactuals of freedom.

The possibility of degeneracy has important implications for the picture of divine intervention at work in Sterba's playpen. Sterba appeals to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shephard as an example of a significant and especially horrendous evil that an omnipotent and benevolent God should have intervened to prevent. God could have easily prevented this hate crime, according to Sterba, by causing the assailants' car to have a flat tire as they were leaving the parking lot (Sterba 2019, p. 21). Consider the possible world, W*, in which God does exactly that. In W*, the hate crime is averted. Keeping everything else the same, W* is morally better than the actual world. Now the flat tire on the assailants' car is included in the T for that world. It is among the states of affairs that God strongly actualizes in W*. If the true counterfactuals of freedom are degenerate, then if God were to actualize T, the result would not be W*, but rather a different world that would be worse, not better, than the actual world. God's intervention would not result in a morally better world after all.

Sterba does acknowledge that God's intervention could potentially result in greater evils. Sterba imagines a scenario in which Matthew Shephard survives only to go on to commit horrendous evil acts of his own. In that case, Sterba thinks the appropriate solution is for God to intervene once again to prevent those further evils (Sterba 2019, pp. 21–22). Sterba does not seem to recognize, however, that this second intervention would be no more successful than the first, at least if the desired outcome is to actualize a world that is morally better than the actual world. The same reasoning applies: any additional interventions would also be included in T, and if the true counterfactuals of freedom are degenerate, then God's strong actualization of T would result in a world that is morally worse than the actual world. The limited divine intervention in Sterba's playpen would not do the job: the only way for God to prevent horrendous evil would be to deny creatures any significant freedom whatsoever.

Sterba argues that God's failure to intervene would be a violation of the Pauline Principle: the principle that "we should never do evil that good may come of it" (Sterba 2019, p. 49). While the principle speaks only of *doing* evil, Sterba claims that when the evil is significant and easily preventable, permitting evil is morally equivalent to performing it (Sterba 2019, p. 51). Moreover, he thinks God's failure to prevent significant evil does not fall under the three standard exceptions to the principle: the evil is not "trivial," it is not "easily reparable," and it is not "the only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocent people" (Sterba 2019, pp. 49–50). I am suggesting that, if the true counterfactuals of freedom are degenerate, God's failure to prevent significant evil would then be an exception to the Pauline Principle. Any attempt on God's part to prevent horrendous evil—or at least any attempt that leaves some creaturely freedom intact—would result in even more evil. So permitting evil would, in fact, be the only way to prevent far greater harm to innocent people.

At this point it would be worthwhile to revisit Lewis's version of the playpen. Recall that in Lewis's playpen, all evil is victimless: God severs the causal connection between the evil acts we perform and the suffering that would otherwise result. God cannot directly control what choices we make, if those choices are to be genuinely free. But God can control their *causal consequences*. God cannot prevent Stalin from condemning prisoners to the Gulag (at least while preserving Stalin's freedom). But God can fix it so the prisoners escape unscathed. God can even make sure Stalin never discovers the chronic inefficacy of his evil-doing. The result would be a world with free creatures, but without any of the concomitant suffering. As we saw earlier, both Sterba and Lewis himself dismiss this version of the playpen. For Lewis, freedom is significant only if something is at stake. For Sterba, a world with no suffering would lack the challenges required for soul-making. But now that we have seen that Sterba's version of the playpen is possibly not feasible, Lewis's playpen might not look so bad after all. The problem with Sterba's playpen is that God's intervention is only *partial:* God allows some evil acts to have their intended

consequences, intervening only when those consequences are especially horrendous. We have seen that if the true counterfactuals of freedom are degenerate, God cannot prevent horrendous suffering unless the intervention is *total*. One way to do this is to deny creatures any freedom whatsoever. But another way is to allow creatures to choose freely, but to sever the causal connections between those choices and any suffering that would otherwise follow. That is, to make all evil victimless.

If the true counterfactuals of freedom are degenerate, Lewis's playpen—unlike Sterba's—may still be *feasible*. It would not, however, be *morally better* than the actual world. A world with victimless evil and some moral goodness would arguably be better, if we ignore for the moment Sterba's concerns about soul-making. But why think God's interventions would result in a world with any moral goodness at all? It may be that if God were to intervene to make all evil victimless, everyone would *always choose wrongly*. It may be that any intervention to prevent suffering would result in a world with creatures who make even more morally repugnant (albeit victimless) choices. The free will defense begins with the assumption that a world with no free creatures, and no opportunities for moral goodness, is less valuable than a world with free creatures who perform both good and evil acts. The entire point of endowing creatures with free will is to allow for the possibility of moral goodness. If a world with neither good nor evil is worse than the actual world, then certainly a world with only victimless evil would be no better.

4. Open Theism and the Playpen

Plantinga's solution to the playpen problem, as with his free will defense, depends on the Molinist doctrine of "middle knowledge": the view that counterfactuals of freedom guide and constrain God's creative activity (Adams 1977, p. 112). But Molinism is not without its detractors. Some, like Robert Adams, argue that counterfactuals of freedom cannot be true, because there is nothing that *grounds* their truth. Ordinary counterfactuals are typically grounded in laws of nature and initial conditions. 'If I were to drop a piece of chalk on the floor, then it would break' is true, if it is, in virtue of the law of gravity, the composition of the chalk, the hardness of the floor, etc. But these sorts of facts cannot ground counterfactuals of freedom, since free actions are not causally determined. The fact that Curley would accept (or reject) Smedes's bribe cannot, therefore, be true in virtue of Curley's character, since Curley's character does not causally determine Curley's actions (Adams 1977, p. 111). Adams concludes that God has no "middle knowledge" about what free creatures *would do*, and must instead make do with knowledge of what free creatures *will probably do* (Adams 1977, p. 111). Curley's character makes it *more likely* that he will accept bribes in certain circumstances and not others, but if Curley is a free agent, there is no fact of the matter what he *would do* in advance of his doing it.

Open Theists, convinced by this reasoning, believe God does not know for certain how we will act, or how we will respond to divine intervention. While God's creative activity can still be guided by knowledge of what we will probably do, God must inevitably assume some degree of risk with the decision to endow us with libertarian free will (Hasker 2004, chp. 8). This picture of divine providence depicts God as a deity who responds to our actions in real time, rather than one who plans out every detail of creation in advance (Hasker 2004, p. 118). Perhaps it is here that the playpen problem could get a foothold. Even if God did not know ahead of time what horrendous evils free creatures would commit, God still had knowledge of these atrocities *as they were occurring*, and presumably had the power to nip them in the bud. God might not have known what Matthew Shepherd's assailants would do beforehand. But God could have at least intervened once the assault was in progress. After all, if armed police officers had come upon the scene, we would have expected them to intervene and put a stop to it immediately. Failure to intervene in such circumstances would have been a moral outrage. So why not hold God to the same standard?

Tempting as this line of reasoning may be, the Open Theist could respond as follows. Even if there are no counterfactuals about how we *would* behave in various circumstances,

the Open Theist admits to facts about how we will *probably* behave (Flint 1998, p. 97). And it is possible that these facts are similarly degenerate: it is possible that any time God intervenes to put a stop to some horrendously evil act, the *probable* result is something even more horrendous. It could be that any attempt on God's part to make the world morally better will likely result in a world that is morally worse. Faced with such odds, the most reasonable course of action might be for God to refrain from intervening altogether.

One could object that this kind of degeneracy is preventable if God has control over the characters of the creatures God decides to create. That way God can control how those creatures will probably behave. Of course, this does not *guarantee* that no one will ever commit evil acts, since again we are assuming that our actions are not causally determined by our characters. But it could, on the face of it, avoid degeneracy if God creates agents that will *probably* choose the good, even though it is always possible for them to go astray. In that case, God could have created creatures who would probably choose the good, with the aim to intervene in the unlikely event that one of these creatures acts out of character and attempts to commit a horrendously evil act. And if all creatures were such that they would probably choose the good, God's occasional intervention would not likely result in further, or worse, evils. So perhaps a morally better world had been open to God after all.

However, even if we grant that God had power over our characters, so long as our characters do not determine our free actions, it is still possible that a morally better world has been out of God's reach. To see why, suppose God *did* in fact create free creatures in such a way that they would probably choose the good. As it happens, God turned out to be spectacularly unlucky. Despite the odds, many of God's creatures over the course of history have acted out of character and committed evil acts. Moreover, whenever God attempted to intervene to prevent some horrendous evil from occurring, the result was some other equally horrendous, or possibly even more horrendous, evil. Again, these evil acts may have been out of the evildoers' character, and as a result they were exceedingly improbable. But they happened nevertheless. The only way God could have prevented the amount of evil that has occurred throughout history is by putting an end to creaturely freedom altogether. While this scenario is farfetched, it is enough to solve the logical problem of evil. To solve the logical problem, we need only a defense, not a theodicy.

In sum, both Molinism and Open Theism have the resources to address the playpen problem. Molinists can appeal to degenerate counterfactuals of freedom to argue that is possible that a morally better world *would have* been out of God's reach. And while Open Theists cannot appeal to degenerate *counterfactuals*, they *can* appeal to degenerate *facts*: it may be that all of God's past interventions resulted in evils more horrendous than those that God was trying to prevent. That could be why a morally better world *has so far* been out of God's reach. Either way, it is possible that the only way to achieve a world that has less evil than this one is to create a world without any free creatures whatsoever.

5. A Better Strategy

This is not to say that I am entirely sympathetic with the free will defense as a response to the logical problem of evil. My point is that the playpen problem grants too much. To begin with, the playpen problem does not take issue with *theological incompatibilism*: the view that divine determination of our actions is incompatible with our performing those actions freely. The free will defense assumes that God cannot directly control the free performances of actions. The Molinist and the Open Theist disagree about whether God can *indirectly* control some of our actions by making use of counterfactuals of freedom. But they both agree that God cannot *directly* determine how we will act, at least if those actions are to be genuinely free. Without this assumption, the free will defense is a non-starter, since the atheologian could then ask why God did not, in Mackie's words, make us "freely choose the good" (Mackie 1955, p. 209).[5] The kind of divine intervention we find

[5] I am indebted to Gregory Kristof for convincing me that discussions of the free will defense have not paid sufficient attention to the assumption of theological incompatibilism (Kristof 2021).

in the playpen would be entirely unnecessary. God could simply bring it about that we freely refrain from committing horrendously evil acts, and instead have us commit just the minimum the amount of evil required for soul-making.

Theological *compatibilists* argue that free will is compatible with theological determinism, and that God can directly bring about the free performances of actions. Some contemporary theological compatibilists, such as Hugh McCann, think that theological determinism—unlike *causal* determinism—is compatible with *libertarian* freedom (McCann 2005, pp. 145–46). McCann even goes so far as to argue that theological determinism is a *condition* of libertarian freedom (McCann 2005, p. 156). Now theological incompatibilism is admittedly more popular among theists than theological compatibilism. But this seems to be largely due to the fact that incompatibilists are in a better position to address the problem of evil.[6] Theological compatibilists must explain why God did not directly bring it about that we always choose the good, given that God could easily do so without undermining creaturely freedom. In other words, theological compatibilists cannot help themselves to the free will defense. But while this may be a reason in favor of incompatibilism in the context of a debate among *theists*, it is not so convincing if your interlocutor is an *atheist* who finds the problem of evil compelling in the first place.

Even if we could identify a type of "metaphysical freedom" that is incompatible with divine determination, is this kind of freedom actually *worth* the amount of horrendous evil we find in the world? We have been exploring a possible scenario in which all interventions on God's part to prevent horrendous evil result—or would result—in even more horrendous evil down the road. Note that these interventions, as we have imagined them, leave at least some creaturely freedom intact. It was still open to God to prevent evil by denying creatures freedom altogether. Realizing that the counterfactuals of freedom were degenerate, God could have decided not to create any free creatures at all. If open theism is true, God may not have known ahead of time what evils would unfold. Still, God had the option to prevent *further* evil by simply rescinding our freedom entirely. The fact that God did not do so indicates, either that there is no God, or that a world with no metaphysical freedom and no evil is less valuable than a world that contains both.

The free will defense depends, then, on the assumption that the actual world is more valuable than a world without metaphysical freedom. This is often presented as a choice between the actual world and a world full of "innocent automata" (Mackie 1955, p. 208). That way of presenting the choice makes it seem as though creatures without metaphysical freedom would thereby lack *consciousness*. But this is not obviously the case. The real choice, it seems to me, is between the actual world and a world with conscious beings whose actions are directly actualized by God. While they may lack metaphysical freedom, such creatures could still have *political* freedom: they could still pursue good lives for themselves without interference from evildoers. If political freedom is independent of metaphysical freedom[7], and if, as Sterba claims, political freedom is ultimately more valuable (Sterba 2019, p. 12), then a world with ample political freedom but no metaphysical freedom is arguably more valuable than the actual world.

Instead of demanding why God has failed to put us in a playpen, atheologians should direct their fire towards these two assumptions at the heart of the free will defense: the claim that metaphysical freedom is incompatible with divine determination, and the claim that a world without metaphysical freedom is less valuable than the actual world. Once we grant these two principles to the free will defense, we must allow for the possibility that this is among the best of all feasible worlds: both morally perfect and even morally better worlds may be out of God's reach to create.

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[6] See, for example, (Hasker 2004, p. 11), or (Flint 1998, pp. 90–91).

[7] Almeida argues that the two types of freedom are "logically independent" of one another (Almeida 2020, p. 246).

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Is God Morally Obligated to Prevent Evil? A Response to James Sterba

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Abstract: James Sterba's book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, argues that given the amount of significant and horrendous evil in the world, it is not possible for a (morally) good God to exist. This article draws on the work of Brian Davies' interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics and theology proper and argues that God is not a moral being, and thus has no obligations to prevent such evil. If such is the case, then the problem of evil as presented by Sterba is not a problem for God's existence.

Keywords: God; moral; morality; evil; James Sterba; Brian Davies; Thomas Aquinas; good

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1. Introduction

James Sterba argues that a good God is not logically possible.[1] It may interest some that as a theist, I agree with him in a way. How on earth could a theist agree with an atheist in saying that a good God does not exist? In his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba makes the argument that given the amount of horrendous evil in the world, there is no justification, even in principle, for an all-good God allowing it.[2] While many if not most philosophers today favor a more inductive argument in the vein of William Rowe, Sterba uses a logical, deductive approach to argue against any possibility of God's existence.[3]

This article will outline Sterba's main argument, focusing on his point that any such God would be moral. Drawing on work from Brian Davies, a classical theist response is provided by using Thomistic metaphysics and theology proper. The Book of Job is offered as an illustration. The author will also provide a Thomistic view of what divine perfection, goodness, and moral virtues mean regarding God's essence. Finally, the author will examine Sterba's objections to this position and offer an evaluation.

2. An Overview of Sterba's Argument

Sterba's book attempts to examine the major ways in which theists have responded to the problem of evil. One of the main areas on which Sterba focuses is in regard to the free will defense as set forth by Alvin Plantinga.[4] Plantinga was responding to J. L. Mackie's logical problem of evil which is summarized[5]:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Evil exists.

What is interesting about Mackie's position is that he recognizes that there is no obvious contradiction here.[6] He writes that there may possibly need to be more premises or rules concerning the terms such that when they are understood in a certain way, then there is a contradiction.[7] This point will be taken up by such thinkers as Brian Davies and will also be the route taken in this article, namely about the meaning of "good" and if that is problematic for this style of argument.[8] This is the style of argument that Sterba is making in his book. Since Plantinga responds to Mackie in a way that many philosophers see as successful, Sterba is quick to try to attack the free will defense as presented by Plantinga. In short, Plantinga's free will defense says that it is not logically possible for an omnipotent being to control what free creatures do. If he controls them, they are not free.

If they are going to be free, then he cannot control them such that he cannot prevent evil. Significant freedom requires that creatures have the logical possibility of committing acts of evil. Sterba's contention is that Mackie could have made his argument stronger with what he calls "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements". These are as follows:[9]

1. Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done.
2. Do not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.
3. Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

These are principles which are laid out in the book which are used to bolster the logical problem.

Sterba declares that this "can be incorporated into the argument that John Mackie should have used to succeed in his debate with Alvin Plantinga".[10] The basic argument that Sterba makes is this:

1. There is an all-good, all-powerful God. (This is assumed for the sake of argument by both Mackie and Plantinga.)
2. If there is an all-good, all-powerful God, then necessarily he would be adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III.
3. If God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtained through what would have to be his permission.
4. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us. (This is assumed by both Mackie and Plantinga.)
5. Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God.

In sum, Sterba argues that if a God existed, then he would necessarily follow the above moral evil prevention requirements. As a rational being, God is morally obligated to follow these principles.

Since there are significant and horrendous evils, then such a God would not exist. At least, he is not all-powerful or all-good. However, since that is the general conception of God, no such God exists.

Mackie claims in his article that the logical argument does not get off the ground without some caveats. One of those caveats is the definition and understanding of the terms "omnipotent" and "wholly good".[11] This is an interesting point since some of these terms are often simply taken for granted in the literature, especially "wholly good" or "all-good". Mackie further states, "Now once the problem is fully stated [with the necessary clarifications] it is clear that it can be solved, in the sense that the problem *will not arise* if one gives up at least one of the propositions that constitute it."[12] "If you are prepared to say that God is not wholly good . . . or that good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists . . . then the problem of evil will not arise for you."[13]

Mackie and Sterba both mean by "good" *morally good*. This is oftentimes the only option that people think the term "good" can have. They are not alone. Many, if not most, Christians seem to hold this view as well. For example, Richard Swinburne claims: "I suggest that the theist's claim that God is by nature morally perfectly good should be understood as the claim that God is so constituted that he always does what is—given his omniscience . . . probably the morally best action or best kind of action . . . "[14] He further states, "If God did not always do what on his evidence is probably the best where there was a best, or ever did a bad action, he would be less than perfect."[15] Thus, Swinburne, like Mackie and Sterba, take God to be a morally perfect being (if he exists). With this

understanding, Sterba argues that God cannot even logically exist given the existence of horrendous evil. There is no justification for such evil (hence a rejection of the Pauline Principle that says evil can exist in order to bring about a good effect).[16]

3. A Classical Theist Response to Sterba

Does "good" have to mean *morally good*, and what does it do to Sterba's case if it does not mean that? Brian Davies and Herbert McCabe argue that, indeed, when we say that God is good, we do not mean that he is morally good in the way humans are.[17]

To say that man is moral is to say that he has some obligation to fulfill. Most atheists and theists agree that there is some sort of such obligation on humans to act in a certain way and how they should treat others (although the moral theory ascribed to by such thinkers varies greatly). Why do humans have such an obligation? Regardless of the moral system one holds to, if he thinks that humans have a moral obligation to act in certain ways and not act in others, there is some notion of dependence such that he will be good or bad depending on what he does. Such dependence further requires that humans have a certain metaphysical and moral make up. First, for humans to be able to act morally, they have to act—that is, they have to exist. They also have to be *able* to act in a certain way. In other words, they have to have the ability or potential to do so. These broad categories should not be controversial; in fact, it is hard to see how one could deny either of them. However, such categories are how Aristotle described basic metaphysical principles, viz., act and potency.[18] A thing arguably has to have act and potency to make sense of such moral obligation. For example, Aristotle argues that what it means to be morally good, or virtuous, is simply the actualization of certain potencies that man has by virtue of being a human being. (This of course takes a realist side of the realism/nominalism debate regarding human natures.) Further, there must exist an actual obligation in order to fulfill it. Where do such obligations come from? There are, of course, legal obligations that one has, which comes from the law of the land. Then, there is a moral law that philosophers talk about that is binding somehow by virtue of being human and having some sort of objective and often transcendent legislator to proclaim such law. Theists have taken various approaches to explaining this, such as divine command theory, natural law theory, etc. However one wants to explain moral obligation, it is hard to make sense of it without the notion of objective laws. (Some, of course, especially those who take a more Darwinian framework, attempt to do so on more or less utilitarian grounds; some try to take a type of Aristotelian virtue ethics path.)[19] It is important to note that Sterba does not reject such an objective view of morality even though he may differ with theists as to how such morality is grounded.

All this makes sense of man, but what about God? Can one say that God has such a metaphysical makeup as man, having actuality and potentiality, or that his goodness is dependent on what he does? Such would have to be the case for one to say that God's goodness is dependent on what he does in the sense of God fulfilling obligations and being just. That is the whole point for providing theodicies. Theodicies attempt to *justify* God for allowing evil and suffering while defenses attempt to show that God's existence is not incompatible with such evil. There are several assumptions made with such theodicies. One assumption is that God *needs* justifying. Another is that evil is actually a counterexample to God's existence (at least in most forms of such theodicies and some defenses).

On a classical view of God, as Davies says, he is not "an existent among others".[20] On classical theism, he says, "we get things badly wrong if we take God to be something we can picture or get our minds around".[21] Those who say God is a moral being generally reject the classical view of God in favor of what Davies calls "theistic personalism".[22] Theistic personalists take God to be more similar to human persons than classical theists generally do. However, if what has been said about God in classical theism is right, then he cannot be taken to be just one more thing in the class of existing things.

If God is indeed a being of Pure Act and simple (having no parts, physical or metaphysical), then he is necessarily different and distinct from his creatures, contra the theistic

personalists. This radical Creator/creature distinction is the heart of the rejection of the idea of God being a moral being among other moral beings. As a transcendent Creator over all created beings, he is not like them. However, being like other beings is required to say that God is a morally good being and therefore, unjust for allowing evil and suffering. This is what Sterba argues for, viz., that since God is a rational being *like us*, then the moral law applies to him. Sterba writes, "This is because the law of nature that God presumably implanted in our hearts is understood to apply to all rational beings including God himself."[23] Sterba does recognize that some, e.g., natural law theorists, would argue that morality only applies to beings of a certain nature, and since God does not have that (human) nature, then he is said to not have the moral law. However, he retorts that "God is said to be rational and it is in virtue of his being rational that the same (moral) natural law applies to God as to ourselves."[24] Such is not an argument, but more of an assertion. Sterba seems to want to argue that being rational necessarily entails being moral. If such were the case, then one could see Sterba's point. However, it is not obviously the case that being a rational agent necessarily entails being moral. It is at least conceivable that God created humans as rational agents with a certain moral nature that is not identical to the divine nature. Given such an option, Sterba's point is not a given and needs further argumentation and demonstration. Further, such assumes a univocal view of predicates like "rational". Classical theists generally deny that predicates can be applied to God in such a way.

There are essentially three general ways (with nuances among these positions) that language can be applied to two or more analogates (in this case man/creatures and God). One way is for terms to be used univocally. Such is the case when a term is used in the same way for both analogates. For example, when a person says, "I am going to the bank to deposit money" and "The banks lost money during the Great Depression", the term "bank" is being used univocally or in the same way. Another way terms can be used is equivocally, in which case they mean something different. For example, if one says, "I am going to fish on the bank", the term bank would be equivocal with the former examples. In this latter case, "bank" has two different meanings/usages. However, terms can also be used analogously, i.e., they can be used in ways that are similar but not exactly the same, and not exactly different. For example, the term "good" is used analogously in the following examples: "My computer is good"; "My cheeseburger is good"; "John is good". There is something about the meaning of the word "good" in each of these examples that is similar to the others, but not in the exact same way. What it is to be a good computer is different than what it is to be a good cheeseburger or person. However, there is something in common with them: they each are what they are supposed to be according to what their nature is. A computer is good if it works properly as a computer *should*. A cheeseburger is good if it is tasty and nutritious (somewhat anyway). John is (morally) good if he acts the way he *is supposed to act*.[25]

Thus, the *meaning* of the term "good" is determined by its referent. In other words, the meaning of "good" is contracted to the nature of the thing being referred to. The nature of a thing determines what it means to be a good example of a thing in that category. Two observations are important here: in order to say that a thing is good, one has to know (1) what the thing is, and (2) what it is supposed to be, or how it is supposed to function or act. One can argue that he has a good understanding of what a human being's nature is and what it is supposed to be like, or how a human should behave. However, a major tenet of classical theism is that finite creatures do not know what God's nature is in himself. Thus, one cannot even in principle know what he *should* do or how he *should* behave. Given a strong Creator/creature distinction, there is a real agnosticism regarding God's nature. While his existence can be demonstrated via theistic proofs and rational enquiry, what he is exactly is not known, and cannot be. One reason for this is that one does not have direct knowledge of God but instead knows him via his effects (nature). Another is that creatures know through the senses, but God is not a thing to be known in that way. Further, humans only have direct knowledge of complex being, but God is said (in the classical model) to be

a simple being. God is also an infinite being, thus, by definition, finite beings could not comprehend him. It is important to understand, then, that much of what one says about God metaphysically or literally is negative or apophatic in nature. In other words, such descriptions say what God is *not* like rather than what he is like. For example, to say God is simple is to say he does *not* have parts. To say he is immaterial is to say he is *not* material. To say he is immutable is to say he does or can *not* change. Divine eternality means God is *not* temporal. Infinite simply means *not* finite.

All this is to say that language does not offer a literal, univocal way of talking about God, and that creatures are left with a certain level of agnosticism regarding what God is in his actual nature.[26] However, when people say that God is a rational being *like us*, they are using the term in a univocal way and claiming to know what God is like and how he should "behave". Thus, if such knowledge about God is impossible, then one simply cannot say that God is rational *like us* or that he knows what God is really like or how he should act. Surely, though, for a finite, limited, material creature to be rational is not the same as for an infinite, unlimited, immaterial Creator to be rational. To say they are rational in the same way is to blur the Creator/creature distinction.

As Sterba noted, natural law theorists hold that the moral law is an aspect of being human. He is right about rational beings having the moral law; as rational creatures, humans are moral beings.[27] Other animals are not rational and do not have the moral law. For example, if a lion killed another animal, it would not be murder; it would simply be killing (the same would be the case if a human killed an animal). However, if a human kills another human (other than in war or self-defense), that would be murder. Such is the case because of the *nature* of humans. Thus, there is something about being humans that make such actions wrong. However, God cannot even commit such an act. This is an important point: much of what is considered to be immoral for humans is not even possible for God to do given what he is or is not. For example, God cannot murder. Murder has the idea of taking a life that does not belong to the murderer. However, if God is sovereign over all life, then he owns all life and can do what he wants with it.[28] God cannot steal, since all things belong to him. God cannot commit immoral behaviors that are inseparable from having a material body, such as lust. In short, God is not the kind of being to even be able to commit many of the immoralities that humans often commit, *because he is not a human*. To be a human is to be a creature. Thus, properties that are unique to creation cannot be present in God. To put this into a logical argument one could say:

1. God as Creator does not have properties of creation.
2. Morality is a property of creation.
3. Therefore, God does not have moral properties.

Saying that God is necessarily moral because he is rational is problematic in that it requires the term "rational" to be used univocally, which also requires that one knows the nature of God. Neither can be the case, so one cannot simply state without argument that God is moral in virtue of being rational. As a transcendent being, God by definition does not have properties that are unique to creation. It should also be pointed out that *rationality* in the way that humans have it is a property of creation. God is certainly not rational in the way that humans are as the latter reason in time, through deliberation, and know via the senses passively. Such is arguably not the case with God. For example, Aquinas argues that God as a being of Pure Act cannot know discursively or passively; rather, God knows all that can be known, both actual and possible, by knowing himself as the perfect cause of all finite being.[29] Thus, even the notion of rationality is not the same between creation and the Creator. So, being rational is not enough to be the basis for morality since what it even means to be rational differs based on the nature of the being in question. Thus, God simply is not rational the way humans are. If such is the basis for Sterba and others saying that God is moral, then such is not enough to make that conclusion.

From what has been argued, if God is not a moral agent, then he has no moral obligations to prevent evil. If that is the case, then evil is not an argument against God's existence.

Evil cannot serve as an objection to his existence. Further, it does not invalidate positive evidence for God. For example, if there are sound arguments for God's existence, then the presence of evil does not make such evidence just go away. Davies calls this the "We Know that God Exists" argument.[30] Only if there is something about the nature of evil as such that it requires a logical (and metaphysical) contradiction, could one say that it renders God's existence impossible. However, if what has been said above is true, then God and evil are compossible. What needs to happen in this debate is for atheists *as well as theists* to stop trying to solve or use the problem of evil without first looking at the nature of God. Too many theists attempt to solve the "problem of evil" via logic instead of looking at the metaphysics. Sterba does attempt to look at God's nature, in a way, by saying that as a rational agent, he is thus moral. However, it has been argued that such is simply not the case. However, in general, the atheist gets the cart before the horse by using evil as an argument against God without looking at the positive evidence for him (the various theistic proofs), and just assuming that God must be of a certain nature, since humans are, to want to rid the world of evil or prevent evil from ever happening. Such is tremendous hubris for one to assume what God would or should do, making himself the judge of God. This is exactly what happened in the Book of Job.

4. Job as an Illustration

In the first couple of chapters of Job, God allows Satan to kill Job's children, servants, cattle, and destroy his son's home. God allowed Satan to destroy "all that he has" (1:12), he was simply not allowed to harm Job.[31] God told Satan that Job still honored him even though Satan "incited [God] *without reason* (2:3, emphasis added). Satan was then allowed to inflict Job with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7). After all this, Job's wife told him to curse God and die (2:9). Job's friends came to comfort him. After seven days, they began to inquire what sin Job had done to cause such calamity. Job was adamant that he had done nothing to bring this on (remember, God said this was without reason). For the majority of the book, Job argues with his friends about what he did to bring this on. Job maintains his innocence. Finally, at the end of the book (chapter 38), God answers Job and rebukes him. God interrogates Job as to where he was when God made the mysteries of the world. In the end, Job answers that he is in no place to judge God.

What is interesting is what is not said: God does not justify himself to Job or offer some kind of theodicy. He simply tells Job that he is in no position to judge him. That is because God is the Creator and Job was the creation. God was under no obligation to prevent such evil from happening to Job, or anyone else. If God's character were replaced by a human, most, if not all, would say that he was immoral for allowing Job and his family to suffer (be killed) "without reason". However, there is no indication from the Bible anywhere after this that God is said to be immoral. He is simply not the kind of being to be moral or immoral. He transcends the categories of morality like he transcends the categories of time and space.

5. Divine Perfection and Goodness

So, is God good at all if he is not *morally* good? Classical theists not only answer with a resounding yes, but they also say God is good in a perfect and unlimited way, and he is the only being to be so. Regarding his perfection, Aquinas says "the first active principle must needs be most actual, and therefore most perfect; for a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection."[32] In other words, a thing *can be* perfected or perfect if it has the potential to be so; however, if that potential has been fully realized, then that being *is* perfect. There is no more room or potential for betterment or perfection. However, Aquinas argues that God has not realized his potential, but has no potential since he is a being of Pure Act. Thus, he is inherently perfect. This perfection is a metaphysical one, having to do with being or

existence. So, according to Aquinas, God is perfect, but is he good? He first discusses the notion of goodness in general and then applies that notion to God.

First, Aquinas explains the relationship between goodness and being. According to him, they are really the same, but differ in how they are thought. Quoting Aristotle (Ethics i), Aquinas says that goodness is what is desirable to all. A thing, he says, is desirable if it is perfect, and perfect if it is actual. So, a thing is more perfect the more it is actual. "Therefore," he says, "it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual ... Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present."[33] In this sense, being, or existence, is the same as goodness and are only different in the aspect of desirability.

Regarding the goodness of God, since all things seek their own perfection, and since a thing's perfection is somehow first in the efficient cause (God), the agent is also desirable, having fullness of being and perfection. Thus, God is good.[34] This does not in any way say that God is morally good; this speaks to a metaphysical notion of goodness that is tied to being.

This notion of goodness can be compared to the typical medieval view of evil—one still in vogue today in many circles. Augustine and Aquinas after him, argued that evil is not a thing in itself, but a corruption of good.[35] If being and actuality are good, then evil cannot be a being or an actuality, or it would be good. However, that would be a contradiction. Hence, evil is not a thing in itself, but a corruption of a thing. In other words, it is a reversal of a thing's goodness or perfection. Thus, goodness is equitable to being and evil is simply a corruption of that being, not a being in itself.

6. Moral Virtues and the Divine Essence

Is there any way that moral virtue can be ascribed to God? The answer is, "in a way". That is, analogously. Aquinas states that it is proper to call God "just", "merciful", and the like. (It would be hard to deny that since the Scriptures do so.) Yet, in what way can this be done and does that not invalidate what has been said?

Aquinas says that since God is perfect and good, and since he is the efficient cause of all that exists (besides himself), then there is some way in which all effects reside in him. Since virtues are found in God's effects, then there must be a way in which such virtues pre-exist in God as their cause.[36] Aquinas is quick to point out that whatever this means has to first be understood in light of what he has said before about God's nature, viz., that he is simple. Thus, in whatever way he contains virtue is not in the same way as man does, for man is virtuous through habits and becoming virtuous, while whatever God "has" he simply is essentially.[37]

God, Aquinas says, can be said to be just. However, he cannot be just in every respect, for commutative justice is where things are exchanged between persons, such as in a business transaction. As such requires a debt and since God does not owe a debt, he cannot be just in this way. He can be said to be just in another way, viz., by distributive justice. Such justice is when someone provides for others what they deserve. This is not meant to be seen as a debt since it is clearly contrasted with commutative justice; rather, it is seen between rulers and the ruled, and between a parent and his children. Aquinas has in mind the entire ordering "of the universe" as God's effects, "both in effects of nature and effects of will" which "shows forth the justice of God".[38] Of this type of justice, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange states, "Experience clearly shows that God distributes to all creatures what is necessary so that they can attain their end, although all do not actually do so."[39] In other words, since God created, he gave his creatures what they needed per their natures to attain their final cause, or their ultimate goal (which for humans is ultimately God himself).

God is under no obligation to create or to create certain things; however, since he did, he created his effects to have certain natures and gave them what they needed to be what they are. This is a distinction that Aquinas makes in the context of God's will.[40] Aquinas is here answering the question as to whether what God wills he must will necessarily. His

answer lies in a distinction between absolute necessity and suppositional necessity. The former is what must be willed either by definition (such as analytic statements), or God willing himself or his own goodness. Anything else is willed suppositionally. In other words, he does not have to will x, but supposing that he wills x, then he wills it necessarily (in a suppositional way). This is because, per simplicity, the divine will is not distinct from the divine essence. Thus, it is eternal and necessary. However, God's will is free in that he did not have to create anything, but supposing that he did, he did so eternally and necessarily since there is no contingency in his being. Since he did not have to will, but rather did so freely, Aquinas says that he did so suppositionally.

The point of this distinction as applied here is that God is under no obligation to create or to create certain things. However, since he did, he also justly willed that they have certain natures and ways of fulfilling those natures. This is what Aquinas has in mind regarding distributive justice. He had no obligation to create humans; however, supposing he did, he also necessarily willed their good, and part of that good is to will them to fulfill their natures.

As Davies maintains, however, such does not make God a moral being like humans. Unlike humans, who are just in reference to a law, God, says Aquinas, has no law that is "external" to him. He says, "Since good as perceived by intellect is the object of the will, it is impossible for God to will anything but what His wisdom approves. This is, as it were, His law of justice, in accordance with which His will is right and just. Hence, what he does according to His will He does justly: as we do justly what we do according to law. But whereas law comes to us from some higher power God is a law unto Himself."[41] In other words, God acts justly per his nature, viz., his will and intellect, which are really the same in God. However, Davies argues that one should not take Aquinas as meaning that God is just or moral in a univocal way as those terms are applied to humans. Aquinas explicitly writes, "Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures".[42] Further, since one cannot know the divine essence in itself, one cannot know the exact meaning of such terms as "just". Aquinas further notes that terms such "as *good*, *wise*, and the like" can be predicated of God substantially, "although they fall short of a full representation of Him".[43] Such is the case because creatures know God indirectly via creation. Further, Aquinas thinks that all creaturely perfections pre-exist in God as their cause, but in a more perfect way (if such perfections are properly said of God). Thus, when it is said that "God is just", it should not be taken univocally as when it is said "John is just". There is a similarity, that is analogy, but not an exact meaning. Since to be just in the way creatures are is to say that the creature is living up to a standard imposed on him, then such cannot be the understanding of justice applied to God.

In short, God can be said to contain the moral virtues of his creatures; however, Aquinas thinks that all virtues contained in creatures in a way pre-exist in God. However, they do not pre-exist in God as the efficient cause as they do in the effects. Terms such as "justice" are to be taken analogously and not univocally. While we can rightly apply such terms to God, they do not have the same exact meaning as they do for creatures. Further, one cannot know what God is in himself. Lastly, one should not take such virtues as God having obligations to fulfill.

7. Sterba's Objections and Responses

In chapter six of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba offers a critique of Davies' view and the view offered here.[44] The preceding chapters of his book take God to be a moral agent, but here, he addresses Davies' contention that God is not a moral agent.

One of the objections that Sterba presents against Davies is that since God is a rational agent, then he has moral obligations. However, that was discussed above, so it will not be revisited here.

After the discussion on God being a rational agent, Sterba contends "that the real problem with Davies [*sic*] account is not so much with his denial that God is subject to moral requirements. Rather, the real problem is that God, if he exists, and were not subject to

such requirements, would still admittedly be permitting the horrendous evil consequences of all the immoral actions in the world when he could easily have prevented them without either permitting a greater evil or failing to secure a greater good, which is far more evil than that has been produced by all the great villains among us. That is the real problem."[45] However, it seems that "the real problem" is just that God would be immoral for allowing such evils. There does not seem to be anything else to charge God with. If he could not be charged with immorality, what is Sterba charging him with? Clearly, there would be some imperfection, according to Sterba, in such an account. Yet, what would that imperfection be if not God being immoral? It seems, then, that "the real problem" is that God would not be adhering to moral standards that rational beings should adhere to, according to Sterba. However, that is the very thing Davies is objecting to.

Next, Sterba claims that if Davies is going to reject the idea of God being morally good, then he would need to demonstrate how else God is said to be good. The notion of how God is perfect and good was discussed above. Sterba at this point puts the basic idea into an argument:[46]

1. All things seek their good (that which attracts).
2. All things seeking their good are effects of God (things made to be by God).
3. Effects are somehow like their causes.
4. Therefore, the goodness which creatures are drawn to is like God who can therefore be thought of as attractive (or good) like the goods to which creatures are attracted.

Sterba sees various issues with this argument. Regarding premise (1), Sterba says that such a view of all things seeking their good is based on outdated notions in Aristotle. However, Sterba says (1) is permissible if one only refers to living things. Thus, premise (2) becomes (2′) which would say "All living things seeking their good are effects of God".[47] "Premise (3) however," he says, "is challenged by the countless examples that modern science provides of the emergence of greater physical complexity or higher forms of life from simpler beginnings."[48] Sterba maintains that even if premise (3) were made weaker, it would be difficult to arrive at anything other than: (4′) "God, like the living things he causes seeks his own good."[49] Another problem arises for Sterba. He says, "Moreover, given that (4′) would be based on evidence such as:

Hitler sought his own good

Mother Theresa sought her own good

Stalin sought his own good, it is not at all clear how we should interpret the claim that God seeks his own good."[50]

More than this, Sterba holds that Davies focuses on not only the goods that all men seek, but God as well, since he is the cause of those goods. Sterba states that these goods include the following:

(1) Natural goods that are taken to be goods as ends;
(2) Natural evils that are taken to be good as means;
(3) Moral goods that are taken to be good as ends;
(4) Moral evils that are taken to be good as means.[51]

Given these, Sterba asks "how would it help to know that God is like this large collection of natural and moral goods and evils? More to the point, how would knowing this enable us to infer that God is good in some useful nonmoral sense?"[52]

In response to these objections, Sterba's objection to the first premise above in the argument from Davies is based on a misunderstanding. The point is a metaphysical one, not a physical one. While Aristotle's physics is certainly outdated, that does not mean his metaphysics is. This point is highlighted in that Aristotle makes the claim that all things seek their good in his treatise on ethics, and this discussion includes activities.[53] Further, the notion of *goodness* is not one of physics but metaphysics (unless one is a materialist).

Sterba's next objection has to do with premise (3). He says there are "countless examples that modern science provides of the emergence of greater physical complexity of higher forms of life from simpler beings." However, such is not a counterexample to the

premise. Not only is this notion allowed in the metaphysics, it is precisely how Thomists say things came to be: a simple being brought about complex beings. If Sterba is attempting to use Darwinian evolution as a counterexample, then Thomists are not going to see an issue as many, if not most, Thomists (at least in the Catholic Church) accept (theistic) evolution. The principle Davies cites here does not say that causes are more complex than effects, but that somehow effects resemble their causes in that the causes must in some way contain the effects; otherwise, by definition, the cause could not cause the effects. As Davies notes, this does not mean that effects *look like* their causes, just that effects resemble them in some way. In other words, the effects are brought about by the causes. The illustration Davies uses is alcohol. The drunk man does not look like alcohol, but he does resemble alcohol in that drunkenness is brought about by alcohol.[54] Again, the point is a metaphysical one, not a physical one.

Sterba's next claim is that given "(4') would be based on evidence such as" Hitler, Mother Theresa, and Stalin seek their own good, "it is not at all clear how we should interpret the claim that God seeks his own good". The comparison that Sterba seems to be making here is between the moral and immoral lifestyles that are sought out as "good" by these people. However, this is not at all what is meant when Aquinas and Davies talk about things seeking after their good. Morality is certainly a species of that good, but it is not the good simpliciter that is in view. Again, this is a metaphysical goodness, not merely a moral one. By making it a moral one, Sterba begs the question in favor of God being moral and misses the metaphysical nature of the claims regarding this argument. Further, it is well recognized by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Davies that people seek out various ends that may be seen or thought to be good while actually not. In other words, they recognize that people are corrupted. It is not the case that these thinkers are saying that everyone is good, or that all things that are desired are good. It is important not to make an illicit conversion here. Aquinas (and Aristotle) says that what is good is desirable. One cannot wrongly infer from that that all things that are desirable are good, for much that is desired is evil. However, that is because of the corruption in the person. Thus, the fact that Hitler and Stalin are morally (and metaphysically) corrupted is no challenge to the notion that God seeks his own (metaphysical) goodness.

Sterba next states that "Davies wants to focus on the goods that all living beings seek and infer from God being the cause of all living beings each seeking its good, that God must be like the goods that all these beings seek." There is a careful nuance of Thomistic metaphysics that needs stating. In Thomistic metaphysics, all of God's effects are said to be like him as their cause (similar to premise (3)); however, and this is the point, it is equally the case that God is in no way like his effects. They resemble him, but he does not resemble them. They depend on him, but not the converse. Thus, it is not the case "that God must be like the goods that all these beings seek". Rather, they are all in some way like God if they in fact are good.

The next statements by Sterba are puzzling and unclear. His list of four variations of *goods* includes:

(1) Natural goods that are taken to be goods as ends;
(2) Natural evils that are taken to be good as means;
(3) Moral goods that are taken to be good as ends;
(4) Moral evils that are taken to be good as means.

These are all "*goods that living beings seek*" (emphasis added). First, it is not clear how natural evils and moral evils are *goods that living beings seek*. However, Sterba's point is to ask how this helps "to know that God is like this large collection of natural and moral goods and evils?" In short, Davies never says that "God is like" such a "collection of" anything. He surely is not like a collection of moral evils. This is actually the opposite of what Davies argues, viz., that God is sui generis—a being like none other. Again, his effects are like him, but not the converse. (However, no evil effect is like him since evil is contrary to good.)

Sterba also objects to Davies' discussion of moral virtues such as justice as it is applied to God. Sterba declares that "the virtue of justice as applied to God does present a significant challenge for Davies's view."[55] Sterba recounts Davies' view (a la Aquinas) that divine justice is giving creatures what is due to them according to their natures. Sterba then observes that "this seems to involve simply sustaining them in existence, not interfering with or aiding them in the world in any way."[56] Referring to the parent analogy offered by both Aquinas and Davies—which asserts that parents provide for their children what they are due—Sterba objects that "parents who did no more than merely sustain their children in existence would hardly be considered just. So judged by Davies's own parent analogy, it would seem that a God who simply did no more for us than sustain us in existence could not be considered just."[57]

A couple observations are in order. First, this is not exactly what Davies said, or means. Davies notes that parents not only "strive to provide for their [children's] needs", but also "aim to enable them to *flourish* considered as what they are".[58] So, parents are not merely keeping their children in existence. Second, it is not clear what else Sterba has in mind that parents should do since he does not give any examples that would be missing on Davies' (and Aquinas') account.

Sterba then claims that Davies "backs away" from this analogy since he thinks it is metaphorical. It is not clear if Sterba is here criticizing Davies' use of analogy or averring that the analogy is not really metaphorical. On the Thomistic account, it could not be anything other than analogy and metaphor (God is not literally a parent). Aquinas has stated that no terms can be predicated between creation and God univocally. Further, an analogy is just that: an analogy. While there can be 1:1-type analogies, given what Aquinas and Davies have said, such cannot be the case here. However, as Sterba rightly notes, metaphors have a literal truth, or the metaphor does not make sense.[59] The literal truth is that God gives to his creation (children) what they need to flourish, *just like* parents do. Simply put, the objection is simultaneously not clear since Sterba does not provide what Davies' account is missing, and it also seems to misrepresent what Davies actually said.

8. Conclusions

Sterba's work indeed offers interesting argumentation and is a work that philosophers of religion will have to grapple with regarding the issue of God and evil. Further, Sterba offers one of the most in-depth critiques of Davies' view to date. It has been argued, however, that Sterba's objections do not stand in light of the arguments for God's transcendence over his creation and transcendence over created properties such as morality. If Davies is correct, then the problem of evil is not really a problem and has no bearing on God's existence. As Mackie said in his aforementioned work, if one can dispense of one of the notions set forth in his argument, then the problem of evil will not arise for him. That has been the goal of this work, viz., to dispense with the assumption that God being wholly good means that God is morally good, thus removing one of Mackie's propositions. If this work has been successful, then it has been demonstrated that since God is not a moral being, he has no obligation to prevent horrendous and significant evil. If that is the case, then the problem of evil is not a problem for theism, and indeed, a good God can exist.

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Notes

[1] In this article the term "God", following Sterba and others cited, refers to classical Western theistic notion of an omni-God. In some instances, the Christian God will be in mind, such as when referring to authors such as Aquinas. It is the author's belief that the God of Christianity is consistent with the God of general Western theism.

2 (Sterba 2019). Sterba argues from both moral and natural evil. Likewise, the argument this article makes applies to both moral and natural evil. Sterba does not define "evil" but uses the term in connection with harm and suffering. The term "evil" is used in the same general sense in this article; however, the author holds to the Augustinian notion of evil as being a privation or corruption of good, which is discussed below in the section on Divine Perfection and Goodness. For Augustine's view (and Aquinas'), cf. note 35.
3 For Rowe's, cf. (Rowe 1979).
4 Cf. (Plantinga [1974] 2001).
5 (Mackie 1955, p. 200).
6 (Mackie 1955, p. 200).
7 (Mackie 1955, pp. 200–1).
8 (Davies 2006).
9 (Sterba 2019), conclusion, section II, Kindle. These are also given in chapter 6, section IX.
10 (Sterba 2019), conclusion, section II.
11 (Mackie 1955, pp. 200–1).
12 (Mackie 1955, p. 201 (emphasis added)).
13 (Mackie 1955, p. 201).
14 (Swinburne 2016, p. 202).
15 (Swinburne 2016, p. 202).
16 Cf. Sterba's chapter 4 on this topic.
17 Cf. (Davies 2011) as well as (McCabe 2010).
18 Cf. (Aristotle 2001a), especially Book IX. For an excellent treatment of act and potency see (Klubertanz 2005).
19 For various ways that both theists and atheists attempt to ground morality, cf. (Loftin 2012).
20 (Davies 2006, p. 91).
21 (Davies 2021, p. 8).
22 Cf. (Davies 2021, pp. 13–20) for a discussion of this and how it compares to classical theism.
23 (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. III, Kindle).
24 (Sterba 2019, chpt. 6, sct. III, n9, Kindle).
25 For an excellent treatment on this view of analogy cf. (Rocca 2004). For a Thomistic view that argues more for a univocal view of predication between creatures and God, cf. (Mondin 1963).
26 Some protest at the idea of being agnostic about God's nature; however, in order to avoid such agnosticism, one would have to admit to the preposterous notion that a finite being can have knowledge of the infinite in an infinite way, i.e., know everything about God. If one admits to not knowing everything about God, then at some point and level, he must agree to being agnostic. While many theists find this unsettling or even unwanted, the only other option is to say that he knows everything about God, which would make God not very great.
27 Angels are also rational beings that have a moral nature in a sense at least analogous to humans. Such is the case because they are created, finite beings.
28 There are numerous biblical examples for this, such as Romans 9.
29 (Aquinas 1921, I. q.14 for a discussion on God's knowledge).
30 (Davies 2021, p. 250).
31 The translation used here is the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).
32 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 4 a. 1).
33 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 5 a. 1).
34 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 6 a. 1).
35 Cf. (Augustine of Hippo 1887; Aquinas 2003, question 1).
36 (Aquinas 1924, 1.92).
37 (Aquinas 1924).
38 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 21 a. 1).
39 (Garrigou-Lagrange 2012, p. 608).
40 (Aquinas 1921, I q.19 a. 3).
41 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 21 a. 1 ad. 2).
42 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 13 a. 5). There is a debate among Thomists as to what he held regarding analogy. Besides the aforementioned works, cf. (Klubertanz 2009; McInerny 1968).
43 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 13 a. 2 (emphasis in original)).

[44] The objections will be taken in the order that this essay is written, thus changing the order of Sterba's objections somewhat in his chapter. This should have no effect on the force of his objections or how they are answered. It is also not the objective of the author to address every objection by Sterba, but only those that seem the most relevant to this essay.
[45] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. III, Kindle).
[46] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle). Davies makes this argument in (Davies 2006, p. 205).
[47] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[48] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[49] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[50] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[51] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[52] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. IV, Kindle).
[53] (Aristotle 2001b, Book 1.1).
[54] (Davies 2006, p. 206).
[55] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. I, Kindle).
[56] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. I, Kindle).
[57] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. I, Kindle).
[58] (Davies 2011, chp. 6, Kindle (emphasis added)).
[59] (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. I, n.2 and 3, Kindle).

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A Compensatory Response to the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: In this essay, I affirm the univocity thesis while discussing some alternative positions that avoid the problem of evil by rejecting the univocity thesis. I reject Sterba's assumption that God's governance of creation is adequately understood as an analogy to good governance of a politically liberal democracy. I suggest that Sterba's commitment to the Pauline principle forces a dilemma between significant human freedom and meticulous divine intervention. Finally, I argue that the existence of horrendous evils is logically compatible with the existence of a good God, given a compensatory response to the problem of evil.

Keywords: univocity thesis; doctrine of divine transcendence; horrendous evils; compensatory response to the problem of evil; Marilyn McCord Adams; Thomas Aquinas; Karl Barth; Brian Davies; Duns Scotus; James Sterba

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In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba raises a familiar, and oft-raised, objection to the existence of God, a maximally perfect Being: Whether the existence of God is compatible with the degree and amount of evil actually that exists in our world.[1] While acknowledging the significance of Alvin Plantinga's free will defense as a response to this traditional philosophical issue for Christian theists, Sterba finds two significant faults with free will defenses to the problem of evil. First, they fail to address not only the vast amount of evils but also the degree/kinds of evils that actually exist in our world. Following Marilyn Adams[2] and Sterba[3], let us refer to particularly grievous evils as "horrendous evils". Specifically, Sterba concedes that a good God[4] may have morally sufficient reasons for allowing some kinds and amounts of evils, but clearly, it is not possible that a good God is permitted to allow the vast amount and kinds of horrendous evils of which we are so aware. Second, the familiar kinds of defenses fail to grapple with the ethical concepts and issues that are relevant to the discussion of the existence of horrendous evils. Sterba argues that the existence of horrendous evils is logically inconsistent with the existence of a God understood as a good God, once we acknowledge the ethical implications of God having these properties. In this paper, I argue that Sterba fails to make his case.

I found Sterba's book an engaging and formidable book, both in terms of the range of traditional and contemporary topics he addresses and some of the new conceptual or ethical resources to which he appeals to make his case. In this essay, frankly, I cannot do justice to the full range of provocative issues he raises and theses he prosecutes. I will limit my attention to only a few of his primary arguments.

1. Univocity Thesis and the Goodness of God

Let me begin identifying a theme about which Sterba and I agree—that typically, when theists acknowledge or affirm God's goodness or worry about His goodness, moral goodness is being ascribed to God in the same sense in which we ascribed moral goodness to human beings (and other possible moral agents).[5] Call this the univocity thesis. Sterba reminds his readers that important thinkers in the Western philosophical and theological tradition have contended that God is not a moral agent. Additionally, if this thesis is true, then the problem of evil cannot get off the ground. Brian Davies is one such contemporary example. He says,

> As it is usually presented, the problem of evil is a problem which arises on the assumption that if God exists, he must be morally good. Hence, it is that writers like Swinburne and Hick to deal with it by attempting to exonerate God from the moral point of view in spite of the existence of evil. But now suppose we introduce a new question into the discussion. Suppose we ask whether the theist is bound to regard God as a moral agent. Once we do this a whole new line of defense is open to someone who thinks it is reasonable to believe in the existence of God along with the existence of evil. For, clearly, if belief in God is not necessarily belief in the existence of a moral agent, then the problem of evil . . . it turns into a pseudo-problem.[6]

According to Davies, the concern that the existence of evil, horrendous or not, is an objection to the existence of God reflects a confused way of thinking about God, a category mistake[7] since God is not a moral agent. Why think that God is not a moral agent? Davies offers this response:

> . . . classical theism thinks of God as the source of all beings . . . But if God is the source of all beings, something has to be done to distinguish him from all beings, and the obvious thing to do is to deny that God is a being. Yet moral agents, whether bad or good, are obviously beings. If God is not, in terms of classical theism, properly spoken of as a being, he is not properly spoken of as a moral agent[8]

In a more recent book, Davies argues that the problem of evil is a pseudo-problem because those who pose it as a real problem for theism fail to understand the affirmation of God's goodness properly. Appealing to the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Davies insists that the goodness of God is predicated analogically rather than univocally with respect to the moral goodness of human beings. It is a mistake, argues Davies, to think (or assume) that if God's goodness is understood as perfection, a predicate, 'moral goodness', a property that both God and human beings may possess in the same way. In short, Davies argues that the model of the morally well-formed human being is an inadequate model for understanding Divine Goodness.[9]

Karl Barth, an important Protestant Theologian of the 20th century, concurs with Davies. He argued that since

> [God] is distinct from everything, . . . He is so in a peculiar and pre-eminent fashion, . . . as no created being confronts any other . . . God stands at an infinite distance from everything else, not in the finite degree of difference with which created things stand towards each other.[10]

In another passage, Barth says, "Between God and man, as between God and creature in general there exists an irrevocable otherness."[11] What Barth's claim consists in is this: God is metaphysically unique compared to all other created objects. Let us call this the doctrine of transcendence. However, this claim about divine transcendence is ambiguous between two possibilities. Does God's metaphysical uniqueness consist in the fact that God is wholly dissimilar to all creatures that exist? That is, that God possesses no properties possessed by any other created object? This seems to be the point suggested by Karl Barth's second quote. Or does God possess some properties possessed by other various particular instances of the kinds of created objects with which we are familiar in the universe, but in ways and degrees that, nonetheless, are unique to God alone? The latter might satisfy the first quote from Barth.

To be sure, the first understanding, but not the second, poses a deep difficulty for traditional or classical Christian theism. The Old and New Testaments use many of the concepts at work in our ordinary moral language when we speak of God's goodness. God is loving, just, and merciful, for example. If these terms refer to properties God has but are entirely different in kind to the moral properties potentially possessed by human beings, then it is reasonable to claim that they are inaccessible, unknowable by us. C. B. Martin captures this difficulty as a dilemma.[12]

Argument A: Divine Transcendence and A Dilemma in Speaking About God's Goodness

(1) Either God's goodness is completely different in kind from the kind(s) of moral goodness we admire in ourselves or other human beings, or it is the same kind of moral goodness we admire in ourselves or other human beings.
(2) If it is completely different in kind from the kind(s) of moral goodness we admire in ourselves and other human beings, then God's goodness is unintelligible to us.
(3) If it is the same kind of moral goodness we admire in ourselves or other human beings, the God's goodness is intelligible to us.
(4) Therefore, either God's goodness is unintelligible to us or God's goodness is intelligible to us.

In all fairness, Davies does not argue that Divine Goodness is completely different from the kind of goodness we admire in exemplary human moral agents. The goodness attributed to God and human beings is predicated analogically, not univocally. Davies claims to be interpreting Aquinas on this point and uses Aquinas' authority as one reason, perhaps, to not only accept but to insist on an analogical understanding of Divine Goodness for Christian theists. However, supposing that appeals to authority are legitimate, my colleague Dr. Thomas Ward argues, persuasively to my mind, that there is no substantive difference between Scotus' appeal to univocity and Aquinas' appeal to analogy. The central insight of Scotus' univocity thesis with respect to speaking about God is that

> the standards of good reasoning about God are exactly the same standards for good reasoning about anything. Piety does not excuse fallacies. The theory of univocity holds that some of our words mean exactly the same thing as when used of God as they mean when used of creatures.[13]

Aquinas seems to affirm Scotus' affirmation.

> Neither is all predication purely equivocal, as some have said, since this would entail that nothing can be known or demonstrated about God, but rather would always be subject to the fallacy of equivocation. This would be contrary to the philosophers, who prove many things about God through demonstration.[14]

In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis agonizes over the death of his wife Joy, a death brought about by a battle with cancer and from which she suffered mightily. Lewis had come to marriage late in life, and his courtship, and later marriage, of Joy brought to him a life he had not imagined possible for himself and joys he had never experienced. In one passage in the short book, Lewis says, "Sooner or later I must face the question in plain language. What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by a standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the prima facie evidence suggest exactly the opposite?"[15] Lewis recognizes that one way out is to say that God is so exalted and we human beings

> are so depraved that our ideas of goodness count for nothing; or worse than nothing—the very fact that we think something good is presumptive evidence that it is really bad. The word good, applied to Him, becomes meaningless: like abracadabra. [However, if so][16] We have no motive for obeying Him . . . If cruelty is from His point of view 'good,' telling lies may be 'good' too . . . If His ideas of good are so very different from ours, what He calls Heaven might well be what we should call Hell, and vice versa. Finally, if reality at its very root is so meaningless to us—or, putting it the other way round, if we are such total imbeciles—what is the point of trying to think either about God or about anything else? This knot becomes undone when you try to pull it tight.[17]

Thus, Lewis affirms that we must speak of the moral goodness of human beings and God's moral goodness univocally. According to Lewis, we are undone to speak non-univocally of God's moral goodness. If Lewis is correct, and I believe he is, then it follows that Christians and Jews are committed to God's metaphysical uniqueness but not in the strong sense.

Indeed, one of the most important theological claims made in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is that human beings are created in the image of God. That God is wholly dissimilar to all creatures, including human beings, is logically inconsistent with the claim that human beings are created in the image of God.[18] In addition, in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, God is spoken of as being just, loving, patient, long-suffering, good to human beings, etc. Moral predicates are applied to God, it appears to me, univocally rather than non-univocally. Thus, like Sterba, I accept the univocity thesis in thinking about Divine Goodness—the goodness of God.[19]

2. God's Governance of the Universe and Politically Liberal Societies

Sterba begins his book with a discussion of the free will defense.[20] He observes that

> political states, particularly those aiming at securing a high level of justice for their members, are structured to secure a range of important freedoms for all of their members, even when doing so requires interfering with the freedoms of some of their members. For example, consider laws against assault. Such laws are designed to help protect people against assault, where assault is understood characteristically as intentionally acting to cause serious physical injury to another person. Whenever such assaults occur, they result in morally unacceptable distributions of freedom. What happens is that the freedom of the assaulters, a freedom no one should have, is exercised at the expense of the freedom of their victims not to be assaulted, an important freedom everyone should have.[21]

Sterba then suggests that political states that have as a high priority the securing of justice for their citizens will have mechanisms in which they punish the assaulters, but more importantly, which prevent or limit the abuse of freedom such as the one cited above. He appeals to an understanding of a just society that prizes individual freedom. On the one hand, such a society is structured in such a way that it secures a wide range of freedoms for its citizens. Nonetheless, in doing so, it restricts the freedom of individuals who aim to harm other citizens. Freedom from assault is a freedom a just society endorses even though upholding it restricts the freedom of other individuals.

Sterba implies that just as good, morally motivated governments (more accurately, those human beings who occupy that appropriate morally salient role in such governments) limit the free activities of their citizens, so God should intervene to limit the evil we human beings do and experience. In so far as we see little to no evidence of such interventions taking place, we can infer that either God is not morally good or God does not exist. That is, Sterba suggests something along the lines of the following argument, which I will label Argument B.

Argument B: A Mistaken Analogy

(1) The politically liberal state has an obligation to provide for its citizens those goods to which they have a right, when it can be done easily, and doing so does not violate the morally significant rights of others.
(2) God's governance of the universe is analogous to the head of a politically liberal state.
(3) God is a being perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness—a good God.
(4) If a good God exists and created human beings, then God is obligated to provide for the well-being of human beings just as the head of a politically liberal state is obligated to provide for the well-being of its citizens, as best as he or she is able.
(5) If God is obligated to provide for the well-being of human beings, then God is able to provide all human beings those goods to which they have a right without violating the morally significant rights of other human beings.
(6) It is not the case that most human beings possess the goods to which they have a right and which constitute their well-being.
(7) Therefore, either God is derelict in God's duties with respect to human beings or God does not exist.
(8) It is not possible that a being perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness is derelict in their duties with respect to human beings.

(9) Therefore, God does not exist.

Should a believing theist concede that this argument demonstrates that her or his belief in God is logically inconsistent and, thus, irrational? I do not think so. While, on the one hand, I affirm that to address this issue adequately, the discussants must address the relevant ethical concepts that bear on the issue, I hope to show that Sterba has misconstrued their implications. Let me explain why.

In short, Sterba accepts, and invites his readers to accept, the idea that God's governance of the universe is best understood as analogous to the good governance of a politically liberal society, perhaps such as that of the United States, with the powers of government guided and limited by concepts such as individual freedom, natural and legal rights and their correlative duties, and due process, among others.[22] However, now we have identified the rub. As much as most Christians accept the importance of these concepts for citizens and for those that govern the citizens, especially in democratic societies, Christians do not, nor should they, regard a head of government of a politically liberal society as an adequate analogy for God's governance of the universe.[23] The positive point of various arguments for God's transcendence or metaphysical uniqueness is that there is an important metaphysical difference between God and creatures. That there are such significant metaphysical differences between God and human beings is alluded to vividly by Psalm 113. In it we read, " . . . The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth".[24] Here, the ancient Hebrews envisioned a mighty King whose knowledge and power extends over all things and whose moral goodness is deeper, more powerful, and more unified than the moral goodness of human beings. Moreover, as sovereign of all creation, they envisioned God as unconstrained by anything except God's own nature and the nature of human beings, those God created and desires to flourish.[25] In Psalm 146, using moral concepts drawn from the assessment of human agents and their acts, the Psalmist asserts that

> God keeps faith forever, executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over strangers, and upholds the orphan and the widow.[26]

Suppose you think that our current economic and political arrangements in the United States encourage and support practices that permit, or condemn, a significant number of our fellow citizens to suffer economic and social deprivations. Suppose you also think, from the vantage point of the rights and duties of citizens in a liberal democracy and the powers and responsibilities of those that govern us, that those of us who are well-off should advocate for those much less well-off and, additionally, petition those that govern us to do more to increase the welfare and prospects of our fellow citizens. Suppose you also fault the former or present occupant of the office of the President of the United States (justly or unjustly) for doing too little to improve the lives of millions of fellow Americans whose living conditions significantly diminish their prospects of flourishing. Clearly, you doubt the President's efficacy in addressing these civil ills and, thus, fault his or her knowledge of how to address these concerns adequately or effectively or the strength of his or her moral commitments to address those ills.

When one expresses such morally motivated concerns, we are assuming that our advocacy for our fellow citizens fulfills obligations we have as occupants of a variety of morally salient roles in relation to our fellow Americans (fellow citizen, child of God, friend, human being, neighbor, etc.). If God is analogous to the President of the United States, then God, like the person occupying the morally salient role of "President of the United States" is responsible to all human beings for using all of God's resources to improve the lives of human beings (perhaps other creatures also) under God's governance. However, contends Sterba, obviously, God is not doing all God can to improve, preserve, and protect the lives of His human creatures. All too many suffer horrendous evils. If a good God existed, such evils would not exist. They do exist; therefore, God does not exist.

However, the disanalogy between God and a human being serving as a king or as a democratically elected head of state is obvious. God has no constraint on the time frame within which God can and must accomplish the good ends God intends for human beings. A head of state is constrained by his or her time in office and the possession of effective political influence with respect to achieving those good ends. That God has no temporal constraints, unlike human political agents, to my mind, is a significant objection to Sterba's argument and an issue we will revisit later in the paper.

3. Marilyn Adams on Horrendous Evils

Sterba gives a variety of arguments whose conclusion is that God does not exist, given the kinds and amounts of evil in our world. His primary argument is as follows.

Argument C: The Argument from Horrendous Evils:

(1) If God exists, then horrendous evils do not exist.
(2) Horrendous evils exist.
(3) Therefore, God does not exist.

Marilyn Adams defines horrendous evils as "evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of) constitutes prima facia reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole"[27]. This is a formidable argument, given that the argument is valid and premise (2) is obviously true. However, one can block Sterba's contention that the existence of horrendous evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of a God, a Being who is maximally perfect in knowledge, power, and moral goodness. To do so, one insists that God has morally permissible reasons for permitting the kinds and particular incidences of evil that God in fact permits. One's insistence does not require that God's advocate/apologist be satisfied that he or she can provide a complete list of God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting the horrendous evils, which, to our laments, are so characteristic of the world in which we live.[28] Equally important, what God's advocate also believes is that whatever evils one has endured in this earthly life, God can overcome them in such a way that even for the person who has endured horrendous evils in his or her life, that person is capable of experiencing his or her life as a great good without trivializing the horrendous evils he or she has experienced.[29] This is why one's inability to provide a complete list of morally sufficient reasons for the kinds of evil we identify in the world is not, ultimately, a defeater. Again, if it is logically possible that God can overcome the horrendous evils all too often suffered by all too many people and God can overcome them in such a way that each person experiences his or her life as a great good despite including in it the suffering of horrendous evils,[30] then it is false that Sterba has demonstrated that the existence of horrendous evils is inconsistent with the existence of a good God.

4. Meticulous Divine Intervention and the Horns of a Dilemma

Sterba disagrees. He presses his case against theism with another example of horrendous evil from the actual world, the case of Matthew Shepard. Sterba reports that

> . . . Matthew Shepard was befriended by two men in a bar in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. The two men, who were reportedly anti-gay, offered to give Shepard a lift and then drove him to a remote location where they robbed, severely beat, and tortured him, and left him to die hanging on a fence, where he lapsed into unconsciousness and was discovered the next day by a passing cyclist who thought he was a scarecrow. Shepard died two days later in a Laramie hospital never having regained consciousness."[31]

Then, Sterba suggests that God could have intervened in this case by causing the car of Shepard's assailants to have a flat tire or by causing Shepard to get a ride with someone else or by causing Shepard to walk to his lodging on the University of Wyoming campus.[32] Additionally, despite Shepard's potential loss of morally significant freedom with respect to these particular actions, a significant balance of good over evil, overall, would be achieved

by this kind of divine action, especially when one focuses on Shepard's death when compared to his or his perpetrators' temporarily diminished freedom. Sterba concludes,

> So clearly with respect to the broad range of actual cases in the world, God has not chosen to secure the freedoms of those who are morally entitled to those freedoms by restricting others from exercising freedoms that they are not morally entitled to exercise. As a consequence, significant moral evil has resulted that could otherwise have been prevented. So, if God is justified in permitting such moral evils, it has to be on grounds other than freedom because an assessment of the freedoms that are at stake would require God to act preventively to secure a morally defensible distributions of freedom, which, of course, God has not done. So, if God is to be justified with respect to cases like Matthew Shepard's, it must be because there is a justification for God's inaction in terms other than freedom because of an assessment of the freedoms that are at stake would require God to act preventively to secure a morally defensible distribution of freedom, which of course, God has not done. It would have to be a justification for permitting moral evil on the grounds that it secures some other good or goods in this life or other goods in an afterlife. Now I am not contesting the possibility of that sort of justification for moral evil in our world here.[33]

What Sterba argues here is that God should have intervened to prevent Shepard's vicious killing. However, if in it, then why not in every vicious human activity? The logical consequence is that God ought to be continually intervening in human affairs when human beings intend to act in morally vicious ways. To me, this implies a serious diminishment of morally significant human actions, carried out as meticulously as Sterba suggests. To block this criticism, what Sterba advocates is "constrained intervention".[34] Sterba admits that it is reasonable to permit some evils that good may come. I see two problems. First, what criteria is God to use to distinguish between those cases in which divine intervention is required by Divine Goodness, according to Sterba's standards, and those in which divine interventions are not required? Second, the Pauline Principle holds that "we should never do evil that good may come of it".[35] However, if God's goodness requires strictly following the Pauline Principle, then meticulous divine intervention is always required, is it not? Is Sterba now on the horns of a dilemma? Either significant human freedom or meticulous divine intervention?

5. A Compensatory Response to the Problem of Evil

To strengthen his case against God, Sterba invites us to consider another analogy:

> "Suppose . . . there were among us persons with superhuman powers for making our societies more just than they are . . . like Superman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, and Xena . . . Would we not expect them to do what they can to make our societies more just than they are, and thereby bring about a better distribution of significant freedom?"[36]

He then asks, "Why then, in the actual world, couldn't God, like superheroes in our fictional world, be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?"[37] Indeed, whatever superhuman powers Superman, Wonder Woman, Spider Man, and Xena possess, if God exists, God has infinitely more power than all of them taken collectively.[38]

It is easy to grasp Sterba's suggested argument. If God is perfect in power, knowledge, and moral goodness (a good God), then God is more powerful than any of the superheroes we admire for intervening to prevent horrific evils. If we expect superheroes to intervene to prevent horrific evils, when they are able to do so, then we ought to expect God all the more to intervene in human affairs to prevent horrific evils. However, God does not intervene (very often, as far as we know) to prevent horrific evils.[39] Therefore, when we think about horrific evils that God permits, we ought not to admire God with respect to his

governance of our world. Indeed, we should concede that God does not exist, given the amount of horrific evil in the world.

As I have already pointed out, Sterba also appeals to the Pauline Principle to press his case against theism. According to the Pauline Principle, one is not permitted to commit evil, typically, that good may come of it.[40] He then comments that "good can come of evil in two ways. It can come by way of preventing evil or it can come by way of providing some new good."[41] In the case of Matthew Shepherd, it comes, if it comes at all, via the preventing of evil. In his case, the intervention did not occur and Matthew Shepherd suffered a horrifically awful death, and we ask: Where was God?

All these arguments share a common feature. They assume that since God is a moral agent, that His actions to benefit the welfare of human agents must be initiated and completed within the lifetime of God's human beneficiaries. However, this assumption is not a belief internal to the theistic faiths. In particular, Christians believe that God has an infinite amount of time to compensate human beings for the evils, both horrendous and non-horrendous, each has suffered. Thus, it is consistent to claim that not only are these evils defeated in some global way, but, with respect to each individual, the evils he or she has suffered are defeated and redeemed, a particular new good.[42] Since the faithful have an infinite amount time with God after their earthly pilgrimages have ended, God has an infinite amount of time to accomplish this great new good. Call this the Compensatory[43] Response to the Problem of Evil.[44] It is well expressed by Alexander Pruss in a blog called "The Blink Response to the Problem of Evil." He says,

> I want to confess something: I do not find the problem of evil compelling. I think to myself: Here, during the blink of an eye, there are horrendous things happening. But there is infinitely long life afterwards if God exists. For all we know, the horrendous things are just a blip in these infinitely long lives. And it just doesn't seem hard to think that over an infinite future that initial blip could be justified, redeemed, defeated, compensated for with moral adequacy, sublated etc.[45]

Pruss endorses the view that the goods of an orderly universe, human autonomy or freedom, and soul building justify God's permitting many of the moral evils so characteristic of human history. He says,

> They all have reasonable stories about how the permission of evils is needed for these goods. There is, in mind, only one question about these theodicies: Are these goods worth paying such a terrible price, the prices of allowing these horrors (horrendous evils)?[46]

Pruss suggests that we Christian believers may believe that the question of price is undercut for two reasons.

> First, the goods gained by soul building and free will last an infinite amount of time. It will forever be true that one has a soul that was built by these free choices. And the value of orderly laws of nature includes an order that is instrumental to soul building as well as aesthetically valuable in itself. The benefits of the former order last an eternity, and the beauty of the laws of nature—even as exhibited during the initial blink of an eye—last forever in memory. It is easy for an infinite duration of a significant good to be worth a very high price.
>
> Second, it is very easy for God to compensate people during an infinite future for any undeserved evils they suffered during the initial blip. And, typically, one has no (moral) obligation to prevent someone's suffering when (a) the prevention would have destroyed an important good and (b) one will compensate the person to an extent much greater than the sufferings. The goods pointed out by the theodicies are important goods, even if we worry that permitting the horrors is too high a price. And no matter how terrible these short-term sufferings were—even if the short period of time, at most a century, "seemed like eternity"—infinite time is ample space for compensation.[47]

Both these points made by Pruss are internal to the theistic traditions. For example, consider Psalm 8, from the Hebrew scriptures:

> O Lord, our Lord,
> How majestic is Thy name in all
> the earth,
> Who hast displayed Thy splendor
> above the heavens!
> . . .
> When I consider Thy heavens,
> the work of Thy fingers,
> The moon and the stars, which
> Thou hast ordained;
> What is man, that Thou does take
> thought of him?
> And the son of man, that Thou
> dost care for him?[48]

From the New Testament, consider what the Apostle Paul says in Romans,

> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subject to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it . . . And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purposes.[49]

Additionally, another response from St. Paul to the problem of evil:

> But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus's sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED; THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe; therefore we speak; knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you . . . Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.[50]

Now, an interlocuter may object by suggesting that compensation implies a wrong being made right. If this is true, then God is implicated in the wrong being righted, and thus, God exhibits a moral imperfection. Moreover, since the classical or traditional Christian view

is that evil is a consequence of sin, who does God have to compensate? Let me respond, briefly, to these two concerns.

First, *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines compensation as "something . . . awarded to someone as a recompense for loss, injury or suffering." The something received is addressing the loss, injury, or suffering in some fitting way, given the circumstances. From this definition, it does not follow that the one doing the compensating is implicated as a cause of the loss, injury, or suffering. A generous employer might respond to a loyal worker's injury with a paid leave or money to help while the worker is unable to work. It is possible that the injury was caused neither by the employer nor the employee's negligence. Yet, the beneficent employer addresses the injury in a compensating manner, with no implication that he or she is at fault in any way.

Second, rather than asking, "to whom does God owe compensation?", let us ask, "How will a good God respond to the evil that those God created and loves have suffered?" In his rich and provocative *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, Dallas Willard argues that

> This present universe is only one element in the kingdom of God. But it is a very wonderful and important one. And within it the Logos, the now risen Son of man, is currently preparing for us to join him (John 14.2-4). We will see him in the stunning surroundings that he had with the Father before the beginning of the created cosmos (John 17:24).
>
> We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join the eternal Logos, "reign with him," in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. It is for this that we were each individually intended, as both kings and priests (Exod. 19:6; Rev 5:10).
>
> Thus, our faithfulness over a "few things" in the present phase of our life develops the kind of character that can be entrusted with "many things." We are, according, permitted to "enter into the joy of our Lord" (Matt. 25:21). That "joy" is, of course, the creation and care of what is good, in all its dimensions[51]

I see no reason to think what is represented by Willard presents a logically impossible state of affairs. It presents a possible way in which God compensates those who have suffered. The experience described by Willard will defeat experienced evils by absorbing, overshadowing, and redeeming the evils each person experienced by reference to what is good in all its rich and robust dimensions.[52]

Perhaps anticipating something such as the compensatory response to the problem of evil, Sterba says, in his discussion and critique of the soul-making theodicy,

> What then could God give those deprived of the opportunities for soul-making in this life? Well, then God could give them what we could call them, in contrast to the goods we have just considered, consumer goods, that is, experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling, and all encompassing. Surely the beatific vision, which is said to involve ultimate communion or friendship with God, would presumably be the primary consumer good that would be experienced and enjoyed by those in the traditional heavenly afterlife. [53]

Notice Sterba's choice of words in describing an intrinsic feature of a theistic perspective. He describes the supreme good for the faithful, a life after death that includes union with God and other friends and friends of God, as a consumer good. Now, "consumer good" sounds pejorative to me, a kind of ridicule of, or the demeaning of, a point of view. One way of hearing it is that a consumer good is something regarded as good by someone willing to buy and use it, but it not really a good for the person buying it or it is a second-rate good, compared to other possible goods. However, one acceptable meaning of "consumer good" is a final good, the end result of production and manufacturing of a good or, more generally, the fitting end of a good agent's activity whose product is a real good for the agent and for others, when they possess it. Surely the beatific consummation is a final

good in the latter meaning of the phrase. Therefore, let us understand "consumer good" as a final good, a new good, which includes a fitting compensation for the suffering of the faithful, though it is much more than that.

6. Conclusions

Sterba offered a number of probing, provocative arguments whose conclusions are that a good God does not exist. I am moved by his moral sensibilities and especially by his moral concern for the poor and the politically misused and neglected, given the affluence and power of our shared American culture. However, Sterba dismisses the logical possibility that a good God is able to compensate all victims of horrific evils in a way fitting to each of them. I see no reason to accept that God cannot compensate the victims of horrific evils in these ways. After all, a good God has the requisite power and knowledge, and an infinite amount of time to accomplish this awesome task by absorbing, defeating, redeeming, and thus, compensating each human being for any horrendous evils he or she has suffered. In short, my defeater presumes that God can secure for a human being genuine goods, not only in this life, but also in the life to come, the most important of which is enjoying God, the Supreme Good, and His divine presence, in the company of other saints, eternally; a new good.[54] The richness of this communion is what is sometimes called beatitude. This assumption is legitimate for Christian theists of a traditional sort, since it is an essential component their beliefs. Early on in his book, Sterba notes that he is not contesting the possibility of a moral justification for God's permitting horrendous evils, one of which might be that God's permitting them "secures some other good or goods in this life or other goods in an afterlife."[55] Given the logical possibility that human beings who have suffered horrific evils will enjoy God's Divine Presence in the company of other human beings united in friendship with one another and with God, eternally—and this possibility is an essential constituent of traditional Christian theism—the existence of God is logically compatible with the existence of horrific evils.[56]

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Notes

1 (Sterba 2019, p. 1).
2 (Adams 1999).
3 (Sterba 2019, p. 1).
4 In the book, by "good God", Sterba means a Being maximally perfect in knowledge, power, and moral goodness.
5 Some theists affirm that the assertion "God is the Good" is a metaphysical claim, which may or may not entail moral goodness. One such proponent is Robert Adams. See (Adams 1999, especially Chapter 1, pp. 13–49 and Chapter 2, pp. 50–82).
6 (Davies 1982, p. 22).
7 (Davies 2006, p. 103).
8 (Davies 1982, p. 23).
9 For a rigorous defense of this position, see (Davies 2011, chapter six).
10 (Barth 1957, p. 311).
11 (Barth 1957, p. 189).
12 (Martin 1960, pp. 17–18).
13 (Ward; Scotus 1987, p. 19)
14 See, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.13.5 (Hause and Pasnau 2014). I am grateful to my colleague, Tom Ward, for suggesting this quote from Aquinas. It supports Ward's contention that Aquinas' view on analogy aligns decisively with Scotus' view about how our language works when we speak about God and human beings.

15 (Lewis 2001, p. 29).
16 My insertion is to make explicit Lewis' clear meaning of this paragraph.
17 (Lewis 2001, p. 32).
18 Of course, it is possible that the similarity between God and human beings is sufficient to ground analogous predications of goodness but not strong enough for univocity. Like Sterba, I accept the univocity thesis with respect to a wide range of moral properties asserted of both God and human beings. In doing so, both Sterba and I join Marilyn Adams and Richard Swinburne and the mainstream of the Christian theological tradition in accepting that God's agency is personal, an agency that acts by thought and will. See (Swinburne 1979, pp. 22–50) and (Adams 1999, pp. 62–70; 80–82).
19 That is, the part of Divine Goodness that is moral goodness.
20 I regard Plantinga's "free will defense" as having a limited but important usefulness in the discussion of the problem of evil. I accept Sterba's rejection of the free will defense as an adequate response to horrendous evils. Of course, Plantinga never offered it as such. While Sterba devotes considerable attention to Marilyn McCord Adams' treatment of the problem of evil in her (Adams 1999), it seems odd to me that he ignores or fails to address the central themes in (Stump 2010).
21 (Sterba 2019, p. 13).
22 That many of the dissenters to the Catholic and Protestant churches insisted on natural rights and a kind of political equality is no surprise since each of us bear the image of God.
23 I fear being misunderstood on this point. I do not mean to suggest that Christians do not think of God as analogous to a ruler or a king of a Kingdom. The Bible uses that imagery, not surprisingly, a great deal. My point is that that thinking of God governance of the Universe as analogous to the governance by the head of state of a political liberal democracy is an inadequate or misleading analogy.
24 Psalm 113:4–6, (Coogan 2010).
25 I affirm that God's good will is directed not merely toward human beings to all God's creation. After all, in Genesis 1:31, we find that God affirmed that all that God made was very good. An ethically provocative treatment of the implications of God's affirmation of the goodness of the created order is found in "Shalom and the Community of Creation," in (Woodley 2012, pp. 41–66).
26 Psalm 146: 7–9.
27 (Adams 1999, p. 26). This definition first appeared in her essay, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", in (Adams and Adams 1990, pp. 209–21).
28 See (Adams 1999, p. 155).
29 *Ibid*., p. 156.
30 *Ibid*., pp. 155–56.
31 (Sterba 2019, p. 20).
32 *Ibid*., p. 21.
33 *Ibid*., pp. 23–24.
34 *Ibid*., p. 90.
35 *Ibid*., p. 49.
36 *Ibid*., p. 19.
37 *Ibid*., p. 20.
38 To the theist, the analogy will be at best limited, and, at worst, demeaning, a false analogy, and impious.
39 Perhaps we should be skeptical about how much we know about how much God intervenes to prevent evil, both ordinary and horrific evils.
40 (Sterba 2019, p. 56).
41 *Ibid*. On my reading of Sterba on this point, sometimes the provision of a new good overrides the Pauline Principle. More importantly, that when God permits evil, it is not God's doing evil that good may come of it. God is not the agent doing evil.
42 See the text referenced by footnote 39, in which Sterba suggests that it is permissible for a new good to be a satisfactory response to some instances of evil.
43 In her rich and important book, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Eleonore Stump says, in comparing a possible world in which God permits suffering, hence evil, and a possible world in which God does not, that the former, her stories show, possess a "great compensatory beauty". The compensatory beauty does not provide God, however, on Stump's account, a morally sufficient reason for permitting the evils God in fact permits. It merely explains one reason why allowing or permitting moral evils is not a defeat for a good God. Both Stump

and I are appealing to the concept of compensation or a compensatory aspect to God's governance of the world. However, my use is somewhat different that Stump's. However, I commend Professor Stump's book to the reader, both for its profundity and for the ways in which it is an antidote to the notion that the existence of suffering, hence, moral evil, is incompatible with the existence of a good God (Stump 2010).

44 I first formulated something like this response in an unpublished paper called "The Problems of Evil". In it, I addressed what I called the "existential problem of evil" and posed the possibility of a "delayed divine deliverance" from evil.

45 (Pruss 2017).

46 (Pruss 2017).

47 *Ibid*.

48 Psalm 8, (Coogan 1977).

49 Romans 8:18–25; 28, (Coogan 1977).

50 2 Corinthians 4:7–14; 16–18, (Coogan 1977).

51 (Willard 1998, p. 378).

52 C. S. Lewis gives us an arresting and evocative picture of our union with God in the last two chapters of his book, *The Last Battle*. See, Lewis (2005). The chapters are entitled, "Further Up and Further in" and "Farewell to Shadowland", pp. 755–67.

53 (Sterba 2019, p. 36).

54 See footnote 39.

55 (Sterba 2019, p. 24).

56 See also, James H. Cone, "The Meaning of Heaven in the Black Spirituals", in (Cone 1992, pp. 78–96). In this chapter, he asks, "How was it possible for black people to endure the mental and physical stresses of slavery and still keep the humanity intact? I think the answer is found in their image of heaven".

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Article

On James Sterba's Refutation of Theistic Arguments to Justify Suffering

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Abstract: In his recent book *Is a Good God Logically Possible*? and article by the same name, James Sterba argued that the existence of significant and horrendous evils, both moral and natural, is incompatible with the existence of God. He advances the discussion by invoking three moral requirements and by creating an analogy with how the just state would address such evils, while protecting significant freedoms and rights to which all are entitled. I respond that his argument has important ambiguities and that consistent application of his moral principles will require that God remove all moral and natural evils. This would deleteriously restrict not only human moral decision making, but also the knowledge necessary to make moral judgments. He replies to this critique by appealing to the possibility of limited divine intervention, to which I rejoin with reasons why his middle ground is not viable.

Keywords: problem of evil; James Sterba; existence of God; theodicies; moral evil; natural evil; ethical principles

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James Sterba seeks to reinvigorate the argument formalized by John Mackie against God's existence from the presence of evil (Mackie 1955). Although his immediate target is the Free-Will Defense argument advanced by Alvin Plantinga (1974), as he proceeds through his book, he critiques theodicies advanced by other theists, all in support of his contention that no extant greater good defenses or theodicies successfully show that the degree and amount of evil that exists in our world is compatible with God's existence (Sterba 2019, p. 11). While formulating his argument deductively, including as a logical *reductio* (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90), he contends at the same time that "the problem of evil is fundamentally an ethical, not a logical or epistemological, problem" (Sterba 2019, p. 5). The reason is that "a defensible solution depends on a moral requirement that applies to both God and ourselves and to the logical relations of that principle to the circumstances in which we find ourselves" (Sterba 2019, p. 32 n18). He sees his unique contribution in stressing the ethical structure underpinning the discussion and the fact that if a good God exists, he has not satisfied those requirements.

After advancing Sterba's version(s) of the atheologian's arguments from *moral* evil, I will attempt to clarify the terminology used, since the discussion in important ways trades on it. Following that, I will develop my critique of Sterba's arguments and engage his responses to my critique. In the final sections I will consider his discussion of *natural* evil and the principles and requirements he invokes with regard to God's obligation to prevent it. I do not pretend to claim that my responses in defense of a greater good theodicy are unique or novel. Indeed, as I will point out in his replies, he has often anticipated many of them. However, I will focus on his ethical principles and argue that they and the arguments they generate are inadequate and that theists can reasonably defend their position.

1. Sterba's Arguments from Moral Evil

The initial question that Sterba poses is "Why then, in the actual world, couldn't God . . . be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?" (Sterba 2019, p. 20). Or more generally, "Why does not God prevent significant suffering or loss when he is morally obligated to do so and could do so easily?"

His response, and the burden of his book, is that greater good defenses, invoking freedom, soul-building (Adams 1999), and skeptical theism (Bergmann 2009), offer inadequate answers (Sterba 2020a, p. 203). He provides a summary of his main argument regarding moral evil to parallel that proposed by Mackie.

1. "There is an all good, all powerful God."
2. "If there is an all good, all powerful God then necessarily he would be adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III."
3. "If God were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission."
4. "Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us, which, if God exists, would have to be through his permission.
5. "Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all good, all powerful God" (Sterba 2020a, p. 208).

His Moral Evil Prevention Requirements, mentioned in premise 2, are

I. "Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right) when that can easily be done. For example, if you can easily prevent a small child from going hungry . . . without violating anyone's rights then you should do so" (Sterba 2019, p. 126).

II. "Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have" (Sterba 2019, p. 128). For example, do not allow someone to be a suffering victim so that another person can aid them and relieve them of their victim-sufferings.

III. "Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (which would violate someone's rights) in order to provide such goods when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods (Sterba 2019, p. 128; 2020a, pp. 204–6)." That is, when you can, do not let them be a victim in the first place.[1]

Premise 1 is assumed for the reductio argument, while 5 follows validly. Premise 4 is true, although Sterba's defense of it is problematic and leads to our major objection, as we shall see shortly. Premise 2 reflects Sterba's recrafting of Mackie's argument by appealing to ethical considerations. We will especially focus on premise 3, which is the central, hypothetical claim about what would happen if premise 2 were implemented.

Although Sterba does not overtly formulate the following moral principle, his discussion presupposes it: (MP) A good being, like a just state, will perform all moral actions in its power that will prevent significant or horrendous evil and/or promote significant freedoms and rights when it can be done easily, without the net loss of significant freedom and rights to which all are entitled, even when doing so requires interfering with the freedoms and rights of some.

We can use a case study advanced by Sterba to illustrate MP. Both rich and poor have a right to resources to satisfy their basic needs. Lacking such resources is an evil. Consider a situation where the rich have more than enough resources to satisfy their basic needs, whereas the poor lack those resources, although they have tried to acquire them

[1] Sterba suggests an alternative formulation of his argument in more positive terms of providing goods for which we have a right, rather than preventing loss of rights and freedoms. The state has an obligation to provide for its citizens those goods to which they have a right, when it can easily do so, so long as it does it in a way that does not violate the morally significant rights of others. The rights of others may be violated only if the exercise of those rights involves serious wrongdoing. Because of God's power and knowledge, if God existed, God would be able to provide for us, God's citizens, without violating morally significant rights and as morally good is obligated to do so. God is not logically constrained from doing this, otherwise God would be weaker than humans are. However, it is apparent that God has failed in this duty. Therefore, God does not exist (Sterba 2020a). Sterba sees this formulation of his argument as equivalent to the above argument, since "the nonprovision of goods to which we have a right is a way of doing evil" (Sterba 2020a, p. 204).

legitimately. In such a situation, the poor have a right to take the surplus resources from the rich and the state has the obligation not to interfere with their doing so. The rights of the rich to their excess resources are not denied, since they have earned them, but the freedom to meet one's basic needs takes precedence over the freedom to use justly earned but non-basic or excess goods (Sterba 2019, pp. 15–17).

2. Argument from the Pauline Principle

Sterba suggests a second formulation of his argument, this time from what he terms the Pauline Principle.

6. Pauline Principle: One should not do or allow evil so that good will come of it (Sterba 2019, p. 2).
7. According to the traditional free will defense, God allows moral evils so that the goods of freedom of choice and freedom of action are possible. Similarly, in the soul-building theodicy, God allows evils so that the good of character development is possible.
8. Therefore, the traditional free will defense and soul-building theodicy are incapable of justifying moral evil.

Sterba recognizes that there are exceptions to the Pauline Principle. These exceptions have to do with trivial offenses, reparable offenses, or avoiding serious or far greater harm to innocents.

9. Exceptions to the Pauline principle are allowed "when the evil is trivial, easily reparable, or the only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocents" (Sterba 2019, p. 50).
10. These exceptions arise because humans lack the power to arrive at the good or avoid or prevent the evils (Sterba 2019, p. 50).
11. God is omnipotent and omniscient.
12. Therefore, God could avoid these exceptions by using his power and knowledge. For example, he can act earlier in the causal chain (Sterba 2019, p. 50). Put another way, God always has the causal powers "to prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 57), and there is no logical contradiction in exercising that power (Sterba 2020a, p. 205).
13. However, God has not avoided these exceptions. See premise 4 above.
14. Consequently, "none of these exceptions to the Pauline Principle that are permitted to agents, like us, because of our limited power, would hold for God" (Sterba 2019, p. 50).

This is a stronger conclusion than usually given by Sterba, who qualifies conclusion 14 when he analogizes God to the just political state.

> *God, like a just political state, should not try to prevent every moral evil. Instead, like a just political state, God should focus on preventing the significant moral evils that impact people's lives. God should not seek to prevent lesser evils because any general attempt to prevent such evils would tend to interfere with people's significant freedoms. (Sterba 2019, p. 59)*

We would not want, he affirms, a political or divine police state where to remove all lesser evils all freedoms would be curtailed. Thus, God, like the state, should concentrate on significant evils.[2]

However, given God's omni-properties and the fact that God can intervene anywhere along the causal chain while protecting significant freedoms to intend evil, and given the ambiguity and relativity of "significant" (which we will argue in the next section), the stronger conclusion 14 follows. In a Sterba-type argument, God would have no excuse

[2] Although Sterba does not go this direction, building on the analogy between just states and God, he might argue that the presence of unjust states also constitutes an argument against God's existence, for if God existed, he would be able to and should prevent the existence of unjust states that promote moral evil, remove significant freedom, and disregard rights to which all are entitled.

for permitting both significant and lesser moral evils, given his omni-properties and the Pauline Principle. In short, specifically referencing the freedom defense, "if God is to be justified in permitting such moral evils, it has to be on grounds other than freedom because an assessment of the freedoms that are at stake require God to act preventively to secure a morally defensible distribution of freedom" (Sterba 2019, pp. 23–24).

3. Setting the Stage

Moral evils may be defined as instances of pain, suffering, loss, dysfunction, and states of affairs significantly disadvantageous to living beings that are caused by actions for which human agents can be held morally blameworthy. Natural evils are instances of pain, suffering, loss, dysfunction, and states of affairs significantly disadvantageous to living beings that are caused by actions for which humans cannot be held morally blameworthy.[3] This classification does not differentiate between moral and natural evils based on the types of results, but rather with reference to the moral accountability of the agents or causes.

The question Sterba raises for the theist is why a just, omnipotent, and omniscient God permits significant moral and natural evils, when presumably God could easily prevent them by altering the causal conditions somewhere along the causal chain. For Sterba, the contradiction between unjustifiable, significant existing evils and an all good, omnipotent, and omniscient God, given that Sterba's moral requirements apply to God as well as to us, provides good reason to think that God does not exist.

Sterba is not interested in ordinary or less significant moral and natural evils, but wants to focus on significant and horrendous evils. He notes Marilyn Adams' definition of horrendous evils, but primarily directs his attention to "significant moral evils that have their origin in human freedom and the lack thereof" (Sterba 2019, p. 14). He characterizes "significant moral evils" as the significant negative consequences of our immoral acts (Sterba 2019, pp. 12, 23, 26, 28). In his book, Sterba frames much of his discussion of significant evil in terms of freedoms that are lost. The freedom he has in mind is not the freedom necessary for making moral decisions, but freedoms to which we have a right that a just society would preserve or defend. Such freedoms include freedom from assault (Sterba 2019, p. 13), from lacking resources to "satisfy basic needs" (Sterba 2019, p. 5), from disproportionate distribution of goods and resources (Sterba 2019, p. 18), from "unjust economic systems" (Sterba 2019, p. 20), and from being unable to live out our life without being tortured or killed (Sterba 2019, p. 20).

Sterba notes his differences from Plantinga and other free will theists regarding the freedom invoked in their defenses/theodicies. Whereas Plantinga appeals to the freedoms necessary for making morally significant choices, Sterba wants to narrow the freedoms to those that "a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Sterba holds that God would have more reason to defend interests in his sense of social freedom than in Plantinga's sense of choice-making freedom.

In speaking of significant evils and significant suffering, Sterba holds that evil can be qualified and quantified; there are "degrees" and "amounts" of evil in the world (Sterba 2019, p. 1). However, it is also important to note that what constitutes significant and insignificant, acceptable and unacceptable, suffering is relative to persons, contexts, and even outcomes (for example, whether suffering is the final outcome or whether suffering is a means to a greater good or a byproduct of some action). Some people tolerate pain and suffering more readily than others. Some children are more pain intolerant than adults; the bodybuilder more accepting than the couch-potato. Some people take the loss of a partner or relative much harder than others. Whereas defamation or election loss is a significant

[3] Sterba does not define moral and natural evils, with the result that his distinction is unclear. For example, he treats climate change as a natural evil, while accepting that humans are at least partly responsible for it. Sterba here appears to be using "responsible" in a moral sense (Sterba 2019, p. 31). Again, he terms a parent giving permission for a child to have surgery to save her life as natural evil (Sterba 2019, p. 98). However, this is not a case of natural evil, for the parent, in intending a good outcome or obeying a rule of beneficence, is morally praiseworthy. The reason for the surgery, however, might involve natural evils.

evil for some, physical attack would be a worse evil for others. In effect, the amount and kind of suffering that might be insignificant to one person will be significant to another, and vice versa. Not only is what constitutes significant suffering relative to persons, it is also relative to other suffering. We measure instances of suffering against each other. For example, physicians ask patients to report the severity of their pain on a scale of 1 to 10. Thus, in a world where we normally experience pains at level 3, level 8 pains will be very significant. In another world where we normally experience no pains, level 1 pains may be very significant, if not horrendous.

The matter of significance, whether of significant evil or of significant freedom, becomes further muddied when Sterba contrasts "lesser freedoms" with "more significant freedoms" (Sterba 2019, p. 29) and "lesser evils" with "significant evils" (Sterba 2019, p. 51). On the one hand, Sterba might be understood to hold that lesser freedoms and lesser evils are *in*significant. However, the relativity of determining significance on this understanding is precisely the point made above. On the other hand, if "lesser" still leaves the freedom and evils to be significant, his attempt to have God focus on significant evils leaves no contrast, leading to the contention that God should remove all evils. We will return to this important point when we inquire whether Sterba's position requires that God meticulously remove all instances of suffering or loss.

4. Sterba's Defense of Premise 2

Sterba contends in premise 2 that if there is an all good, all powerful God, then necessarily he would adhere to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III. To motivate this, Sterba creates an analogy between the just state and God. Within a state, significant freedoms, which are freedoms in terms of rights that every human has or deserves, "are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Political states are obligated to secure these freedoms by law, "even when doing so requires interfering with the freedoms of some of their members" (Sterba 2019, pp. 12–13). This interference can be justified only if it is done to protect the freedom of others to which they have a right and "that everyone should have" (Sterba 2019, p. 13). If we fail to interfere, we have a "morally unacceptable distribution of freedom" (Sterba 2019, p. 13).

As good or just, God is morally obligated to follow the same Moral Evil Prevention Requirements as just political states. This includes securing a range of important freedoms based on universal rights, even when doing so requires interfering with individual freedoms of some. That is, God is morally obligated to prevent a morally unacceptable distribution of freedom.

One could question whether an appropriate analogy can be created between the just state and God. After all, the properties of the former are finite, whereas God's properties express his infinity. However, since the soundness of Sterba's argument does not rest on this analogy, which is more illustrative than argumentative, but on the ethical principles or requirements that purportedly govern both, this article will not take up that question.

5. Sterba's Defense of Premise 4

To support premise 4—that God has not decreased significant evils that exist by his permission—Sterba appeals to particular cases of significant or horrendous moral evils. We can, he claims, on a case-by-case basis, reimagine the causal sequences that led to the respective tragedy and create scenarios about how God could intervene each time to restrict the less important freedom of the wrongdoers, prevent the suffering, and protect the significant freedom and rights of the participants being victimized. By judicious intervention, God could prevent the rape of a woman, men setting dogs to attack and kill an innocent child, people kidnapping a child, and the sailing of loaded Portuguese slave ships from a Ghanaian port—illustrations provided by Sterba.

I agree that, on a case-by-case approach, one can always speculate about the many ways God could have intervened to prevent the suffering and loss of freedom victims

experience and to further their rights. In this speculation, God, in his causal manipulation of events, would be like Sterba's superheroes (Superman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man) who, by their valiant actions, create good outcomes stories (Sterba 2019, pp. 19–20). In their fight against malevolent forces, these benevolent, powerful superheroes guarantee that significant freedoms and morally justifiable, universally deserved rights of the victims are protected, even though to do so the superheroes limit the freedoms of those bent on creating evil or mayhem. Similarly, when miscreants intend evil, God might allow them freedom to plan evil but by specific intervention would prevent them from being able to fully carry out their plans. Through his super-knowledge and powerful action, God would intervene either before or during the event to "secure a more important freedom for the would-be victim" (Sterba 2019, p. 130) and thus bring about a world without significant moral evil, though the freedom to entertain evil intentions is preserved.

However, if one is going to construct a theodicy or an atheodicy, general principles, not particular cases, must be the basis for the justification. Otherwise, we look to God to meticulously operate the world to prevent each individual instance of significant or horrendous suffering or to provide the necessary, desired goods. The world would consist of superhero comic book stories, where God is the actor. Sterba's overall argument supports this contention regarding general principles. For example, Sterba believes that skeptical theism, where no justifying reason is provided, fails, for "there is still the need to justify to the victims what would have to be God's permission of the infliction on them of at least the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of the actions of wrongdoers. This arises from the very nature of morality, which only justifies impositions that are reasonably acceptable to all those affected" (Sterba 2019, p. 73). This argument depends not on appealing to the possibility of intervention in specific cases, but to general principles of justification. Indeed, Sterba wants to consider whether there is "*a greater good justification for God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions*" (Sterba 2020a, p. 203). Thus, although Sterba may be correct in contending that theoretically God could intervene in particular cases, his piecemeal justification for the contention that God should universally do so leads to an unsatisfactory situation where God operates the world by meticulous divine intervention.

6. Critique of Premise 3

The above considerations pose important issues, but my main worry arises from MP. Sterba distinguishes significant evils from lesser evils. God, he says, like the just political state, need only address the former. However, as argued above, what is one person's lesser suffering might be another person's significant suffering. Significance is a matter of perspective and degree. Are levels 2 or 4 evils significant but only less so, as over against level 7 evils, to be overlooked even if we have the power to remove them without significant negative consequences? Preventing or stopping even so-called lesser or insignificant suffering should be done if one is able to do so easily without creating greater evils or losing significant freedoms to which we all have a right. I should avoid stepping on my neighbor's foot if I can. What generally hinders us from eliminating many evils, as Sterba notes, is our impotence, ignorance of the causal chain, or lack of opportunity or time.

The point here is that, as we argued above regarding MP, to be totally morally good, God should prevent all evils he can, even if God has to interfere with the freedoms of wrongdoers when those freedoms inhibit rights that belong to all. As we have seen, Sterba contends that a God with omni-properties of power and knowledge is capable of so doing. Then, no matter what the number of evils in the world is, if God existed, God could and should be doing more to reduce them (Sterba 2019, p. 66). If God eliminates the highest evils of level 7, then the question arises of why a good, omniscient, and almighty God is not causally involved in the world to remove evils of level 6, since these are now the most significant or serious evils. Moreover, once God removes evils of level 6, evils of level 5 become most significant, if not horrendous, and one wonders what God is doing

about these evils, and so on. The result of such a scenario is the requirement that an all good, omniscient and almighty God is obligated to eliminate all significant moral evils and provide all significant goods where there is no logical impossibility (Sterba 2019, p. 63). Moreover, since "significant" is a relative and comparative term, such that probably no moral evil would not be significant on some person's valuation, God would be required to remove all moral evil. Furthermore, not only is God *obligated*, for Sterba, God *can* do so, since he has the causal power, knowledge, and time to do so (Sterba 2020a, p. 205). "God would never be subject to such causal constraints, and it would be contradictory to assume that he is subject to logical constraints here" (Sterba 2019, p. 129). To accomplish this will require God to meticulously operate the world by divine intervention, either indirectly or directly (by miracle) in a way that would result in the serious curtailment of both morally significant human freedom and the incentive for humans to act beneficently.

This need for continuous divine meticulous intervention becomes clear in Sterba's treatment of Matthew Shepard. He asks what God should do with respect to someone who is mistreated but then goes on to mistreat others. His response is that the intervener should protect the person and significant freedom of the mistreated person in the first place, but then intervene to prevent that person from creating subsequent significant moral evil (Sterba 2019, p. 22).

If God meticulously operates the world by his actions to bring about the good results or the results he desires, there is no reason for us to act. Given God's omni-properties, God can do a much better job at any task than we can. Ultimately, if God is expected to run the world to thereby eliminate all significant moral evils, there is no incentive for humans to act, since God determines what will or will not be done. Even if we do not act, God will intervene to at least meet all basic needs that he can meet, if not do more. There are no situations for humans to act immorally since God prevents all evil consequences; only good can be accomplished. Consequently, there is no opportunity for moral agents to develop their character or engage in soul-building, since there is no morally significant freedom to choose between doing good and doing evil. (Incidentally, this seems to be a difference between God and the just state; it is not the obligation or prerogative of the latter to be engaged in soul-building.) It would be pointless and fruitless to plan or intend evil if the ability to carry out the plans is rendered impossible. Indeed, this scenario not only has moral implications, it has epistemic implications as well. If God meticulously runs the world by direct or indirect intervention, we lack grounds to know how to act, since divine operations replace natural laws (we will return to this later when we address natural evil).

One might expand this scenario beyond the prevention of significant suffering to procuring the good (using Sterba's alternate argument that failure to provide needed goods is an evil). If the just state can easily provide a service (for example, free garbage removal) or goods (plant trees in personal lots to enhance the city) for its citizens without negative impact on its budget or overriding other required duties, benefits, or rights, then it should do so. Failure would count against its goodness or distributive justice. Of course, the just state has limited resources for creating goods for all its citizens. Similarly, a good and benevolent God ought to provide all goods that cost him nothing, and because he has unlimited resources, he can easily do so, thereby demonstrating the beneficence aspect of his moral character. The result of MP is the unacceptable requirement that God meticulously operate the world to remove all instances of (significant) suffering and loss and provide all (basic) goods.

7. Limited Intervention

Sterba notes the objection we just made, in particular about soul—or character—building (Sterba 2019, p. 53), and replies that our criticism fails to take account of another option that avoids the necessity of God meticulously running or managing the world, but still meets Sterba's condition that God ought to be preventing significant evils. Sterba argues that a middle ground exists between God always intervening fully (which removes opportunity for moral development) and God not intervening at all (which he takes as the

Plantingian view of the free will response), and that had God existed, he could have used this middle ground. The middle ground, which he terms "limited intervention" (Sterba 2019, pp. 60, 132) or "constrained intervention" (Sterba 2019, p. 90), is that God "not fully intervenes" (Sterba 2019, p. 133) or intervenes in ways that are "only partially successful" (Sterba 2019, p. 132) to leave us room to take action to build our character. God even might allow us to partially carry out our evil intentions, but would step in once the matter becomes a significant evil. He thinks that our freedom would be protected by God allowing us to have "the freedom to imagine, intend, and even to take initial steps toward carrying out (our) wrongdoing," but everyone would be prevented from *fully* implementing their malevolent plans (Sterba 2019, pp. 161, 55).

Soul-building and moral responsibility are made possible because, with God's limited intervention,

> *[w]hen you choose to intervene to prevent significantly evil consequences of wrongdoers, you will either be completely successful or your intervention will fall short. When the latter is going to happen, God does something to make the intervention completely successful. Likewise, when you choose not to intervene to prevent significant evil consequences, God again intervenes but this time not in a fully successful way. In cases of this sort, there is a residue of evil consequences that the victims still do suffer. This residue is not really a significant evil in its own right, but it is harmful nonetheless, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible. You could have prevented those harmful consequences but you chose not to do so and that makes you responsible for them. Of course, God too could have prevented those harmful consequences from happening even if you had decided not to do what you could to prevent them yourself. It is just that in such cases God would have chosen not to fully intervene and completely prevent all the evil consequences in order to leave you with a constrained opportunity for soul-making. Moreover, I maintain that this is exactly what God would be morally required to do. (Sterba 2019, pp. 132–33)*

In this way, Sterba holds that limited intervention provides ground for denying that his argument requires God to meticulously operate the world to prevent significant moral evil.

He provides the example of a child being abducted (Sterba 2019, p. 61). With limited interposition, God could allow the kidnapping to occur, giving the bystander opportunity to intervene and develop character. Should the bystander not take any action, God would stop the kidnapping later and rescue the child (for example, by having a policeperson stop the car for a broken taillight). His second example is of someone on the Ghanaian Slave Coast who can warn people not to be tricked into entering the Portuguese slave ships. Should the bystander not act or be unsuccessful, God will use other resources such as the French navy to return the slave ship to port and release the prisoners (Sterba 2019, pp. 132–33). God is the backup plan in case the bystander takes no action or fails in his evil-preventing endeavors.

However, such limited intervention is not an option for Sterba. God's delay in the action and backup role violates Sterba's own Pauline Principle that one should never allow or do evil so that good can come of it. In this scenario, God allows the evil kidnapping of the child or the abduction of Africans on a Portuguese slave ship to occur, so that bystanders can develop character. This appears to be a case where the end of allowing persons (bystanders) to develop their character justifies the evil-producing means, even where the means are only partially successful.

Sterba would reply that we have forgotten that the Pauline Principle can be overridden in cases where the harm done is trivial or easily reparable. Accordingly, he might consider these as exceptional cases of trivial or reparable evil (the child is only "somewhat traumatized, but otherwise unharmed" (Sterba 2019, p. 61)). However, that is hardly the case. The kidnapping of the child causes psychological damage to the child. The little good that the bystander could realize from intervening would not compensate for the trauma caused to the child by delay, and even if it did, the principle still would be violated. The

capture of the slaves and their forcible incarceration on the ship leave them more than "a bit traumatized, but otherwise unharmed" (Sterba 2019, p. 132). If Sterba could visit the Cape Coast slave castles in Ghana, as I have done, and see the conditions under which the captured and chained slaves were held in complete darkness with filth up to their knees before they were pushed through a narrow doorway into the foul hold of the slave ship, he would be less sanguine about suggesting that this is a trivial matter. As Sterba notes, "the experience (of significant evil) will almost always be an alien factor in one's life" (Sterba 2019, p. 58). Rather, if God is to be good, he would intervene in the causal event to prevent the abduction of the child or capture of the slaves in the first place, even if he allowed the villains freedom to conceive of their plans. The sufferings and traumatization of the child and captives might appear trivial to Sterba but not to the child and captives. Again, perspective matters on deciding triviality and significance. God "would never be justified in permitting evil in such cases" where the "intrinsically wrongful actions would significantly conflict with the basic interests of their victims" (Sterba 2019, p. 57). "There are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle in this regard" (Sterba 2019, p. 58).

Here is the dilemma. If the evil consequences are trivial and reparable, equivalent to the pain caused by accidentally stepping on someone's foot in exiting the subway, then the bystander's moral character is not significantly involved, and for good reason, since we don't develop moral character in trivialities. If they are not trivial, the Pauline Principle is violated.

Furthermore, on the one hand, on this view of limited intervention, right-doers would soon learn that if they did not act, they need not worry. Not doing anything is justified in that the person believes that a more effective solution would arise, namely, God's intervention. They would have the well justified belief that God will take the necessary, backup rescue action, given his power and character, and that God can do it better than we can. If I act, the slaves' incarceration is temporary; they will be dispatched on the next slave ship. If God intervenes to eliminate the evil, the solution can be maximally effective.

If bystanders saw that God did not intervene immediately the first time but believed that God eventually always intervenes so that suffering is minimal, they would correctly assume that he would do so at other times. Moreover, even if God did not intervene previously, which cannot happen because it would violate God's goodness and power, this provides no reason to think he will not intervene this time (given their adequate theology of God's omni-properties and that God adheres to the Pauline Principle).

If, on the other hand, wrongdoers (or anyone) knew that God would prevent whatever horrendous or significant evil action they planned, there would be no sense in their planning it. Planning for our action presupposes that we believe that we can carry out what we plan. However, if God always intervenes to prevent implementation or to direct anything that happens to his own purposes, they soon would learn that planning was useless because what occurred was planned and brought about by God, not us.

Limited intervention, when it faces Sterba's Prevention Requirements, fails to avoid requiring God to run the world by direct intervention to achieve the end that Sterba demands of God, namely, preventing significant suffering and loss and protecting rights held by all. It ultimately devolves into divine meticulous operation of the world. Rather, "[It] is far more plausible to see an all-good, all-powerful God as also interacting with us continually over time, always having the option of either interfering or not interfering with our actions, and especially with the consequences of our actions" (Sterba 2019, p. 27), the very thesis counter to Sterba's.

8. The Limiting of Freedom Objection

Sterba contends that "God could have decreased the moral evil in the world by justifiably restricting the freedoms of some (for example, wrongdoers) to promote significant freedoms for others (victims)" (Sterba 2019, p. 30). This is possible for God, since "an omniscient and all-powerful God would surely be aware of these causal processes as they

get going to divert them or put a stop to them" (Sterba 2019, p. 28). In advancing this, Sterba anticipates another important objection to his atheological case.

> *Now it might be objected that if God interfered with wrongdoing by preventing rather than permitting their significant or even horrendous evil consequences, God would be limiting the wrongdoer's freedom. This is true, but in each and every case where God would thus be limiting a wrongdoer's freedom by preventing rather than permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of his wrongful action, God would also be securing a more important freedom for the would-be victim. So in terms of freedom, it would be better for God to prevent significant or even horrendous consequences of wrongdoing thereby restricting the wrongdoer's freedom than to permit significant or even horrendous consequences of wrongdoing, thereby restricting the freedom of the victim. So any justification in terms of freedom alone (contrary to the Free-Will Defense) would favor the freedom of the would-be victims over the freedom of the would-be perpetrators of wrongdoing. (Sterba 2019, p. 130)*

However, this reply to the limiting-of-freedom objection also falls prey to the Pauline Principle when Sterba argues that "it would be better." God's restriction of the wrongdoer's freedom, which the wrongdoer might claim to violate a basic good, is justified on the grounds that it is better overall that this is done. However, this is nothing less than claiming that one can do evil (restrict freedom) so that a greater good will result, an infraction of the Pauline Principle.

Sterba might reply that the Pauline Principle is not violated, since restricting freedom to do evil is not an evil but a good. The freedoms the state and God should preserve are significant freedoms, that is, freedoms "that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). The greater good is not freedom per se, but the freedom to do right and the just distribution of freedom. In this, I think, Sterba is correct, but to successfully accomplish this just distribution of freedom still leaves God with having to meticulously administer the world by divine intervention, for he has to determine in each case what freedoms to protect and which to interfere with.

We conclude that Sterba's argument against God's existence from moral evil fails. It imposes too high a cost by making human moral action undecidable and not exercisable. To allow humans meaningful moral freedom and to provide for character development, God must be a risk taker, allowing human choices and action that result in the possibility of moral evil along with moral good.

9. Sterba's Argument Regarding Natural Evils

When Sterba turns to natural evils, he applies much the same reasoning to reconciling the existence of God with natural evils as he does to reconciling the existence of God with moral evils. He contends that in our daily life "when the basic welfare of other humans is at stake, in particular, we think we ought to prevent such natural evils from occurring or at least prevent or mitigate their consequences, especially when we can easily do so without causing greater harm to other humans" (Sterba 2019, pp. 157–58). The same applies to preventing the destruction of the basic welfare of living beings in general, whether sentient or not (Sterba 2019, p. 184). By parallel reasoning, he argues, God too is morally obligated to prevent significant and horrendous natural evils to living beings, whether human, sentient, or non-sentient (Sterba 2019, p. 159). It is evident, he believes, that God is not very proactive in preventing significant natural evils to all three types of beings. God's failure to prevent significant natural evils cannot be justified by an appeal to freedom, for allowing them to happen removes or denigrates rather than maximizes the freedom, basic interests, and welfare of those affected. They are diminished, not enhanced, something the just state would not tolerate. Neither can these natural evils be justified by appeal to soul-building, for again not only does the evil overmatch the human soul-building they allegedly make possible, but human soul-building can occur without significant and horrendous natural evils. All that is needed for soul-building are lesser, insignificant, and temporarily delayed evils. In short, God's permission of the consequences of the causes of

natural evil cannot be justified by appeal to either the greater good of human freedom or human moral development.

How should God be acting with respect to humans and nonhuman nature? Sterba argues that, whereas we compete with other living beings and hence cannot always eliminate significant natural evils or their causes, God does not compete with anything else and thus as good is obligated to take into consideration "the interests of all living beings" (Sterba 2019, p. 160). Using his power, God can and should eliminate significant natural evils by divine intervention. There are cases where God cannot intervene. For example, God should be neutral when the conflict is an either/or conflict between nonhumans (as between the predatory spider and the victim fly). However, where one living being is not significantly disadvantaged, God can and ought to prevent the "significant and especially horrendous natural evils upon (humans) and other living beings" (Sterba 2019, p. 159), especially when he can do so "without causing greater harm to other humans" (Sterba 2019, p. 160). Indeed, consonant with what Sterba argued regarding moral evil, a good God should not use significant or horrendous natural evils to protect human freedom or promote human soul-building at the expense of the basic needs of other living beings where the human needs involved are not basic.[4]

Sterba does suggest exceptions. When there is a conflict between humans and nonhuman living beings, God generally ought to prefer human beings. However, even here he gives qualifications. He introduces a Principle of Disproportionality to govern exceptions that favor nonhuman living beings. "Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems" (Sterba 2019, p. 158). That is, where human basic needs are not jeopardized, God, like us, ought to favor meeting the basic needs of sentient and non-sentient nonhuman beings over non-basic needs of human beings.

10. The Principle of Disproportionality

Sterba's Principle of Disproportionality, however, is unacceptable. For one thing, questions paralleling what constitute significant evils arise here with respect to what constitute basic and non-basic needs. Sterba suggests that although we cannot define "basic" and "non-basic" needs, and although we cannot classify all needs in one or the other category, the distinction is not only clear enough to be functional but necessary in moral, political, and environmental philosophy (Sterba 2020b, p. 506 n15).

Maybe so, but how does this distinction get applied? What non-basic human needs would justify intervening in human affairs to protect the basic needs of individual animals and plants? Are not having dandelions in the lawn or spiders and ants in the house (after all, they serve an important function in nature) basic needs, so that one is justified in killing weeds, spiders, and ants? Is having wood for construction a basic need, or should we replace wood with nonorganic building material and thereby stop the lumbering that kills individual trees? After all, trees are living beings with the basic need of life. Is eating meat or seafood or wearing silk clothes, which requires death of sentient beings, a basic need, or is it immoral to not be a vegetarian or to wear silk?

Sterba considers the case of vegetarianism. He writes that "though a more vegetarian diet seems in order, it is not clear that the interests of farm animals would be well served if all of us became complete vegetarians" (Sterba 2020b, p. 508). One reason he suggests is that people would not continue to raise and feed farm animals. However, what right does that violate? Non-existent farm animals do not have a right to be brought into existence. Further, he suggests that being raised under healthy conditions, killed relatively painlessly, and eaten is beneficial to them. True, it is better for animals to be raised in healthy conditions than being raised on an unhealthy factory farm, but how does being killed and eaten benefit them as individual living beings? Life is a basic need, so that killing farm animals in their youth (calves or lambs) or prime justly deprives them of meeting that

[4] These injunctions follow from his nine Natural Evil Prevention Requirements (Sterba 2019, pp. 184–85).

basic need. His Natural Evil Prevention Requirement IV—"Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on nonrational sentient beings, as needed, whenever the welfare of rational beings is not at stake and one can easily do so without causing greater or comparable harm to other nonrational sentient life" (Sterba 2019, p. 184)—requires us not to deprive them of their life when human welfare is not at stake, and the vegetarian contends that eating meat is not necessary for or basic to human diets or human welfare. Indeed, if life is a basic need for animals, then killing them to satisfy our desire for meat fails to meet the Pauline Principle, which lies at the heart of his ethic, and animal slaughter is not a trivial or reparable matter, at least to animals.

It is reasonable to conclude that his Principle of Disproportionality, which combines Natural Evil Prevention Requirements IV and VII,[5] is dubious. No one, even in their best moments, could abide by it, let alone ought to. If it is dubious that human beings or the just state does, can, or ought to live by this Principle or these Requirements, there is no reason to think that they also apply to God.

Sterba proceeds to further justify his position that we should maintain farm animals for consumption on the ground that "many will find it difficult to pass up an arrangement that is morally permissible and mutually beneficial for both humans and farm animals." However, his Natural Evil Prevention Requirements show that the arrangement of growing animals and slaughtering them for food, even humanely, does not benefit them. We certainly would not tolerate such a process of raising humans for others' consumption or use on the grounds that it would benefit them. There are, as his Requirements note, "countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods (not required for their basic welfare) to rational" beings, rather than raising animals to be killed and eaten (Sterba 2019, pp. 184–85).

A similar argument might be raised about lumbering. Sterba might argue that lumbering is beneficial in that it thins the trees and thus makes room for a new forest to grow. However, again, this violates not only the Pauline Principle of doing evil (to individual trees by depriving them of the basic need of life) for a greater good (of forest conservation), but also Natural Evil Prevention Requirement VII, according to which we should not prevent natural evil from being inflicted on non-sentient living beings if our welfare is not at stake.

Sterba seems to modify the concept of basic needs by talking about what we as rational beings "need for a decent life" (Sterba 2019, p. 159) or for our welfare. However, what is a decent life? Does welfare go beyond basic needs and goods? Now the debate might be whether a weed-free lawn, an insect-free basement, a house built of wood, and diet that includes meat and fish contribute to a decent life. Might a decent life include even luxury goods, such as art, or is donating to the homeless to be preferred to paying for a visit to an art museum? Even "luxury goods" is not a helpful deciding category. Many Americans consider automobiles essential to a decent quality of life and not a luxury good at all. Some young Americans are not so sure, since they can navigate the city without them. Certainly, my university students in Liberia consider such transport luxury. For many of them, even having a functioning bicycle is a luxury. What might seem basic to one person might be luxury to another, or luxurious to one person basic to another.

Sterba attempts to answer at least part of our objection with his Principle of Human Defense, which

> *permits defense of nonbasic needs of humans against aggression of nonhumans. So while we cannot legitimately aggress against nonhumans to meet our nonbasic needs, we can legitimately defend our nonbasic needs against the aggression of nonhumans seeking to meet their basic needs. (Sterba 2020b, p. 506 n17)*

[5] Requirement VII is the same as Requirement IV, except that it applies to non-sentient living beings.

While this self-defense principle does not resolve the problems posed above, it, like human self-defense principles, allows us to defend against ants, spiders, and, with a stretch of the imagination, dandelions. However, like the human self-defense principle, which only allows incapacitation of the aggressor, it does not justify killing them (acting contrary to their basic need of life), only defending against them and removing their capacity to be aggressors. It still leaves problematic issues with the Principle of Disproportionality where our non-basic needs involve the destruction of sentient and non-sentient beings that are not aggressing on us, but that we are using for our benefit or decent life (for example, silkworms, farm animals, and oysters).

In short, not only is the application of basic and non-basic needs and goods ambiguous, but it is dubious that Sterba's Principle of Disproportionality governing human obligations holds true. As such, it is doubtful that it can be used to identify and qualify God's moral obligations with regard to preventing natural evil among all living beings.

11. Sterba on God's Obligations to Nature

Returning to the main argument, Sterba contends that God should be preventing the significant and horrendous consequences of natural evils, something that as omnipotent he can do. It is important to note that Sterba applies this to individuals, not just to species. Thus, he worries about the fawn caught in a forest fire. Given Sterba's Natural Evil Prevention Requirements, a good God would be under obligation to rescue the fawn, which he easily could do by causing a quick, localized cloudburst without causing greater harm (Sterba 2019, p. 162).[6] We all sympathize, Sterba notes, with the pitiable, endangered fawn. But what about beetles, snakes, possums, and others likewise trapped in the forest; their biological need for survival is as basic to them as to the fawn and to us, and though we might not be as naturally sympathetic to them as to the fawn, God could and presumably should preserve them as well from the fire. What about non-sentient forest beings: individual pines, aspens, grasses, mushrooms, ferns, wild roses, fungi, and the like? As living organisms, their life is basic to them and threatened by forest fires. Their loss does not occasion any suffering for them but is the loss of life and opportunity to reproduce (pass on their genes). In effect, the consistent application of the contention that God has an interest in living beings, human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient, and ought to preserve their basic needs without discomforting humans would require God not only to rescue the trapped fawn but all the individual insects, mammals, trees, plants, and fungi as well. In effect, God should not allow forest fires, for they cause horrendous destruction and loss—death—of individual living beings and, if animals and plants have rights, their rights, regardless of their sentience (Sterba 2019, p. 162).

Sterba might reply by qualifying his position. Were we to take the interests of all (nonhuman living beings) into account, "we would be in competition with nonhuman living beings such that our survival and basic well-being requires preferring our own interests to their interests in many cases of conflict" (Sterba 2019, p. 160). Preserving all insects and animals and meeting their basic needs would leave us overrun by critters, much to our discomfort. Preserving all vegetable matter and meeting its basic needs would leave us inundated with plants. Hence, preference is given to human needs and "decent living" over the needs of other living beings.

Sterba applies this requirement to give preferential treatment to God as well. God should prefer helping humans because he seeks a special relationship with us. For the theist, this is true, but what moral principle preferences human survival over that of other organisms? Sterba observes that

> *given that it is virtually definitive of traditional theism that God is open to just such a special relationship with us, which, when combined with what I have called a Godly opportunity for soul-making, could ultimately include friendship with God himself,*

[6] Why Sterba does not consider God bringing about a sudden rainstorm to quell the forest fire a miracle is puzzling, since it would be a specific, intentional, divine intervention in nature (Sterba 2019, p. 162). We will address miracles or divine intervention below.

> *then surely God would be morally required to act to prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on us when he could easily do so without causing greater harm to other humans. (Sterba 2019, p. 160)*

Thus, if God existed, theistic reasoning about creation, *imago dei*, and even the rationality needed to have relationships with God would play a role in justifying this principle. Of course, if God does not exist, as Sterba holds, this specific support for preferential treatment evaporates.

He goes on to suggest that "meeting our basic needs over those of other species who do not suffer as intensely as we do is the best way to limit serious suffering in the world" (Sterba 2019, p. 161). This too is a dubious claim, considering how many sentient living beings there are in the world in comparison to us. Humans are not the only creatures that suffer. Even if he treats serious suffering qualitatively, it is not obvious that humans suffer more intensely than animals. Watching a cat hit by a car suffer and slowly die in the middle of a road is an unpleasant experience.

Sterba considers whether one might appeal simply to rationality as intrinsically valuable and thereby justify preferencing human needs and decent living, but as he notes, this is a biased perspective. If lions had a say, they would be biased in favor of lions, appealing to their own distinctive traits of excellence. Sterba advances "A Principle of Human Preservation" that gives preference to humans in meeting their basic needs, even at the expense of basic needs of other sentient and non-sentient beings. He justifies it on utilitarian grounds; if the basic needs are not satisfied, it would "lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of a decent life" (Sterba 2020a, p. 505). Of course, lions and cows might derive a comparable preferential Principle of Feline or Bovine Preservation, utilizing the same utilitarian argument. With regard to meeting conflicting basic needs, this leads us back to a "might makes right" ethic that Sterba rejects (Sterba 2020b, p. 504).

To summarize, not only are some of his Natural Evil Prevention Requirements and other principles questionable, but also the impossibility of their reasonable application shows the weakness of his natural evil atheodicy. It is doubtful that, for example, Natural Evil Prevention Requirements IV and VII apply to us, let alone to God.

12. Natural Evil and Soul-Building

Finally, paralleling his argument about moral evil, Sterba suggests that God's intervention is not inconsistent with soul-building. God could wait a bit in a situation of significant natural evil to give us a chance to act and develop our moral character before he rectifies the situation by taking his own action. In such cases, we would see how God has given us the opportunity to soul-build in the past and can take advantage of that opportunity now, so that we do not become unworthy of heaven (Sterba 2019, p. 95). Consider Rowe's forest fire and the fawn. Where we cannot do anything or fail, Sterba expects God to intervene to save the fawn. However, where we can intervene, God would wait to give us a chance before stepping in and rescuing the fawn (who might suffer a bit in the meantime).

However, the example is fraught with difficulties. For one thing, are we really in a position to see God step in to rescue people and animals in cases of natural evil? What would we be seeing just in case God did (or did not) step in? How would we know it was God who put the fire out rather than it being serendipity? How would we know that God waited for someone to act before he acted, or even if he is waiting for *me* to act? Second, why should we act when we know that not only will God intervene, but that God always does it in the right way, much better than we could do? In fact, we would seem to be morally culpable if we did not let the professional handle the nontrivial job rather than possibly botch it ourselves. Third, can we justify God letting the fawn suffer even a bit to give us a chance to rescue it? This would be an instance of God allowing the significant evil of suffering be a means to benefit us in our soul-building, all the while temporarily withholding the significant good from other living beings. It is not that God ought to wait a bit to give us a chance to rescue the fawn and put out the fire; God should have prevented the fire in the first place, since once started it affects the basic needs of many living beings.

Ultimately, God's temporary-delay solution violates the Pauline Principle of not doing evil—here to living beings—that good may come. If the evil resulting from the delay is significant, the Pauline Principle is violated; if the resulting evil is insignificant, it does not count against God's goodness and does not make for our character-building either.

Sterba's response ultimately becomes untenable when death is included among the significant natural evils. It is reasonable to include death, since life is a prerequisite for satisfying all needs and realizing all goods. Thus, to carry out Sterba's scenario, where God prevents significant natural evil to all living beings, sentient and non-sentient, satisfies their basic needs, and provides for their basic goods, when the satisfaction of basic needs does not contravene human basic needs, God would either have to give immortality to most living beings (depending on whether Sterba accepts eating meat and fish or root vegetables as a basic human need that would not be met without death) or exclude life from being a basic need. However, Sterba's examples treat life as a basic need. They involve either the evil of taking life itself (the fawn, Matthew Shepard) or fulfilling a basic need like freedom that presupposes that the being is alive.

In short, if to be good God is required by Sterba's Natural Evil Prevention Requirement IV to prevent significant natural evils for nonrational sentient living beings, and by Requirement VII for non-sentient living beings as well, then God would have to intervene to such an extent and in such a way that there would be no natural laws. God would be required to meticulously operate the world by divine intervention. Given the variety, "degree and amount" of natural evil in the world (Sterba 2019, p. 11), little regularity of causal relations would be left for us to calculate how to act. The result would be that, with God's intervention replacing natural causal relations, we would be unable to plan or act rationally, for all events would depend on God's actualization with the prevention of evil in mind. God alone would determine the most propitious outcomes.

To protect morally significant freedom and the human ability to plan and act rationally in the world, which is necessary for the greater good of having moral agents that do a significant amount of good, God will respect the natural laws that govern the world that he created. Moreover, if the universe operates by natural laws, and if living beings are natural beings, they will be affected by those laws, other natural beings, and natural events, sometimes to their benefit and sometimes not.[7]

13. Nomic Regularity

Sterba rejects this critique: "[T]here is no reason to think that God's (intervening to prevent natural evils) would adversely affect the nomic regularity and development from disorder to order of our world, leading to less good overall" (Sterba 2019, p. 169). Such a world would still have nomic regularities. As we noted above, he argues for constrained intervention.

However, one cannot have it both ways: on the one hand, that the degree and amount of significant natural evil are great enough to justify a claim that God does not exist, since a good God should be much more involved in intervening to prevent significant natural evil to sentient and non-sentient living beings alike. On the other hand, that divine miraculous intervention would not be great enough to disturb natural laws so that God's intervention would leave them and the rational deliberation and action they make possible to be fundamentally undisturbed.

Sterba responds that there could have been a different set of natural laws that did not result in significant natural evils (Sterba 2019, p. 63), but he provides neither a description of what such a world would be like nor an accounting of the degree and amount of evil that would result that would support his claim.

[7] For a natural law theodicy, see (Reichenbach 1982, chp. 5).

14. The Threat of Deism

It might be suggested that, in replying to Sterba's atheological arguments, the advocate of a natural law theodicy promotes a position that likewise is unacceptable to many theists. Whereas atheists claim that God does not exist, deists claim that God, though existing, is absent from and uninvolved in the world. Because he is perfect, God created a perfect world, and once a perfect world existed, God has no reason to intervene. More importantly for our discussion, regular, frequent divine intervention would make human free action impossible, since no necessary or regular causal relations would hold between events to enable rational calculation and implementation of potential action.

On the contrary, however, a natural law theodicy need not be deist. What has been argued above is that to eliminate all significant evil, as Sterba suggests, a world *operated by* divine meticulous intervention would be necessary, and that such a world would be incompatible with agents knowing how to act and exercising morally significant freedom. However, a natural law theodicy does not eliminate divine intervention (Reichenbach 2016, pp. 225–29). Neither does divine intervention dispense with laws of nature; they operate before, during, and after the intervention. Rather, God intentionally introduces new features into the setting. As C.S. Lewis puts it, miracles are "an interference with nature by a supernatural power," an insertion of a new event into nature by a wise and powerful agent (Lewis 1960, p. 5).

As active beings, we frequently intervene in natural events in ways that interfere with the operation of natural laws. When I hold a rock, preventing it from falling, I interfere with the law of gravity. I do not violate the law of gravity; it still applies. However, I have introduced new events into the natural system that affect how the law of gravity functions in this case. Our limited intervention does not destroy our ability to recognize natural laws but presupposes that recognition. Similarly, the occasional divine intervention or miracle does not destroy our ability to recognize natural laws and is consistent with the character of a good God who does intervene (Lewis 1960, pp. 57–58). However, Sterba's requirements of eliminating all significant natural evil, given its "degree and amount," far exceed the presence of occasional divine interventions.

It might be objected that the theist cannot explain why God allows any particular evil, since preventing that one additional evil would not affect our ability to calculate rational action. If God can remove 100 evils, why not this one—101. Of course, the same objection can be repeated regarding evil 102, and so on, so that ultimately God would be obligated to remove all evils. However, to do so, we have argued, would mean that God would have to operate the world by meticulous divine interference, which would remove natural laws and the human ability to rationally calculate action. Since removing all evils is incompatible with the greater good of having free, rational moral agents, God must draw the line determining evils he can and does remove. From our perspective, and perhaps from God's, it would appear that that line is arbitrary, but the line must be drawn at some point (van Inwagen 2006, p. 105).[8]

15. Conclusions

Sterba thinks that he can resuscitate the atheologian's argument by appealing to the amount and degree of significant or horrendous moral and natural evils that would concern us and, particularly, the just state. Good beings and just states should intervene in human and natural events to prevent significant and horrendous evils as far as they easily can, without creating greater evil or losing significant freedom, rights, and basic goods, even if they have to restrict the freedom of some. Since God is all-powerful and all-knowing, he not only should but can easily eliminate these evils by intervening somewhere along

[8] Our argument for God not eliminating all evil, based on the premise that it is good that moral agents exist and that having moral agents requires freedom of choice and action, differs from van Inwagen's, who bases it on the grounds that if he did so, God would frustrate his desire to reconcile all persons to himself (van Inwagen 2006, p. 88).

the causal chain. The degree and amount of these evils in the world shows, he claims, that God does not exist.

However, if we follow Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 1—the moral requirement that a good being must prevent all the significant moral evils when it can be easily done, without violating anyone's rights, and if we grant God omni-properties of power and knowledge, we conclude that God must eliminate all moral evil. Similarly, if we follow Natural Evil Prevention Requirements IV and VII, we conclude that God must eliminate all significant natural evil that he can do easily without infringing on human basic needs. We have contended that what constitutes significant and worst evils is a subjective, comparative concept, for what is significant or worst depends on what individual persons conceive to be significant, horrendous, or worst. Suppose that God prevents or removes all evils of level 7 magnitude. Instances of significant or worst evils would remain, namely evils of level 6 magnitude. According to Sterba's Requirements, God now would be obligated to remove or prevent all significant or worst evils, namely, those of level 6 magnitude. Were these removed, by the same argument, evils of level 5 magnitude would be significant and the worst and must be prevented or removed, and so on. Hence, Sterba's demand to mitigate all significant evil leads to the necessity of removing all evils. His scenario of constrained intervention is not a viable alternative, for either the evils are trivial and not significant enough to count against God's goodness, or else significant enough to require God's intervention, resulting in God operating the world by meticulous, divine intervention. However, this would remove our morally significant freedom to conceive or act, whether understood in a Plantingian or Sterban sense. Thus, there are good and sufficient reasons to doubt that Sterba has succeeded in defeating a freedom-based defense or theodicy.[9]

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Article

Evil and Divine Power: A Response to James Sterba's Argument from Evil

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Abstract: In this article, I offer a response to James P. Sterba's moral argument for the non-existence of God. Sterba applies to God the so-called Pauline Principle that it is not permissible to do evil in order that good may come. He suggests that this is the underlying element in discussions of the Doctrine of Double Effect, a doctrine that has been largely overlooked by philosophers of religion. Although, as hypothetical trolley cases demonstrate, human beings sometimes cannot avoid doing or permitting evil in order to prevent a greater evil, Sterba argues that the same cannot be said of an omnipotent God and that, since our world contains horrendous evils, the existence of a God who is both omnipotent and good is therefore logically impossible. I argue that, if God is thought to be a conscious being with unlimited power to prevent horrendous evils, Sterba's argument might be valid. I also argue, however, that divine power need not be construed in this way. Drawing on some ideas derived from the work of Charles Hartshorne, I suggest that God is not a kind of divine micromanager and that it is more coherent and, indeed, helpful to think of God as a social influencer whose power is a source of positive energy for the promotion of goodness.

Keywords: problem of evil; theodicy; process theology; process theodicy; Charles Hartshorne

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1. Introduction

In this article, I offer a response to James P. Sterba's moral argument for the non-existence of God as presented in his book *Is A Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019). Sterba applies to God the so-called Pauline Principle that it is never permissible for human beings to do evil in order that good may come of it. Many scholars have argued that it is acceptable for a good God to permit evil in order to bring about some good that would not otherwise have been attainable, but Sterba suggests that, although human beings sometimes cannot avoid doing evil in order to prevent a greater evil, the same cannot be said of an omnipotent God. Sterba claims that his argument "is obviously new" (Sterba 2019, p. 191), because it draws on resources in ethics which have been largely ignored by contemporary philosophers of religion, but suggests that, as "the problem of evil is fundamentally an ethical, not a logical or epistemological, problem" (p. 5), these previously untapped resources might finally help us to resolve the problem. Sterba also acknowledges that his argument might contain a fatal flaw, however, and he invites theists to identify this (p. 191).

I will argue that if, as Sterba suggests, the definition of divinity includes unlimited power, the answer to the question he addresses might well be a negative one. If an omnipotent God has the power to monitor and adjust the activities of every one of the 7.8 billion or so human inhabitants of our planet, not to mention its animals, plants, and natural processes, and there is no over-riding good reason why such a God might choose not to exercise this power, Sterba's argument is valid. However, I will also argue that divine power need not be construed in this way. Drawing on some ideas derived from the work of Charles Hartshorne, I will suggest that God should not be regarded as a kind of divine micromanager and that it is more coherent and, indeed, helpful to think of God as a social influencer whose power is a source of positive energy for the promotion of goodness.

2. Sterba's Argument from Evil

2.1. The Argument from Moral Evil

Sterba notes the widely-accepted view that Alvin Plantinga solved the so-called logical problem of evil by arguing, in response to John Mackie ([[1955] 1990), that even an omnipotent God would not have been able to create a world containing the good of human free will without the evil that human beings sometimes bring about while exercising their free will (Plantinga 1974b; see also Plantinga 1974a). However, Sterba questions whether the existence of a God of this kind "is compatible with the degree and amount of evil that actually exists in our world" (2019, p. 1). At first sight, one might question whether Sterba's argument is as obviously new as he suggests, since it appears to have much in common with William Rowe's so-called evidential argument from evil to the effect that "our experience and knowledge of the variety and profusion of suffering in our world" (Rowe [1979] 1990, p. 132) constitutes rational support for the claim that "[t]here exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" (Rowe [1979] 1990, p. 127). Sterba differs from Rowe, however, in suggesting that application of the Pauline Principle (so-called because it appears in Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 3:8; Sterba 2019, p. 49)) to the problem of evil yields the conclusion that Plantinga did not, after all, succeed in solving the logical problem of evil.

Sterba re-visits both the Free-Will Defense and what he calls the Greater Moral Good Defense and finds both wanting. He rejects the Free-Will Defense on the grounds that God's provision of human freedom cannot justify the quantity and intensity of evil that exists in our world and that Plantinga has failed to show that God's existence is compatible with some evil in the world, because the evil consequences of our free actions include horrendous evils (pp. 11–12). Sterba argues that human freedom includes the freedom not to suffer violations of significant freedoms, or rights, such as those that would be protected by a just and powerful political state, e.g., freedom from assault, and advances a version of what William Hasker terms "the problem of divine non-intervention" (Hasker 2004, p. 144). He argues that, although a Free-Will Defense might explain violations of trivial freedoms, such as the freedom not to have someone cut in front of us while we wait in line to see a movie, it does not explain why a good and omnipotent God does not intervene to prevent violations of fundamental human rights. Sterba cites as an example the case of Matthew Shepard who, in 1998, died after he was driven from a bar to a remote location where he was robbed, beaten, and tortured. In this case, why could God not have intervened by causing the car to have a flat tire before leaving the parking lot? (pp. 20–21) Only the assailants' freedom to carry out the final step of their plan, a freedom that they ought not to have had, would have been interfered with, while Shepard would have enjoyed the freedom not to be murdered, and, most probably, many other freedoms throughout his life (p. 21). Sterba argues that, since the world contains many such cases, it is clear that "God has not chosen to secure the freedoms of those who are morally entitled to those freedoms by restricting others from exercising freedoms that they are not morally entitled to exercise". As a consequence of this, "significant moral evil has resulted that could otherwise have been prevented" (p. 23). According to Sterba, Plantinga does not recognize that God could promote freedom not only by not interfering with free actions, but also by interfering with free actions to prevent horrendous evils that limit the freedom of others. An omniscient and all-powerful God would be aware of freely-made decisions to bring about horrendous evils and would have the power to intervene at the beginning of the causal processes to divert or stop them (p. 28). However, God has not done this. Therefore, Sterba suggests, if moral evil is compatible with the existence of an omniscient and all-powerful God, it must be explained not in terms of freedom but in terms of some other good or goods that may be obtained either in the present life or in an afterlife, i.e., in terms of a Greater Moral Good Defense, which, itself, requires a defense.

Sterba considers two further goods that might explain why moral evil is compatible with the existence of an omniscient and all-powerful God. He rejects the suggestion that

opportunities to choose good or evil provide occasions for soul-development, because the perpetrators of horrendous moral evils are provided with soul-making opportunities at the expense of their victims' soul-making prospects (pp. 35–36). Secondly, he argues that, for a victim of such evil, a beatific vision of God in an afterlife would not constitute adequate compensation for their loss of soul-making opportunities during this life, because the experiences of horrendous evil in this life and a beatific vision in an afterlife are unrelated. To suggest otherwise would be akin to awarding a prize to a runner who is prevented from competing in a race when a more appropriate response would be to offer an opportunity to compete in a similar race (p. 37). It might therefore be better to offer victims of horrendous moral evil "a second-inning afterlife where they would have the opportunity, though soul-making, to make themselves less unworthy for receiving a heavenly afterlife" (p. 42). However, second-inning afterlives could also include horrendous evils, leading to an infinite regress of n-inning afterlives (p. 43). Moreover, if the soul-making opportunities these afforded were, in effect, opportunities to begin life over again, the horrendous evils experienced in the previous life or lives would appear to be merely mistakes on God's part, since the victims would derive no benefit from them (pp. 43–44).

Sterba suggests, however, that the most significant objection to the claim that God permits evil and compensates for it later is derived from the Pauline Principle that it is never permissible to do evil that good may come of it, which constitutes "the central underlying element" (Sterba 2019, p. 2) of moral philosophers' discussions of the Doctrine of Double Effect. This recognizes that there are some situations in which an evil cannot be prevented and in which it is therefore permissible to do or permit a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater evil, provided that the greater evil is unintended. It is commonly illustrated by the hypothetical trolley cases constructed by Phillipa Foot (1967) and Judith Jarvis Thomson (1976). In Foot's version, the ethical dilemma is presented by a runaway trolley that will likely kill five innocent people on the track unless it is redirected to a second track on which only one innocent person will be killed (Foot 1967). It is arguably permissible to redirect the trolley because the death of one person on the second track is an unintended consequence of saving the lives of the five people on the first track.

Although it is generally agreed that exceptions may be made to the Pauline Principle—for example, when the evil in question is trivial or easily reparable, or when the evil is the only way to prevent much greater harm to innocent people—Sterba suggests that no exceptions are permissible for God, because evils of all kinds could be avoided by a God with unlimited power. He considers whether the Pauline Principle might require God to prevent only evils of the kind that are prohibited by a just and powerful political state—i.e., horrendous evils that result in the loss of victims' significant freedoms—meaning that God could permit the less harmful consequences of evil actions in order to provide opportunities for soul-making (pp. 52–53). However, Sterba suggests, although it is possible that God is already preventing the most horrendous evils, this "clearly is not the way we experience our world" (p. 63).

Sterba also suggests that, although it might be permissible for human beings to do or permit evil in order to prevent a greater evil, there is no exception to the Pauline Principle that permits doing or allowing evil in order to provide a new good. This, he argues, rules out the possibility that God permits horrendous evils in order to provide soul-making opportunities (pp. 56–58). It seems to me, however, that, if it is never acceptable to do or permit evil in order to provide a new good, this also rules out the possibility that a good and omnipotent God could allow even lesser evils in order to provide soul-making opportunities. Therefore, if we accept the Pauline Principle, Sterba's argument appears stronger than he claims it to be. Our experience of the world suggests that God is not preventing the most horrendous evils, but the Pauline Principle entails that a good and omnipotent God should not permit even limited evils in order to provide some greater good. On Sterba's view, then, there remains a logical contradiction between God's existence, the requirements of morality, and God's failure to prevent both the loss of significant freedoms or rights (p. 66) and the loss of freedoms or rights of a less significant kind.

2.2. Sterba's Responses to Three Possible Objections

Sterba considers three possible objections to his argument, as follows:

2.2.1. Skeptical Theism

The skeptical theist's defense is that we cannot know God's reasons' for permitting evil because human knowledge of the consequences of an action is so limited in comparison with divine knowledge. Sterba observes that this position has been advocated by several well-known philosophers of religion, but he responds to the version developed by Michael Bergmann in a number of papers (e.g., Bergmann 2009).

Sterba argues that, whatever God's reasons for permitting the horrendous evil consequences of an action might be, God could only be justified if God's victims or their representatives had given informed consent, and this is usually not the case. Sterba thinks that it is, however, questionable whether it would be possible to give informed consent in such circumstances, because the Pauline Principle should prevent God from permitting horrendous evils in order to bring about some greater good. Despite this, he notes, the Bible often portrays God permitting evil not in order to prevent a greater evil but to attain a greater good (p. 80). For example, in the book of *Genesis*, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, but he eventually becomes the chief administrator in Egypt. He is reconciled with his family and provides for them, thus enabling the survival of their descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel. Sterba suggests that God could have saved Jacob's sons and given them their mission without permitting the sale of Joseph into slavery and that history is full of examples of the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in which good consequences are difficult to discern (p. 82).

Sterba also considers whether the provision of an opportunity to attain an afterlife, to which we do not have a right, could be justified by depriving us of something to which we do have a right by permitting us to suffer the horrendous consequences of evil actions. He argues that human beings do have the ability to provide something to which someone does not have a right without depriving them of something to which they do have a right and this means that, if God is unable to do this, God is less powerful than human beings. It therefore follows that an all-powerful God should be able to provide us with opportunities for soul-making without permitting the horrendous consequences of evil actions, but God does not do this (pp. 82–88).

2.2.2. God Is Not a Moral Agent

Sterba then considers the claim of Brian Davies (in Davies 2006, 2011) that the problem of evil is not a serious problem for theists because God is not a moral agent who behaves well or badly. Davies acknowledges that God possesses the virtue of justice, which entails supplying creatures with what is owed to them, but this simply means that God sustains their existence. However, according to Davies, God also implants in all rational agents a law of nature that commands them to avoid inflicting horrendous avoidable harm on others, and Sterba objects that, since God is usually thought to be a rational agent, this must also apply to God. This means that God is, after all, a moral agent, and "one with the power and knowledge to surely get things right" (p. 117). However, Sterba suggests, the real problem is not that God is not subject to morality but that, even if God is not subject to morality, God nevertheless permits "the horrendous evil consequences of all the immoral actions in the world when he could easily have prevented them without either permitting a greater evil or failing to secure a greater good, which is far more than the evil that has been produced by all the great villains among us" (p. 117). I am not convinced that there are two distinct problems here, however. The real problem with Davies' position *is* his claim that God is not subject to morality, and it is because Davies thinks this that he sees no need to explain why God apparently permits preventable horrendous evils to occur.

Sterba argues that if, as Davies suggests, rational agents are moral agents and if God is a rational agent, then we might reasonably expect God to follow three Moral

Evil Prevention Requirements that are exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle. In summary, these are:

1. Prevent the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions when that can be easily done.
2. Do not permit the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in order to provide rational beings with goods that they would rather not need (e.g., receiving aid following an assault).
3. Do not permit the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in order to provide goods when this would violate a person's rights (e.g., permitting rape to provide an opportunity to offer comfort to the victim) when there are many unobjectionable ways to provide those goods (pp. 125–30, pp. 151–52).

Sterba argues that God might be justified in allowing limited evils. Therefore, for example, God might allow the would-be perpetrators of horrendous evil the freedom to plan their course of action and to take its initial steps. God might also be justified in refraining from intervention when the consequences of actions are not significantly evil. Additionally, in a situation in which we, ourselves, choose to intervene in order to prevent evil and are only partly successful, God could intervene in order to render the intervention completely successful. If we choose not to intervene in the expectation that God will do so, however, God might still intervene in order to prevent horrendous evil, but might be only partly successful. This would provide a constrained opportunity for soul-making, as some harm would be suffered and we would be responsible for it. However, Sterba observes that, despite these possibilities, the world still contains horrendous evils, in the light of which he concludes that a good and all-powerful God does not exist (132–33).

I suggested earlier that, if there are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle's prohibition of doing or permitting evil in order to provide a new good, this also rules out the possibility of permitting limited evil in order to provide the new good of soul-making opportunities. It could, however, be argued that there are, after all, exceptions to the Pauline Principle's prohibition of doing evil in order to provide a new good. For example, the pain of cosmetic dentistry might lead to the good of an enhanced appearance. However, if, as Sterba suggests, there are no exceptions for God to the Pauline Principle's prohibition of doing or permitting a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater evil, on the grounds that an omnipotent God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil, the same might apply to the Pauline Principle's prohibition of doing or permitting evil in order to provide the new good of soul-making. Even if we can find exceptions to this application of the Pauline Principle that might apply to human agents, perhaps an omnipotent God could provide the good of soul-making without permitting evils of any kind. Indeed, David Hume suggested that God might reasonably be expected to "exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found, and produce all good, without any preparation or long progress of cause and effects" (Hume [1779] 1980, p. 70). It is, admittedly, difficult to imagine how opportunities for soul-making could be logically disconnected from evils of some kind, but it might be possible to argue that God could have provided a pleasant afterlife without the need for even limited evils to provide opportunities for soul-making.

2.2.3. Divine Redemption

Thirdly, Sterba considers the objection that God's provision of redemption for sinners justifies permitting their sins. He argues that, for God, as for a just and powerful political state, although the redemption of wrongdoers is important, it should "not be as important as the task of preventing the inflicting of significant and especially horrendous harmful consequences of immoral actions in the first place" (p. 147). Focusing on the Christian tradition, Sterba suggests that it was not necessary for God to "suffer an ignominious death on a cross" (p. 149) for the purposes of redemption. A redeemer could be "more like Nelson Mandela, Dolores Huerta, or Mohandas Gandhi (without his assassination), each of whom in different ways opened up a path of redemption for wrongdoers in their societies" (p. 149). For God, however, the context would be one in which wrongdoing had already

been limited, because God would have prevented the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Again, Sterba concludes that, since the horrendous consequences of immoral actions could have been prevented and this has not occurred, this is logically incompatible with the existence of God (p. 150).

2.3. The Argument from Natural Evil

Since a just and powerful political state might be expected to prevent not only moral evil but also the horrendous consequences of natural evil, Sterba argues that a God who desires a special relationship with us should also be expected to prevent not only moral evil but also the horrendous consequences of natural evil.

Some examples of what others might regard as natural evils do not count as natural evils for Sterba, however. For example, Charles Darwin was disturbed by the behavior of ichneumon wasps, whose larvae consume their living caterpillar hosts, but Sterba suggests that the conflict between Ichneumonidae and their prey should not concern us because it has no effect on us. We should therefore allow them to work out their conflict on their own; it "does not seem to be one where we (or God) should be taking sides" (p. 158).

With respect to evils that he does regard as natural evils, however, Sterba argues again that constrained divine intervention would have been possible. In this scenario, God prevents only the worst natural evils in order to preserve opportunities for us to prevent lesser natural evils. If we fail to do so, God intervenes but is only partly successful. So, for example, if we fail to rescue deer from a forest fire, God sends rain to put out the fire, "but not before some of the deer have been painfully singed by the flames" (p. 163), and we are responsible for this.

Sterba suggests that God's interventions to prevent horrendous natural evils would have a law-like regularity, as would God's interventions to prevent horrendous moral evils (p. 166), which means that God would intervene in all relevantly similar cases. However, he argues, God evidently does not intervene, and the resulting horrendous natural evil is incompatible with the existence of a good God.

Sterba claims that the solutions to the problems of moral and natural evil are different, however, because our world is such that "it is not possible to avoid all significant natural evil" (p. 164). For example, in a flood, there is a conflict of interests between possible victims of the flood and scavengers who would feed on their dead bodies. Therefore, God is not morally required "to prevent all the significant or even horrendous evil consequences of natural evil in the world" (p. 164).

However, this argument surely does not follow. If we could reasonably expect God to be able to prevent both possible evils in trolley-type cases, on the grounds that an all-powerful God is not constrained by causality as we are (p. 127), why would it not also be possible for God to provide an alternative source of food for the scavengers? Sterba suggests that "miraculous interventions that would always keep the lion from eating the zebra or any other living being would change the lion into something else; it would not be consistent with the lion's nature" (p. 178). However, if, in a trolley case, God could, for example, intervene by causing a distraction so that the first person is not on the track when the trolley passes by, why could God not create lions who thrive on an exclusively herbivorous diet? Here, then, Sterba needlessly undermines his own argument, since he could have employed a stronger version of the argument in order to claim that a good and all-powerful God could have reduced, and possibly even prevented, not only moral evil but natural evil, too.

Furthermore, the formulation of Sterba's Natural Evil Prevention Requirements (pp. 165–66) suggests that his solutions to the problems of moral and natural evil are not, in fact, significantly different. The Natural Evil Prevention Requirements largely replicate the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements—except that there are three parallel sets of three: one set for the evil inflicted on rational beings, one for the evil inflicted on nonrational sentient beings, and one for the evil inflicted on nonsentient living beings. However, if caterpillars are—or, at least, might be—nonrational but sentient beings and

God permits the behavior of the Ichneumonidae, this appears to fall foul of Natural Evil Prevention Requirement IV, according to which God is expected to prevent the "significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on nonrational sentient beings . . . wherever the welfare of rational beings is not at stake and one can easily do so without causing greater or comparable harm to other nonrational sentient life" (p. 165). One cannot simply let God off the hook by claiming that the conflict between the Ichneumonidae and their prey has no effect upon us; indeed, this conflict seems to have had a significant effect upon Darwin.

The question of where we draw the line between rational and non-rational beings and between sentient and nonsentient beings may, of course, be disputed. Some animals exhibit a more highly developed capacity for rational thought than the average human infant, while plants react to the presence or absence of light and use a variety of methods to communicate with other living things. However, in discussions about the problem of evil, it is surely the capacity to suffer that is the relevant factor. Higher degrees of rationality and/or sentience might be associated with a wider variety of ways in which to suffer, but this does not render irrelevant the suffering of beings who have fewer ways in which to suffer.

3. The Fatal Flaw?

As we saw earlier, Sterba invites theists to find a fatal flaw in his argument (p. 191). I think that there are three possible flaws, although only the third might be regarded as fatal. The first is that, if there are no exceptions for God to the first application of the Pauline Principle—that it is never acceptable to do or permit a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater evil—on the grounds that God, unlike human beings, would be able to prevent both the lesser and the greater evil, this surely rules out the provision of soul-making, even if only lesser evils are permitted. The second is that, if there are no exceptions for God to the second application of the Pauline Principle—that it is never acceptable to do or permit evil in order to provide a new good—this also rules out the provision of soul-making, even if only lesser evils are permitted. In both cases, God would be able to provide the benefit attained by soul-making—a pleasant afterlife—without the need to permit even limited evils.

John Hick responds to Hume's suggestion that God should be able to "exterminate all ill . . . and produce all good, without any preparation or long progress of cause and effects" (Hume [1779] 1980, p. 70), however, by suggesting that, in such a world, it would not be possible to distinguish between right and wrong actions, because no wrong action could ever have bad effects (Hick 1985, pp. 324–26). However, Sterba could reply that the Pauline Principle pertains only to the kind of evils that would be prohibited by a just and powerful political state and that God could, therefore, permit lesser evils in order to provide opportunities for soul-making. This possibility was also anticipated by Hume, who suggests that we might reasonably expect God to intervene secretly in only a limited number of cases—for example, "[a] fleet whose purposes were salutary to society might always meet with a fair wind" (Hume [1779] 1980, p. 70)—in order to change the world for the better without making obvious modifications to the laws of nature. Hick's response is that "evils are exceptional only in relation to other evils which are routine" (Hick 1985, p. 327). Therefore, unless God were to eliminate all evils, there would always be some evils that were worse than others and that some would say should have been prevented. In Sterba's example, the suffering of the deer who are singed in the forest fire might be the worst form of suffering that could be experienced in the possible world that he envisages, but, in such a world, this might be regarded as a horrendous evil.

Hick does acknowledge, however, that our world contains "excessive and undeserved suffering", and resorts to "a frank appeal to the positive value of mystery" (p. 335). This is coupled with faith that evil "will in the end be defeated and made to serve God's good purposes" (p. 364). Sterba's argument has suggested, however, that we might have reason

to doubt that a God who could intervene to prevent horrendous evils but permits such extensive and intense suffering is a God in whom we should have faith.

Sterba's argument only works, however, if we continue to regard God as an all-powerful interventionist who is able to oversee every aspect of every situation, making slight adjustments to ensure an outcome that is at least mostly good. Sterba describes this as "constrained intervention" (p. 90), on the grounds that God need only intervene when necessary, but I would suggest that the constant monitoring and likely frequent interventions on behalf of every living thing that he proposes might more appropriately be attributed to a strongly interventionist concept of God. I would argue, however, that it is not necessary to define divinity in this way, and that this is the third and fatal flaw in Sterba's argument.

David Ray Griffin observes that many critics of theism say or imply that "in refuting the arguments for the existence of the God of traditional theism, they have established the probable truth of complete atheism" and ignore "less easily refutable ideas of divinity" (Griffin 2001, p. 165). In the final paragraph of his book, Sterba does consider whether his conclusion could be avoided by hypothesizing a more limited concept of God like that of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, but this possibility is quickly rejected on the grounds that such a God must be "either extremely immoral or extremely weak" (p. 192). God would be "more immoral than all of our historical villains taken together, because he would have permitted all the horrendous evil consequences of those villains when he could easily have prevented them without permitting a greater evil or failing to provide us some greater good" (p. 192). Alternatively, God would be less powerful than we are, because God would be incapable of preventing evil or providing goods without permitting us to suffer horrendous consequences of immoral actions, both of which we are only causally and only on some occasions unable to do (p. 192). In the next section, however, I will argue that a deity who is good and powerful in senses derived from Hartshorne's process or, as he prefers to call it, neoclassical theism (Hartshorne 1984, p. ix), might, indeed, represent the theist's best response to the problem of evil.

4. The Nature of Divine Power

Hartshorne argues that paradoxes are "signs that we are thinking badly" (Hartshorne 1948, p. 4) and suggests that omnipotence is one of six theological mistakes that give the word "God" a meaning that is found neither in sacred writings, such as the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, nor in religious piety (Hartshorne 1984, p. 1). To say that omnipotence is "the power to do anything that could be done" is to talk nonsense, because there could not be power of this kind; if God were to exercise such power, a person's action would be ultimately decided or performed by God (Hartshorne 1948, p. 134), and God would be ultimately responsible for a death caused by cancer (Hartshorne 1984, p. 3).

Hartshorne suggests, instead, that an adequate notion of cosmic power "is power to do for the cosmos . . . all desirable things that could be done and need be done by one universal or cosmic agent" (Hartshorne 1948, p. 134). This allows space for significant and genuine human freedom. Hartshorne suggests that cosmic power has not reduced freedom to a minimum in order to reduce the risk of evil consequences because "a situation in which practically no harm can be done is not necessarily a very desirable situation . . . If the risk or threat is slight, perhaps the opportunity or promise is equally slight" (p. 136). In order to experience "great joy" and "profound happiness", we must be able to experience intense emotions, but this also enables us to experience great evil. The ideal quantity of freedom is therefore a golden mean between "[a] too tame and harmless order and a too wild and dangerous . . . disorder" (p. 136), between the chance of good and the chance of evil. Hartshorne notes that, in the New Testament, the parental role provides an analogy. Wise parents do not determine everything for their children, which means that there is a risk of conflict. So "[l]ife simply is a process of decision making, which means that risk is inherent in life itself. Not even God could make it otherwise. *A world without risks is inconceivable*" (1984, p. 12).

However, God is also responsible for the cosmic order, which limits freedom and chance. Without laws of nature, there would be only "meaningless chaos" (p. 18). Additionally, although the world contains a multitude of decision-makers, God's existence "makes it possible for the innumerable decisions to add up to a coherent and basically good world where opportunities justify the risks" (p. 18). According to Hartshorne, we have to believe that our right actions will produce sufficient good to outweigh the evil produced by our wrong actions. Omnipotence does not guarantee the exact degree to which good will be victorious over evil, but risk has a limit; even bravery that ends in failure adds value to the universe (Hartshorne 2001, pp. 109–10).

Hartshorne admits that the divinely determined favorable ratio between risk and benefit is not an observable empirical fact but suggests that he has, nevertheless, formulated "an idea of adequate cosmic power that is apparently free from the absurdities that haunt traditional notions of omnipotence" (Hartshorne 1948, p. 138). However, unlike others who, as Mackie observes (Mackie [1955] 1990, p. 26), avoid the problem of evil by limiting God's power, Hartshorne continues to maintain that divine power is unlimited. He suggests that it is omnipotence as it has traditionally been defined that, in fact, limits God, because it denies that our world is one in which significant decisions are made and limits God's power to foster creativity in creatures (Hartshorne 1984, pp. 17–18). For Hartshorne, God's power "is absolutely maximal, the greatest possible" (Hartshorne 1948, p. 138). However, the greatest possible power is only one power among other powers. Thus, "God can do everything that a God can do" (p. 138), but this does not mean that God can do everything that can be done; rather, God can do everything that can be done by "a being with no possible superior" (p. 138).

For Hartshorne, then, God allows creaturely freedom but sets "appropriate limits to the self-determining of others, of the local agents" (p. 138). However, God is also "the absolute case of social influence" (p. 138). Indeed, a version of Sterba's just and powerful political state analogy might work better for Hartshorne than it does for Sterba because, for example, the state uses legislation and punishment to encourage its citizens not to murder each other, but does not intervene to prevent murder. For Hartshorne, God changes human minds by changing Godself; we then change in response to God (p. 139). Following Whitehead, Hartshorne calls this divine method of controlling the world "persuasion" and suggests that this is "one of the greatest of all metaphysical discoveries" (p. 142). God inspires us "with novel ideas for novel occasions" (p. 142). Hartshorne says that he learned to worship divine love, and that "God's power simply is the appeal of unsurpassable love" (Hartshorne 1984, p. 14). Therefore, we feel divine beauty and majesty and respond appropriately. As Whitehead suggested, it is divine beauty that leads the world, and this "beauty beyond all others is the beauty of love, that with which life has a meaning, without which it does not" (p. 14). For Hartshorne, then, "[t]he only livable doctrine of divine power is that it influences all that happens but determines nothing in its concrete particularity" (p. 25). We cannot know what God wills in detail, but we can "know the *general principle* of God's purpose. It is the beauty of the world (or the harmonious happiness of the creatures), a beauty of which every creature enjoys its own glimpses and to which it makes its unique contributions" (p. 25).

It is, however, questionable whether divine persuasion must be preceded by divine change. An idea similar to that of divine persuasion may be found in the work of Iris Murdoch. She argues that the Platonic Form of the Good, which has many attributes in common with God, possesses "magnetic" power (e.g., Murdoch 1992, pp. 24, 223, 442). For Murdoch, we contemplate the perfect Good by focusing on examples of imperfect goodness, and this reorientates our desires (Murdoch 1992, p. 487), which provides us with a source of spiritual energy (Murdoch 1992, p. 496). The Good itself does not change—although our understanding of it may do so. Hartshorne does, however, say that we must distinguish between "the eternal self-identity of God" from God's "successive states in time" (Hartshorne 2001, p. 110). The former is changeless, all-penetrating love, while the

latter describes states that change only in that each individual coming into existence has a value that is added to the value of God (Hartshorne 2001, p. 111).

Hasker notes that process theists "resist vigorously" the claim that God, on their view, is weak. Although God does not possess all power, God does have "the most power that any being could possibly have", and to regard this as weakness "is gravely to underestimate the ability of persuasive love to gain its ends, given sufficient time and patience" (Hasker 2004, p. 137). However, Hartshorne's claim that God ensures that the opportunities afforded by the nature of the world in which we live justify the risks associated with living in such a world appears to be a form of the Greater Moral Good Defense for which, as Hartshorne acknowledges, there is no evidence and which Sterba rejects. Hartshorne suggests that "the ancient defence, we are not wise like God and probably not in a position to second-guess divine decisions, becomes at least far stronger than it could be under the old idea of all-determining power" (1984, p. 24). However, this amounts to a form of skeptical theism, which Sterba also rejects.

I would suggest, however, that at least some of the elements of Hartshorne's position can be maintained without recourse to either a Greater Good Defense or a version of skeptical theism. Although Hartshorne argues that God limits our freedom in that the world operates in accordance with natural laws, and that God is love, a power which is able to exert a positive influence on human choices without determining our choices, he rejects the idea of God as "a conscious purposive being" (1984, p. 5). We might therefore hope that the chance of good outweighs the risk of evil and that the good brought about as a consequence of our right choices will outweigh the evil brought about as a consequence of our bad choices without claiming that the decisions of a conscious, purposive being will ensure this. Even if good does not, ultimately, outweigh evil—it is questionable, for example, whether bravery could be said to outweigh the evil that necessitates it—we could, at least, say that divine persuasion increases the quantity of goodness in the world so that the world contains more goodness than it would otherwise have done.

A further objection may be derived from Kenneth K. Pak's response to Griffin's process theodicy. Pak argues that a God with limited power cannot guarantee the meaningfulness of human life and is therefore not worthy of worship (Pak 2016, p. 163). As we saw above, however, Hartshorne says that it is unsurpassable divine love that is worthy of worship, and it is the power of this divine love which helps us to make life meaningful. For Hartshorne, "[t]he idea of God is the idea of a being that . . . is the seat of all value" (1984, p. 124) and, although we are often tempted to put ourselves in God's place, it is God who inspires the altruistic behavior that makes human life meaningful.

5. Conclusions: The Existence of a Good God Is Logically Possible

Sterba argues, then, on the basis of the Pauline Principle, that it is never right to do or permit evil that good may come, but that, for God, this applies only to evils of the kind that are prohibited by a just and powerful political state. This allows him to claim that a good and omnipotent God could legitimately permit limited moral and natural evils in order to provide soul-making opportunities, while monitoring the world closely and intervening to prevent horrendous evils. Sterba argues, however, that, since the world contains horrendous evils that violate significant freedoms, a good and omnipotent God cannot exist.

I have, however, argued that it is not necessary to accept the premise that God is able to intervene in order to limit or prevent evil, and that this is the fatal flaw in Sterba's argument. Following Hartshorne, I have suggested that God possesses the highest form of power that it is possible for God to have, a power that encompasses all things (Hartshorne 1984, p. 26). However, I have also argued that Hartshorne does not need to appeal to a form of the Greater Good Defense to support the belief that God ensures that the balance of good and evil is ultimately beneficial; as he himself says, only an omniscient person would be able to claim that this is an empirical fact (Hartshorne 1948, p. 138). Neither does he need to appeal to a form of skeptical theism to argue that, for all we know, God might be able to achieve

this. Rather, "God has power uniquely excellent in quality and scope" (Hartshorne 1984, p. 26), and this may be used for good in our world. Whether this should be regarded as an interpretation of divine omnipotence is a matter for debate; Hartshorne has significant reservations concerning the continued use of the term, due to its interpretation in the tradition (p. 26), and, more recently, Graham Oppy has suggested a distinction between a secular but incoherent idea of omnipotence, and a religious idea of more limited divine power (Oppy 2005, p. 82).

For many centuries, religious believers of various kinds have held that God is, in some sense, ultimately "in control" and can intervene to prevent or alleviate suffering. However, the extent and degree of suffering experienced by so many sentient beings suggest that God, at least for the most part, cannot, or does not, prevent or alleviate extreme suffering, whatever argument we might construct in response to the problem of evil. Indeed, the followers of God have often been, and often continue to be, perpetrators of some of the world's greatest evils (Bowker 2018). However, the followers of God have also been, and continue to be, responsible for some of the world's greatest good (see Bowker 2015), and it could be argued that it is the power that drives the positive actions of religious believers that should be regarded as genuinely divine power, and that this is an important resource for humankind.

This raises the question of how we can know that such a power exists. In response, we might note that the problem of evil is an argument about coherence. Sterba argues that the concept of a God who is both good and omnipotent is incoherent, and therefore that the existence of such a God is logically impossible. I have argued that the concept of a God who is both good and powerful is not incoherent, because divine goodness is the source of divine power, and that the existence of such a God is therefore logically conceivable. It is, however, possible to construct positive arguments for the existence of God construed in this way. Although the limitations of space do not permit elaboration here, Hartshorne formulated six theistic proofs (Hartshorne 1983, pp. 275–97), and, elsewhere (Burns 2018), I have developed a combined ontological, moral, and cosmological argument for a similar concept of divinity that is, in part, derived from Iris Murdoch's reading of Hartshorne's ontological argument.

We must also consider whether divine power conceived in this way is religiously adequate. Hartshorne argues that "lives can be changed" by showing how some of the traditional problems of belief such as the problem of evil can be solved or alleviated (Hartshorne 1984, p. x). This proposed solution is no mere theoretical argument; it has an important practical application, because it shows that divinity is a valuable resource upon which we can draw and that enables us to contribute to the prevention and alleviation of suffering. The power of God is a source of meaning, purpose, values, and strength and can be manifested, if sometimes imperfectly, in the scriptures of the world's religions, in religious practices such as rituals, liturgies, prayer, meditation, and music, and in human kindness both within and beyond formal communities of believers.

Sterba is partly right, then; the problem of evil suggests that a God who continually monitors and adjusts the world's regular processes probably does not exist. However, I would suggest that he is not right about the nature of divine power. The answer to Sterba's question, therefore, is that the existence of a good God *is* logically possible, but the God in question is not a God of the kind that Sterba describes. The poem "Footprints in the Sand" (authorship and date of publication disputed) is often used as a metaphor for the way in which God is said to "carry" believers during difficult times in their lives, but it could be interpreted to illustrate divine power construed along the lines suggested by Hartshorne; the power of divine persuasion cannot always prevent suffering, but it can motivate those who are able to offer strength and support to those who suffer.

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Essay

Compassionate Deism and the Grammar of Permission

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Abstract: Both theism and atheism assume that God permits evil. But neither theism nor atheism make this assumption with due attention to what I call, following Wittgenstein, the grammar of the term 'permission'. When this grammar is examined, it becomes clear that this assumption cannot avoid the atheistic force of the argument from evil. To rescue belief in God, I propose the adoption of a position I call compassionate deism. This position is a combination of Christian theism and traditional deism. The combination is produced by making a slight deistic modification of Christian theism in the direction of non-intervention, and a slight modification of deism in the direction of compassion. Such a compassionate deism denies the common assumption made by both Christian theism and atheism, namely, that God permits evil, and thus avoids the theistic denial of the reality of evil and the atheist's denial of God's goodness.

Keywords: intervention; permission; deism; compassion; Wittgenstein; grammar

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> Who finds the money when you pay the rent? Did you think that money was heaven sent?
>
> Paul McCartney

In this paper, I will present and defend a version of deism that can be fruitfully combined with traditional Christian theism to produce a compelling response to the problem of evil. I call this combination "compassionate deism".[1] This combination is possible because both agree with a basic belief that God exists as the creator of the heavens and the earth. As such, both deny atheism's rejection of the belief that such a creator God exists.

My project of combining deism and Christian theism may seem doomed from the start, since Christianity is a theistic religion and by most accounts, deism is not a form of theism. Indeed, there is sense to the claim that, by definition, deism is a form of a-theism. But it does not follow that the combination is a form of atheism.

Because there are different concepts of God, there can be a variety of "atheisms". For example, the denial of a particular theistic concept of God (say in pantheism) might count as atheism relative to other theistic concepts (say panentheism) and the denial of any form of theism (say in Buddhism) might seem to entail that every non-theistic concept of God is a form of atheism. Of course, a non-theistic concept of God is, by definition, a-theistic but it may not be atheistic, at least if its theology affirms the existence of a divine reality of some sort. That is, if God's existence is affirmed in a-theistic or, or non-theistic theologies, these theologies cannot count as forms of atheism. While in general, I take the term 'atheism' to mean, *tout court*, a denial of the existence of God, however conceived, in the discussion of

[1] For an extensive discussion of various forms of deism, see (Taylor 1989). Taylor connects the emergence of modern forms of deism to the 18th-century adoption of a picture of nature that is mechanistic (in the sense that it works independently of God's will) and yet teleological (in the sense that it is designed by God to work toward the good without his interference). This picture of nature, along with the creation of self-sufficient reason designed into human beings, allowed God to withdraw from both natural events and from human affairs and to assume a disengaged point of view on the world analogous to the picture of the disengaged spectator of empiricism at the center of the epistemic standpoint of the emerging sciences. (p. 248ff).

the problem of evil that is to follow, I will take 'atheism' to have a narrower meaning. In this discussion, 'atheism' is synonymous with an anti-theistic denial that a creator God exists.

As I understand it, neither deism nor Christian theism are forms of atheism in this narrow sense. That is, both agree that God exists as the creator of the universe. They join hands as opponents to atheism in this narrow sense. To make this combination feasible, we will need to make some changes in both. We will need to make a slight deistic modification of Christian theism in the direction of non-intervention, and a slight modification of deism in the direction of compassion. If this can be done, if these two views join forces, this alliance can mount a strong counter argument to atheism's assault on their common belief in the existence of a creator God by defeating atheism's strongest ally, the problem of evil.

Attempts to combine these two forms of belief in God, Christian theism, and deism, have had a respectable history, figuring prominently, for example, in the development of the American Republic. It is widely known that Thomas Jefferson was one of many in this colonial period that embraced a form of Christian (theistic) deism.

The core beliefs of these forms of Christian Deism are (1) that there is a God who freely created the universe and (2) that God designed the workings of his creation to run independently of his permission. Christian theism, of course, has no problem in embracing the first of these core beliefs. However, it may find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the deistic idea that what happens in the realm of human affairs and in nature does not require God's permission. To counter this, I will try to present deism in a way that may overcome this difficulty.

To use a favorite metaphor of deism, in one respect God's relation to the world he creates is analogous to the relation of a watch maker who designs the hands of the clock to move independently of the permission of the maker.[2] Because the movement of the hands is independent of the maker's permission, it makes no sense to suppose that she must constantly intervene in the mechanism to keep it going. The clock, we might say, is designed to have a life of its own. Of course, the maker can intervene to stop the clock, or to get it running again if it breaks, or to keep it wound up. But certainly, it makes no sense to think that the clock needs the maker's continued intervention into the mechanism to continue renewing her permission to keep it ticking. Although we do not need to accept this metaphor without qualification, as I do not, it captures the core of the deistic doctrine that the workings of the creation are designed to function independently of God's permission. If God does not permit evil, it evil does not require his permission, the door is closed to the possibility of intervening in the creation to renew, withdraw, suspend, or deny his "evil permits". When divine permission is denied, so are divine interventions that would continue or cancel these permits.

We are ready now to turn to my project of formulating a response to the problem of evil that the alliance of deism and Christian theism, what I call compassionate deism, makes possible.

As I understand it, the problem of evil finally reduces to the problem of divine permission.[3] The problem is easy to state. As omnipotent, it seems that God has the power to intervene in gratuitous suffering, and given that he is perfectly good, perfectly loving, he

[2] The Newtonian universe was often compared to a clock because of the regularity of its mechanical operations. Deists seized on this image to formulate the argument from design, namely that the clockwork order of the universe implied an intelligent designer, i.e., God the cosmic clockmaker are by their nature violations of the laws of nature, laws whose regularity and universality were confirmed by Newtonian mechanics, they cannot be credited. Providential intervention in human history similarly interfered with the clocklike workings of the universe and impiously implied the shoddy workmanship of the original design. Unlike the God of Scripture, the deist God was remarkably distant; after designing his clock, he simply wound it up and let it run. At the same time, his benevolence was evidenced by the astounding precision and beauty of his workmanship. Indeed, part of the attraction of deism lay in its foisting a sort of cosmic optimism. A rational and benevolent deity would only design what Voltaire lampooned as "the best of all possible worlds," and all earthly injustice and suffering was either merely apparent or would be rectified in the hereafter. True deist piety was moral behavior in keeping with the Golden Rule of benevolence" Staloff, Darren. "Deism and the Founding of the United States". National Humanities Center. http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/deism (accessed on 5 March 2021).

[3] What gives rise to my focus on the concept of permission is the fact that it figures so prominently in the latest work of the guest editor of this special issue of Religions. I am referring to James Sterba's book (Sterba 2019). Over and over in this book, Sterba poses the problem of evil in the way so many others have done, namely, in terms of God's permission. He asks: "Could it be that God's permitting all the evil in our world is justified by the opportunity for soul-making it provides?" (p. 35). His answer is "No".

should want to intervene and stop such suffering; yet gratuitous suffering persists. Since evil persists, it seems that the fact that God does not, or does not always, intervene to stop such events and actions demands an explanation and justification from the Christian theist. Why is it that God does not always intervene to stop evil, especially given the presumption that a good God should want to stop evil? The absence of such a justification seems to leave no other option than the abandonment of a belief in God.

Indeed, many have found atheism the only intelligible response to the problem of evil. Again, the atheist assumes that God permits the existence of gratuitous suffering but that he does not, when he could, intervene to deny this permission. And further, the atheist argues that because God does not act to intervene, when he could, in even the most horrendous suffering he permits, he cannot be good, and hence cannot exist.

Christian theism is quick to come to the rescue of its deepest conviction that a good God does exist even in the face of evil. On this view, God could intervene in gratuitous suffering and sometimes he does and sometimes he does not. But when he does not intervene, he has a good reason for this, even if we do not know what this reason is. In a recent debate about this matter, James Sterba has represented atheism and William Hasker Christian theism.[4]

The response of the type that Hasker proposes has been well discussed in the literature of skeptical theism. The argument of skeptical theism is that God has good moral reasons for permitting suffering that he could stop or prevent. And for the Christian theist, God sometimes intervenes and stops or prevents suffering. Sometimes he does not. But in all cases, suffering would not exist at all without God's permission. When God does not stop or prevent suffering, this is because he has good moral reasons for not intervening. In those cases where he refuses to intervene, this calls for a justification. To retain his goodness, God must have morally good reasons for permitting evil, even if the limited perspective of the human keeps these reasons hidden.

The atheistic response has something important in common with the Christian theistic response to the problem of evil. Like its theistic counterpart, atheism assumes that the existence of evil is the result of divine permission. As the atheist argues, if God exists and if the evil that exists is the result of God's permission, God's goodness is destroyed. It is simply not intelligible to think that a good God could permit evil. Like the atheist, the Christian theist does not deny the existence of evil, and strikingly does not deny that it is the result of God's permission. It holds, however, that God's goodness is preserved because his non-intervention is justified and hence somehow testifies to it.

The Christian theistic response to evil is less than convincing. The Christian theist asks us to believe that God permits suffering and sometimes intervenes to stop or prevent it, which implies he has this power of intervention, and sometimes he does not exercise it. However, when God does not intervene, he has a good reason not to, even though we cannot conceive of what this reason might be.

What is missing from these two positions is any further comment on the implication of the obvious fact that both the atheist and the Christian theist agree that evil is the result of divine permission. What we need here is a clear concept of permission. This is necessary in order to understand the relation between permission and intervention and to understand why these related concepts have no place in deism.

Following Wittgenstein, I note that it is a mistake to think that the word 'permission' (or 'permit') has just one common meaning. Rather, he invites us to see that any term, for example, the term 'permission', and hence the concept it names, can be used in many different ways. As Wittgenstein would say, the meaning of a term is a function of the logic of its use, what he calls its grammar. Violating the grammar of a term produces nonsense. In paying attention to the grammar or the logic of the term 'permission', we will notice that it is related to other terms and concepts in the various of its use. In tracking usage,

[4] See the June 2020 Issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Here you find a symposium on Sterba's book and a significant criticism of it by William Hasker.

we notice, for example, that 'permission' is often conceptually related to the concepts of 'allowing' and 'granting" both of which are actions that can be undertaken or refused. We also notice that it makes no sense to use 'permission' in cases where there is no conceptual room for the possibility of denial or refusal. For example, it makes no sense to say that triangles are permitted to have only three sides, just as it is nonsense for a judge to grant a person permission to be a married bachelor.

Some sensible uses of the term 'permission' have their home in games, board and field where rules determine what is and is not permitted. Moving the knight diagonally is not permitted, not allowed in chess. Rules govern when we are permitted to touch the soccer ball and when we are not permitted to do so. It makes no sense, however, to say that playing the game with a soccer ball is permitted or not permitted. That is, in some cases the term 'permission' has no application. This is because, as a matter of grammar in Wittgenstein's sense, some things that occur are neither permitted or not permitted because they are not subject to being granted, denied, or withdrawn. For example, if we return to the deist metaphor, the hands of a clock are neither permitted nor not permitted to move. The term 'permission' has no application here; the hands of the clock just move independently of permission.

Tracking the use of "permission", we see that it is grammatically connected to concepts like granting, denying, reversing and revoking. What cannot be granted or denied cannot count as being permitted. Given this grammar, are atheists and Christian theists alike justified in applying the term 'permission' as an apt characterization of God's relation to evil?

I propose that the usual affirmative responses to these questions in both Christian theism and atheism reveal their inattention to the grammar of 'permission'. And this is where they both go astray. Atheism does not question the theistic view that evil is a matter of divine permission, but thinks this permission is inconsistent with God's goodness and reason enough to reject God's existence. Theists defend God's permission of evil as a sign of God's goodness since this permission advances soul-making.[5]

I think the virtue of deism is that it does not accord the term 'permission' any place in its understanding of the origins of evil. This is what I might say is the deist's attunement to the grammar of 'permission'. What deism sees as well is that there is an important grammatical relation between 'permission' and 'intervention'. Clearly the doctrine of non-intervention must exclude divine permission. Because the concept of permission is grammatically wedded to the concepts of withdrawal and denial, it is clear that only permissions granted can be revoked.

Given that permission opens the door to intervention, we must ask why God sometimes does not enter this door. That is, why does God not intervene when the door to this is wide open? Permits can be revoked only if they have been granted. Here is where the atheist's charge that the failure of God to enter the door his permission opens is a failure sufficient to destroy God's goodness.[6] Certainly, this charge against God's goodness is difficult, if not impossible, as I think it is, to answer. Should not a good God want to enter the door to intervention and to revoke the evil his permission produced? After all, does God not have the power and authority to do this? (Keep in mind that God's omnipotent power is limited to what is logically consistent and to what is not grammatical nonsense. For example, it is not logically possible for God to make it rain and not rain at the same time in the same place and it is grammatical nonsense to suppose that a disembodied God can ride a bicycle.)

[5] Even though soul-making was a central feature of John Hick's famous theodicy, even he recognized its limits. He says: "Let the hypothesis of a divine purpose of soul-making be adopted, and let it be further granted that an environment which is to serve this purpose cannot be a permanent hedonistic paradise but must offer to man real tasks, challenges, and problems. Still the question must be asked: Need the world contain the more extreme and crushing evils with it in fact contains? (Hick 1966, p. 365). Commenting on this William Wainwright says, "Although God may have good reasons for permitting these evils, we have little idea of what they may be. Many of us will wonder whether anyone *could* have morally sufficient reasons for permitting evils of this kind". (Wainwright 1999, p. 96).

[6] William Rowe takes up the issue that worries James Serba regarding the God's permitting horrendous evil. As Rowe puts it, no goods we know of justify God's permitting such gratuitous evil. See for example, (Rowe 1979, pp. 335–41).

Given these difficulties, is there a way for the theist to save God's goodness? I think not, at least so long as the theist agrees with the atheist that evil is permitted by God. But the deist may offer the theist a way out. The first step is to deny that evil is permitted by God. This closes the door to intervention. The second step is to adopt the deist account of the origin of evil. This account denies that evil is permitted by God. Rather, than locate the origin of evil in God's permission, the deist locates it in the design of the creation.

One might think that this is exactly the position some theists (non-Deists) have adopted. I am thinking here of theists who adopt the freewill defense. But, as I will explain, this defense falls short of abandoning the concept of permission in the radical way that deism abandons it. This failure leaves intact the grammatical confusion that supposing that God permits evil entails.

In the freewill defense, even as discussed by its modern-day father, Plantinga, God is said to allow or permit moral evil. Moral evil produces suffering that is the result of free action. God is not permitted to intervene in free actions without denying freedom, even the freedom to sin. This is clear since such an intervention would make any free choice that humans make depend ultimately on what God decides. If it is ultimately God who decides to allow an act or not, this turns the free act of an agent into an illusion. If God intervenes in free choices in this way, it turns out that God is the hidden secret agent behind every human supposedly free act (Malebranche might like this).[7]

Claiming that God permits evil insofar as he permits humans to act freely, runs counter to the claim that God designed the human in such a way as to make freedom intrinsic to his design. Of course, he could have created a different kind of world in which human beings do not have this intrinsic feature. But it is testimony to God's goodness that he thought it wiser to create a kind of world with the human capacity for freedom designed into it, than to create a world without such a design. For God to be able to intervene in human choices implies that he has the power to overturn his decision to make the kind of world he thought was the best kind of world to create. In his wisdom, he must have thought that a world with the capacity for freedom is a better kind of world than one without it, even though this decision implied the logical impossibility of his intervention in the workings of human affairs.

The freewill defense of God's existence in the face of evil, seems to hold out the possibility that the origin of moral evil is located in God's design and not in his permission. If the source of evil lies in God's design of the human and not in God's permission, it seems that the workings of this capacity are independent of the permission of its maker just as the turning of the hands of the clock are independent of the permission of its maker. Once the creation is finished, once the capacity for freedom is installed, it continues to govern human action and needs no further permission to do so. So, in this defense, it follows that it is not a flaw in God's omnipotence to claim that he cannot stop moral evil. This is so, since he would have to deprive the human of the very design that he intended it to have, which he thought unwise even in the face of knowing full well that human beings vested with this capacity would be ipso facto vested with the capacity for moral evil. As omnipotent, God can do all things that are possible, but he could not design the world in such a way that the capacity for freedom could avoid the horrible consequences of its misuse.

Given that the actual world is the kind of world in which the capacity for human freedom is intrinsic, we can be grateful to God for designing the world in just the way he did. Our gratitude is warranted if we think a world in which freedom is possible is a better kind of world than a world in which it is not possible. God's design is testimony to his goodness. If we welcome the capacity of freedom as a good, it is a short step to seeing that God's intervention to stop moral evil would entail a denial of God's creative and good design.

[7] Sterba denies that the free-will defense can justify God's permission the amount of evil and especially the horrendous consequences of free action. He argues that the free-will Defense cannot justify " … God's permission of significant and especially horrendous consequences of wrongful actions." p. 6.

The free-will defense thus edges close to deism in defending the thesis that God's intervention in human freedom is necessarily an impossibility since it would violate the nature of the human. If the human is endowed with the capacity of freedom it is grammatical nonsense to think of this in terms of permission. In this light, it is puzzling to me why expressions of this defense continue to imagine that it has provided a justification for why God permits suffering. Perhaps it is time to stop thinking of evil as a function of God's permission. And perhaps this would take us a little closer to embracing the deistic thesis of divine non-intervention in human decisions.

What turns this deism toward compassionate deism is the realization that God's design is founded on his love for his creatures. He does not abandon his creation in the way the clock maker may abandon his clock, no matter how beautiful or dare I say striking.[8] This is not so in God's case. He does not abandon the world that he created and evaluated as good nor abandon the human which he evaluated as very good. He continues to observe its workings with an interest that is foreign to the clock maker. This is so because the world God designed does not have a fixed cycle of the sort that clocks embody, finite and infinitely repeating. The historical world that God designed is open ended with no fixed outcome. It will have its surprises, its joys and tragedies, its disappointments, its successes, all of which keep God's interest in us from waning and keeps him near. Knowing that God takes a deep and abiding interest in our lives, that he has hopes for each of us, and that he suffers with us, is testimony to his goodness. Realizing this can generate, indeed, ought to generate, gratitude. And it may open us to seeing that God's decision to give us the gift of a life that is independent of his will was motivated by nothing less than his eternal compassion.

Things are a bit different when it comes to natural evil. As it is defined, natural evil consists of the horrendous suffering that is not caused by human decisions. This leaves two possibilities, it is permitted by God or it is a result of chance or necessity.

Clearly, it would not seem to be in the interest of those who believe in the existence of God to hold that God's permission is the cause of such suffering. Yet versions of skeptical theism accept the first of the two possibilities. This is a way of accepting that God is the cause of natural evil by engaging in a sleight of hand. In order to accept God as the cause of natural evil, we must transcend the human limited point of view and consider how things are seen from God's unlimited point of view. The deception in this reasoning comes in holding that God has a good reason for inflicting what appears to humans as gratuitous suffering even though that reason escapes our understanding. The willful deception here comes in trying to rescue God's goodness by turning evil into a disguised good. What appears to the human as something bad, from the divine point of view, is really in the long run something good.

If we are unable to accept this move of skeptical theism, that is, if we are unable to deny the real existence of natural evil by turning it into a good, we must consider the second possibility. This is the possibility that natural evil really exists, and that it is not permitted by God nor can it be stopped by the exercise of his omnipotence. When divine agency is eliminated as the cause of natural evil, how do we explain it? This brings us to the second possibility: it is a result of chance or necessity.

We come then to two versions of the deistic doctrine of non-interference, one based on necessity and the other on chance. As I understand it, the Enlightenment version of deistic non-intervention is based on necessity. A dominant metaphor of nature in this age is the machine. The idea was that God made the clock of nature, wound it up, and set it into motion without any further help from him. As I have discussed, a clock operates on the

[8] The eminent chemist and devout Christian credited with the modern experimental method, Robert Boyle (1627–1691), insisted that the world was not like a puppet that required the constant movement of a puppet-master; it was like a grand clock, in which the parts are so skillfully contrived that, once they are set in motion by their maker, they proceed according to his ingenious design. For Boyle, a world so excellently wrought that it could operate without continual divine impetus was superior to one that required constant intervention. As historian of science and religion Brooke (2002, p. 165) has put it, "That the machinery necessary for life had been packed into the minutest mite was, for Boyle, more astounding evidence for a deity than the larger machinery of the macrocosm". The Divine Clockmaker—Melissa Cain Travis.

basis of the determined necessity of cause and effect and hence runs independently from its maker. Man-made machines are subject to breakdowns, but on the view of Enlightenment deism the God-made machine of nature cannot break down. Hence, in the machine of nature there is never a need for God to step in and fix it. He can only shut it down. As well, there is no real place for chance in the workings of the machine of nature.

This older view of nature, this Newtonian view, was overturned in modern physics. Here a new element was introduced, the element of chance, of indeterminacy, something once called luck. But even the introduction of chance into the natural order, does not create an opening for God's intervention. Just as God cannot intervene with a free decision without making it no longer a free decision, God cannot intervene in an event that happens by chance without making this event no longer a matter of chance. If such an event were the result of Gods permission, God could stop it by canceling his permission. And of course, many try to claim that what appears to be a chance event is actually an event of causal necessity, the cause of which is not known. That is, some think that such "chance" events are not really chance events but disguised determined events. What makes such events look like they are produced by chance is our ignorance of the cause that determined it. This seems like a sleight of hand similar to the move made in skeptical theism.

But suppose that God designed chance into the workings of nature. If chance is built into the natural order, it would make no sense to think that it is a matter of divine permission. It is simply nonsense to claim that one and the same event can be a matter of chance and at the same time be a matter of permission.

But this is where things get difficult for a belief in God. As the atheist notes, believing that God designed chance into the natural world, undermines, and ultimately destroys God's goodness. As the atheist is well aware, chance events, storms, diseases, and so forth, often lead to great suffering. So, why would a good God include chance into his design of nature? Moreover, why would God design some events to be out of his omnipotent control? Chance events, by definition, would be out of God's control. But this would be inconsistent with God's omnipotence. Hence, if God exists, there are no chance events. So, as the atheist reasons that what appears to be a chance natural event is actually a function of God's act of permission. But this just makes things all the worse for the belief in God, since God's permission of destructive storms and catastrophic diseases is all the more at odds with God's goodness.

Perhaps compassionate deism can offer a plausible defense for why God saw fit to design chance into the natural world. This would be a defense that parallels the defense of God's decision to design the capacity of freedom into the human reality. Recall, that defense is the claim that a world with freedom, despite the fact that it can be the cause of suffering, is a better kind of world than a world without it. We ask then whether a world where chance is a reality and as such often leads to suffering is a better kind of world than one without it. Perhaps this decision does not violate God's goodness but testifies to it.

Such a defense is exactly the strategy adopted by what is called the virtue defense. According to this defense, it was God's goodness that guided him to design a natural world with chance built into it. Where is the goodness in this? Perhaps it dawns when we see that exposure to chance invites the development of the virtues that God wanted his creatures to embrace on their own, virtues God himself embodies, virtues such as love and compassion and generosity. Perhaps there is no better way to invite this moral development than to place human beings in a natural world that is exposed to chance. So, even though this exposure leads to natural evil, in a parallel way that the capacity for freedom leads to moral evil, God's design testifies to his goodness.

In wanting his creatures to develop these virtues on their own, we see a critical difference between Enlightenment versions of the deistic doctrine of non-interference and the version I am calling compassionate deism. The clock maker/winder leaves his machine to run by itself. In the vision of compassionate deism, the world that is open to chance is not simply abandoned to chance. Indeed, is not abandoned at all. In compassionate deism, God is with us as an empathetic observer and as infinitely interested in the development

of our lives, especially in how our lives turn out. He is open to being surprised and to being disappointed. Motivated by love, God shares in our joys and in our suffering as well. Indeed, he suffers with us.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

The key concepts at play in my defense of deism have been permission, intervention, and design. We can think of deism as a response to the atheist's argument from evil. According to this argument, if God permits evil, as he obviously does, then he should be able to intervene in human affairs and in nature to withdraw this permission and thus override it and stop or prevent it, which he obviously does not do. That he does not so intervene seems to be a devastating assault on his goodness and a coup de gras to God's existence.

To mount a defense against the atheist's argument, deism denies its fundamental premise, namely, that God permits evil. To make this denial plausible, the deist focuses on the concept of design. This concept is grammatically independent from permission and intervention. This is shown in the grammatical oddity of saying, for example, the engineer permits or somehow allows the bridge she builds to have the design she gives it. It just makes no sense to say that the engineer permits or allows his suspension bridge to be a suspension bridge. And after the bridge is finished, the basic design cannot be removed without demolition and redesign.

Of course, the model for design drawn from engineering, cannot be applied to God's creation, *mutatus mutandis*. The engineer makes things out of existing material, God creates ex nihilo. The deist contends that God designed contingency into creation rather than permitting it. That is, God does not permit or allow the creation to be subject to contingency, he designed this openness into it. We might say, God's design created the ontological possibility of possibility, or, if you will, he brought the reality of possibility into being what it is, which is quite different than permitting it. As God designed it, there is no way to avoid the possibility of moral and natural catastrophe apart from the radical intervention of demolition and redesign.

God's decision to design the creation as he did create it, that is, as open to moral and natural catastrophe, does not imply that he permits this openness and could intervene to suspend or cancel this design at will. Indeed, quite the contrary. Of course, he could have created a different kind of world, and it is always open to him to bring the world he did create to an end and to bring another one forth. Short of this, his design cannot be revoked.

The deist insists that God cannot intervene in the workings of human affairs and the workings of nature; these workings must be left to be just what they were designed to be. What turns deism into compassionate deism is its understanding of the design of God's creation as testimony to his love and goodness. Compassionate deism takes this design to reveal God's careful interest in making just that kind of world that is a fit place for his creatures to develop a life of their own. It is God's love that sets this worldly table and his goodness that invites us to it.

There is, however, no coercion involved in this invitation; it is an invitation, not a summons. It is an invitation that is designed into the creation itself. As such, this invitation is there for anyone and everyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear. Because the compassionate deist insists that the acceptance or rejection of this invitation to develop a life of one's own must be free and unencumbered, it is necessary that God keep an appropriate non-intervening distance from the exercise of this freedom.

I started this essay with a quotation of the Beetles' song, "Lady Madonna". So, it is fitting to end with another, "Let it Be". This song, written by John and Paul, names deeply etched in the Christian myth, calls on Mother Mary (the Mother of God?) in times of trouble to whisper these words of comfort, "let it be". How would the deist interpret these words? This depends on how the words "let" and "it" are used.

If we think that God permits evil, this is just to say that he sometimes simply "lets it be." And for the believer, this permission is OK since it is allowed for a greater good. But

to read "let it be" this way amounts to embracing the very premise of atheism (that God permits evil), the premise that deism is trying to deny.

There is a way to interpret "let it be" that does not read it as a matter of granting permission. Suppose that the "it" in "let it be" refers to design. As such, there is no place in "it" for permission and hence no room for intervention. It makes no sense to say that a wheel is permitted to be round; its being round is a feature of its design and fixes what it is. Similarly, the design of God's creation, like the design of the engineer's bridge, is not a matter of permission and intervention. The completed bridge, like the completed creation, opens to good and bad consequences. The engineer of the bridge cannot control these consequences, just as God cannot control how the capacity for freedom will be used. In both cases, these consequences, good and bad, are independent of the permission of the designer. The designer must live with the consequences of his design. God's design makes nature and human affairs to be just what they are, and as such he cannot revoke them short of destroying what they are.

So perhaps in times of trouble, if God comes to us and whispers in our ears "let it be", he may be trying to tell us to stop wishing for a different kind of world, a world with a different design.[9] Of course, God wants us to keep trying to reduce the amount of evil in this world, since it is clearly far from being the best possible world. Perhaps, however, he just wants to tell us that evil in this world is a consequence of design, not a consequence of permission. As well, he might want us to see clearly that the design of this world reflects his wisdom and goodness. So, his whisper might well be a call to embrace this world as the best possible *kind of world*, at least for his purpose. And what might his purpose be? I cannot think of a purpose more noble than giving his creatures a place that invites them to develop a life of their own. Surely God knew that this world, the world he created, is just the kind of world that is fit for human flourishing and thus a perfect kind of place where his creatures can, on their own, find a life of their own.

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[9] I think here of the final days of Antony Flew, the famous atheist who had a kind of death bead conversion from atheism to deism. Antony Flew was famously converted from atheism to deism. Before his late conversion, he based his atheism on the failure of theism to offer a rational justification for God's right to **allow** evil and suffering despite his ability to **intervene** and stop it. In his last book, Professor Flew announced his conversion from atheism to deism. He says: "To the surprise of all concerned, I announced at the start that I now accept the existence of a God. What might have been an intense exchange of opposing views ended up as a joint exploration of the developments in modern science that seemed to point to a higher Intelligence" (p. 79). And further, "I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe's intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source" (p. 92). See (Flew and Varghese 2008). The Problem of evil was at the heart of Flew's conversion to deism. In an interview with Gary Habermas, Flew as asked: "In your view, then, God hasn't done anything about evil. Flew answers: "No, not at all, other than producing a lot of it" See "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas" (2004). It is not clear what Flew means by saying that God produces a lot of evil. Does he mean that even though God cannot stop it, he nevertheless causes it? This would seem to question God's goodness, or at least call for a justification for this production. In this respect, Flew seems to waiver on his deistic commitment to the importance of non-interference not to mention the commitment of the compassionate desist to divine goodness. My own conversion to compassionate deism was not a conversion from atheism but a conversion from theism.

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On the Significance of Assumptions about Divine Goodness and Divine Ontology for 'Logical' Arguments from Evil

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Abstract: Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically* Possible? (2019) draws attention to the importance of ethical assumptions in 'logical' arguments from evil (LAfEs) to the effect that the existence of (certain types) of evil is incompatible with the existence of a God who is all-powerful and morally perfect. I argue, first, that such arguments are likely to succeed only when 'normatively relativized'—that is, when based on assumptions about divine goodness that may be subject to deep disagreement. I then argue that these arguments for atheism are also, and more fundamentally, conditioned by assumptions about the ontology of the divine. I criticise Sterba's consideration of the implications for his own novel LAfE of the possibility that God is not a moral agent, arguing that Sterba fails to recognize the radical nature of this claim. I argue that, if we accept the 'classical theist' account that Brian Davies provides (interpreting Aquinas), then God does not count as 'an' agent at all, and the usual contemporary formulation of 'the problem of evil' falls away. I conclude by noting that the question of the logical compatibility of evil's existence with divine goodness is settled in the affirmative by classical theism by appeal to its doctrine that evil is always the privation in something that exists of the good that ought to be.

Keywords: problem of evil; evil as privation of the good; existence of God; God's goodness; concepts of God; classical theism

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1. Introduction: Mackie's 'Logical' Argument from Evil

James Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically* Possible? (2019) draws attention to the importance of ethical assumptions about what divine goodness entails in any plausible argument for the conclusion that the existence of evil (or, of certain types and/or degrees of evil) is incompatible with the existence of a theist God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good. Taking God's providence over creation to be analogous to the care an ideally just state takes of its citizens, Sterba argues that such a God would need to meet a set of 'evil prevention' moral requirements which, given the facts about horrendous evils experienced in history, have (he maintains) evidently not been met. We may thus draw the conclusion, Sterba argues, that no such all-powerful and perfectly good God exists.

J. L. Mackie's 'Evil and Omnipotence' (Mackie 1955) is widely taken as making the opening moves in the contemporary debate about 'the problem of evil.' However, it needs to be acknowledged, I believe, that this debate is, historically speaking, a relatively parochial one conducted by philosophers in the Anglophone analytic tradition. In particular, as I shall argue in what follows, the contemporary debate amongst analytic philosophers is limited by key assumptions, not only about divine goodness but also, even more fundamentally, about divine ontology.

Mackie argued that 'the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are [logically] incompatible' and the argument as he presented it has become

known as a 'logical' argument from evil (LAfE).[1] Mackie clearly acknowledged, however, that these propositions do not, purely by themselves, entail a contradiction. To arrive at a contradiction certain 'additional principles' are needed—and these crucially include the assumption that 'a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can' (Mackie 1955, p. 201). But that is, of course, an ethical assumption—or, at least, it becomes an ethical assumption if the 'thing' concerned is understood to be a morally responsible personal agent.

It was thus clear from the start of this contemporary debate on 'the problem of evil' that judgments about what divine goodness requires were essentially implicated in any argument for the incompatibility of God's existence with the existence of (certain kinds of) evil. The fact that this is so is reinforced by the strategy pursued by philosophers in response to Mackie's LAfE. For, that strategy—and I am speaking here at the level of broad overview—was to deny the ethical assumption required to produce Mackie's contradiction by holding that a perfectly good agent may have a morally adequate reason for permitting, or even directly causing, evil. Divine goodness, it may be argued, does not require eliminating evil whenever one can, since sometimes evil may be necessary, either as a means for achieving an outweighing 'higher' good or avoiding a worse evil, or as an unavoidable side-effect of bringing about and sustaining some significantly outweighing good.

Now, it is true that a pertinent doubt arises from the thought that morally adequate reasons for permitting or causing evil arise for us typically from our human limitations in knowledge and power, and so would not apply to omnipotent and omniscient God. Defenders of the coherence of theism sought to assuage that doubt, however, by arguing that even omnipotent God is subject to logical limitations, so that morally adequate reasons could arise for God to permit evils of a kind which were logically implicated in outweighing higher goods. Speculative theodicies were then produced to show how specific impressively important goods might indeed be logically unobtainable without permitting certain kinds of evil.

Thus, for example—to continue my 'broad overview' approach—it may be argued that evil is logically unavoidable if significant moral freedom is to be exercised, and those further important goods achieved (such as the good of inter-personal loving relationships) which presuppose the exercise of significant moral freedom. A world with significantly morally free beings (arguably) needs to be a world where natural law operates consistently and without constant supernatural intervention, and suffering by sentient beings ('natural' evil) will thus be an unavoidable feature. As well, free beings will use their freedom to make morally wrong choices which cause them and others harm ('moral' evils). Besides, having to cope with evil promotes the development of various important virtues (courage, sympathy) which would otherwise not emerge. Accordingly, it may be argued that, for all we know, omnipotent God could have morally adequate reasons to permit evils (both 'moral' and 'natural') based on logical limitations on his power—and this is all we need to rebut Mackie's LAfE. Finally, if appeal is made to the (plausible) existence of evils which seem not to be clearly 'covered' by any speculative theodicy, a 'sceptical theist' move may then be made by arguing that God's logical-limitation-grounded reasons for allowing evils may extend beyond our ability to discern, not simply what they are (for who would dare claim to know that?), but even what they could, for all we know, possibly be. Given *some* success in making intelligible the existence of some kinds of evils in a world created by a

[1] The use of this terminology signifies a contrast between 'logical' arguments from evil, which purport to show that theist acceptance of both the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect God and the existence of evil would be irrational in the strong sense that it would amount to accepting a contradiction, and 'evidential' arguments from evil which claim to show only that the existence of evil makes it (highly) improbable that theist belief is untrue. Rowe (1979) is the *locus classicus* for an 'evidential' version of an argument from evil, although Rowe's argument nevertheless does still claim a logical incompatibility between certain kinds of pointless or gratuitous evil and a really existent all-powerful and morally perfect personal creator. Rowe's argument overall is 'evidential,' however, since it claims only that, given all our evidence, it is (highly) probable that there are many instances of gratuitous evils that are needed neither for an otherwise unobtainable greater good, nor to avoid otherwise inevitable more serious evil. Rowe's (1979) paper has a feature which is seldom remarked on, but is salient for my argument here: Rowe makes it clear at the outset that his argument, if it succeeds, gives good reason for atheism only relative to the ontological assumption that God is a personal being, and that God's omnipotence and goodness are to be understood as attributes of a supreme personal agent. As one who had studied the work of theologian Paul Tillich, Rowe was well aware that this ontological assumption is contestable–a point which I will myself reiterate in what follows.

perfectly good omnipotent creator, it may be urged that we may be satisfied that there's no overall incompatibility with God's existence generated by the existence of *any* evils, since we may consistently believe that God *has* morally adequate reason for allowing even those that are egregiously inexplicable from our own perspective—it is just that that adequate reason is quite beyond our imagining. Of course, these responses to Mackie's argument are open to contestation and further debate: my focus in this paper, however, is not on the detailed dialectic but on certain features of the framework within which it has been conducted.

2. Normatively Relativized' 'Logical' Arguments from Evil

We may observe, then, that unless one has some grip on what divine perfect goodness would imply for a world that is the creation of an all-powerful and all-good creator, there is no prospect of arguing that some features of the world of our experience do not fit with its status as such a creation. And one can have such a grip *only by taking a stance on the normative ethics of divine goodness*. Thus, questions about what ethical principles would apply to the creator if the creator is understood to be an all-powerful moral agent have understandably been at the heart of debate about Mackie's LAfE, as I have outlined in Section 1.

A point of the first importance now emerges: differences and disagreements about what the normative ethics of divine goodness actually are will potentially produce differences and disagreements over whether some actual feature of the world of our experience (such as the existence of certain types of evil, and the lack of clearly disambiguating evidence of God's caring presence) is or is not consistent with its being the creation of an omnipotent and perfectly good creator. Sterba bases his version of a LAfE on some quite specific claims about the moral principles a perfectly good agent would adhere to—principles suggested by Sterba's original use of a 'just state' analogy.[2] Objectors might thus reply by disputing whether adherence to these, or to some of these, principles does indeed characterize divine goodness.[3] And it might ensue—whether in this particular case, or more generally with other disputes over what ethical principles characterize the goodness of that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought—that, from our necessarily limited perspective, we find it moot, or a matter of 'deep' disagreement, whether or not some ethical principle that would seem to have been violated by an omnipotent agent that permits actual evils of a certain specific kind is, or is not, essential to perfect divine goodness.

When such deep disagreement does ensue, we will get what Ken Perszyk and I have called a 'normatively relativized logical argument from evil' (NRLAfE) (Bishop and Perszyk 2011). That is to say, it may be evident that, *if* one endorses such-and-such an ethical principle as essential to divine goodness, then certain actual evils logically could not have occurred had the world's creator been an all-powerful and morally perfectly good intentional agent, yet no such incompatibility obtains if that principle is held not to be entailed by divine goodness. If, furthermore, the ethical principle in question is the subject of a deep disagreement, then one party may have a successful deductive argument from the existence of the evils in question to the non-existence of a perfectly good omnipotent personal creator, while the other party may be logically consistent in accepting that such a creator exists despite agreeing that the world does contain those very same evils.

As I have emphasized in Section 1, it was evident from the start of the contemporary debate that any LAfE must make ethical assumptions about what divine goodness entails. In that sense, one might say, any such argument might be described as 'normatively relativized.' What Perszyk and I meant to draw attention to, however, is the contestability of claims about what divine goodness entails, with the result that a claim that a certain evil

[2] The analogy between justice in the state and justice in the individual soul is, of course, as old as Plato's *Republic*: its application to God understood as an individual personal agent seems novel, however–certainly so far as the analytic philosophers' debate since Mackie is concerned.

[3] For example, Bruce Reichenbach argues that it is doubtful whether Sterba's 'Natural Evil Prevention Requirements' IV and VII (see Sterba 2019, pp. 184–85) 'can be used to identify and qualify God's moral obligations with regard to preventing natural evil among all living beings' (Reichenbach 2021, p. 13).

or kind of evils logically could not obtain in the presence of divine goodness if divine power could have prevented it might stand only relative to a particular normative stance. Such a NRLAfE then justifies rejecting the existence of an omnipotent perfectly good personal creator only for those who find it reasonable to take that particular normative stance, where the context may be one of deep, irresolvable, disagreement in which an opposed normative stance cannot be shown to be unreasonable. Then, the argument in question does not merely rest essentially on ethical assumptions—it rests on assumptions over which there is disagreement, and potentially irresolvable disagreement. It may thus be that the closest an attempted 'logical' argument from evil gets to its goal is to succeed only relative to accepting a certain contestable normative stance (that is, that a successful LAfE would inevitably be a NRLAfE).

3. Ivan Karamazov's 'Rebellion': A Key Example

In case my key claim in Section 2 seems unduly abstract, it will be useful to give examples of 'logical' arguments from evil that are relativized to a contestable normative stance. One example may be drawn from Ivan Karamazov's 'rebellion' in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan relates harrowing tales of the abuse and torture of children, including one example of a child, beaten, birched and kicked by her own parents, who smear her face with her excrement and shut her up in the outdoor privy, where she 'beats her little aching chest in that vile place, in the dark and cold, with her tiny fist and weeps searing, unresentful and gentle tears to "dear, kind God" to protect her.' (Dostoevsky 1958, vol. I, p. 283) Finally, Ivan asks his brother, Alyosha, a novice monk:

> . . . imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but to do that it is absolutely necessary . . . to torture to death only one tiny creature, the little girl who beat her breast with her little fist, and to found the edifice on her unavenged tears—would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? (*op. cit.*, p. 287)

Ivan's question, which expects—and in the novel's narrative does indeed receive—the answer 'no,' envisages a normatively relativized 'logical' argument from evil. Relative to a stance that holds that any agent could not be morally perfect if he could have prevented, but, for whatever reason, did not prevent that little girl's torture, the fact that she was tortured shows that, if the creator exists as an all-powerful agent, that creator logically cannot possess perfect goodness. But that normative stance can be contested. Analytic philosophers who defend theism are inclined to view such an argument as naively reliant on tugging at heartstrings. If, as Ivan envisages, the overall happy destiny of humanity really was at stake, would not a God with an eye on the overall goals of creation need to steel himself against compassionately intervening to prevent or cut short the child's sufferings? As speculative theodicy suggests, for all we know, it may be necessary for achieving creation's ultimate purposes to allow even the torture of children in order to preserve morally significant free will, to secure the historical order as a 'vale of soul-making,' and to achieve further essential goods whose very existence—or, at least, whose logical connexion with such horrifying evils—is necessarily beyond our ken.

The normative stance to which the LAfE suggested by Ivan's question is relativized is thus contestable: though there is a strong moral obligation on agents able to prevent the torture of children to do so, it may be held that this is not an absolutely uniform obligation on all moral agents, but might be overridden in God's case by a yet higher moral obligation unique to God's role as creator. Yet there may be occasion for deep disagreement here. Maybe it is reasonable to hold—as Ivan's question prompts us to imagine—that an all-powerful agent deliberating over creating a natural Universe and finding that achieving certain higher goods would require standing by while even one child was tortured to death would, if perfectly virtuous, regretfully choose to create a 'safer' and less ambitious Universe, or even decide not to create at all. Yet regarding such an outcome as a failure of divine courage may also seem reasonable: what's the use of a God who balks at carrying

out his key role as creator or settles for a creation in which the highest forms of good cannot emerge? Thus, deep disagreement about what divine goodness requires might yield, on one side of that disagreement, a NRLAfE: someone who is convinced that a perfectly good God could not have any reason for refraining from exercising his power to stop the most harrowing kinds of evils, such as the torture of children, will rightly find the actual existence of those evils logically inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful agent who is also perfectly morally good.[4]

4. Assumptions about Divine Goodness

Such a strong conviction that some evils are so bad that there could not be any morally valid reason for allowing (let alone sustaining) them, no matter what 'higher good' was at stake, may be seen as a protest against the generally consequentialist ethical approach of much speculative theodicy. It often seems to be assumed that the normative ethics of divine goodness are straightforwardly consequentialist—that is, that the logical necessity for evils of certain kinds if certain important goods are to obtain is by itself enough to reconcile the existence of those evils with an omnipotent agent's perfect goodness. Yet theist ethics have typically rejected the general principle that 'the end justifies the means,' preferring Kant's categorical imperative (in one of its formulations) that we should never treat humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself. And Sterba emphasizes what he calls the 'Pauline Principle' that 'we should never do evil that good may come of it,' which, as he observes, 'seems to be in direct conflict with God's permitting evil and making up for it later' (Sterba 2019, p. 49).

It might be argued, of course, that a baldly consequentialist normative ethics *does* apply to the unique case of the creator, even if a suitably action-guiding ethics for finite agents like ourselves requires respecting the Pauline Principle and Kant's formula of humanity as an end in itself.[5] Nevertheless, thinking of God as a supremely good personal agent, and reflecting on what is held to be revealed about God's goodness in the Abrahamic religious traditions, it must surely seem that the Creator would not be concerned solely with *an overall* ultimate good outcome, but also with the care of each and every one of his creatures. Marilyn Adams argues that God's perfect goodness makes him *good to* every created person, including those implicated in 'horrendous evils,' which are, on the face of it, so severe as to render their lives not worth living (see Adams 1999, pp. 20–22, 26, 31). Accordingly, the need to allow such evils for the sake of outweighing goods does not *by itself* vindicate God's perfect goodness; God will also ensure that participants in horrors—perpetrators as well as victims—are eventually brought into the joy of eternal relationship with him (see Adams 1999, pp. 49–55 and chp. 8). Adams here places the emphasis of a theist response to a 'horrendous-evils-based' LAfE on the resources that God has to deal with evil, rather than on speculatively justifying God's permitting evils in the first place—although she certainly does not deny God's ultimate responsibility for all the evil that blights the creation. On her account, then, even the worst horrors are consistent with the existence of a personal God who is both all-powerful and morally perfect, provided the overall context is one where all victims are immeasurably recompensed and all perpetrators of horrors eventually reconciled in the ultimate bliss of eternal communion with the God of love.

[4] I have previously argued (Bishop 1993) that a personal creator might find what 'he' needs to do as architect of a universe capable of achieving the highest goods in conflict with what his goodness would require when he actually implements his plan, since that would demand, often enough, a compassionate limitation on what he could actively sustain, as, for example, the torturer's capacity to inflict suffering and the victim's capacity to experience the agony. I suggested then, in effect, that this dilemma makes the role of fully virtuous personal sustaining creator of the Universe necessarily unfillable. Then, as now (as will become apparent in what follows), I did not take that conclusion to entail atheism.

[5] The 'Pauline Principle,' which emerges from a dialectically complicated passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Romans 3: pp. 5–8), seems wholly focussed on how we humans should behave–namely, that we should not deliberately sin in order to bring about the great good of God's showing his goodness and mercy by forgiving and saving us. (The Christian idea that the restoration of human nature in Christ is such a boon that Adam's fault in necessitating so great a salvation is actually a 'happy' one is evidently morally tricky territory, liable to give rise to just such a misunderstanding as Paul here tries to counter.) In any case, Sterba recognizes that the Pauline Principle as he formulates it admits of exceptions, but argues that it has certain 'exceptionless minimal components' which God should have respected, yet given the actual facts evidently has not (see Sterba 2019, chp. 4, and p. 190).

May we appeal, as Sterba may suggest, to the 'exceptionless minimal components' of the 'Pauline Principle' to rule out God's possibly 'making up later' for horrors in the way that Adams, speaking as a Christian philosophical theologian, maintains he will? Adams would, I believe, regard such a reply as completely underestimating the vastness of the love of God, and its incommensurably outweighing even the worst horrors of human history. Philosophers might, however, raise objections to the view, essential to Adams' account, that mortal human history is not all there is for individual personal existence—objections, that is, to the assumption that there can be a meaningful post-mortem existence in which important developments can take place amongst persons, including reconciliation between evil-doers and God, between the perpetrators of horrors and their victims, and between those who have suffered evil and the God who let them suffer. Those objections will include concerns about whether the conditions for diachronic personal identity with historical persons could be satisfied in such an 'after-life,' whether never-ending existence as a finite person would eventually be inescapably tedious, and whether human mortal history would be rendered less significant, even otiose, as a mere preliminary to the 'real thing.'

If all those concerns could be met, a further question to which Perszyk and I have drawn attention still needs considering: could a God who first allows people to suffer horrors and then ultimately brings them into eternal relationship with him have acted so as to form the best kind of overall inter-personal relationship with those persons? We have envisaged a NRALfE according to which, granted a certain stance in relationship ethics, an omnipotent person who presides over the whole suffering-and-redemption scenario as described by Adams would fall short of perfect goodness in relationship with others (Bishop and Perszyk 2011). Adams would reject our intuition that God would not be placing himself in right relationship with created persons if he acted in relation to participants in horrors as she thinks he does—after all, this is a 'logical' argument from evil which is *relativized* to moral assumptions about which deep disagreement is possible. Nevertheless, Adams has agreed that the issue is an important one, needing more exploration.[6]

5. Assumptions about Divine Ontology

'Logical' arguments from evil in the 'Mackie tradition' are limited, then, by their dependence on ethical assumptions, about which there may be deep disagreements, so that it may turn out that the most compelling versions of the charge that certain evils are inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful and morally perfect God are convincing relative only to a specific ethical stance which others may reasonably reject. But these arguments are subject to a further, more fundamental, limitation. This further limitation is the ontological assumption that, if God exists, then God is—at the level of how reality is, fundamentally and ultimately—a personal intentional agent whose agency is all-powerful and whose goodness is personal, moral, goodness. Thus, for example, Sterba's 'Moral Evil' and 'Natural Evil Prevention Requirements' apply to God only if God is a moral agent, morally responsible for his actions in creating and within creation. Sterba's own LAfE, then, fails if God is not a moral agent. Now, Sterba is well aware of this limitation, devoting his Chapter 6 to the question 'What if God is not a moral agent?', and I'll now consider how Sterba deals with that question.

[6] Adams writes as follows:

> Even if God was within divine rights in permitting or producing [horrors], there is the leftover question of whether and/or how God means to be good to us after the worst has already happened. John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have pressed a still deeper question: whether a God who set us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this has exhibited perfectly loving relationality toward us. . . . [They] raise the morally prior question of whether [such] a God . . . is trustworthy, whether God's track record in putting us in harm's way and not rescuing us takes God out of the category of people to whom it is reasonable to entrust oneself as to a parent or intimate friend. Such questions take us to the heart of relationship ethics, to the ethics of abandonment and betrayal, forgiveness and reconciliation. (Adams 2017, p. 25)

Given her last sentence here, Adams may have been envisaging that perfectly loving relationship between God and horror-participants might be achieved when, in response to God's love, *they forgive God* for setting up a world in which horrors are possible and allowing them to become embroiled in them.

I have already noted that God might be a moral agent, and yet—given God's unique situation as a supreme individual being on which all other beings depend for their existence—actions may be permissible for him which would be impermissible for any finite, created, agent. Making allowances for God's unique moral situation should not be allowed to go too far, however. For example, it might be suggested that, as our maker, God is within his moral rights in treating us in any way he wishes.[7] On that view God's goodness as an all-powerful supreme agent would be straightforwardly compatible with the existence of any variety and amount of evil. However, God's goodness would then be rendered unintelligible as such from a human perspective, and worship could only be submission to God's power and not praise for God's goodness.[8]

No, God as a moral agent may be justified in allowing preventable evils up to a certain point, but—as is a key theme in Sterba's argument—God must surely, if perfectly virtuous, keep matters in proportion and not remain aloof in situations where, for example, respecting the significant moral freedom of a genocidal tyrant will result in extinguishing the moral freedom of millions. Human history features events of just that kind, however, which may thus plausibly be regarded as showing that, if a supremely powerful moral agent does exist, he has not respected any such principle of proportionality. An LAfE based on that observation may, however, be, at best, a normatively relativized one of the kind to which I've already drawn attention—decisive only for those who take a certain normative stance on one side of a potentially deep disagreement about what divine goodness entails.

Marilyn Adams notes that her 'favourite five' scholastics (Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham) 'were unanimous that God is too big to be networked to us by rights and obligations' (Adams 2013, p. 22). She herself endorses that view, yet retains a conviction that God is a personal agent whose 'morality' is similar to the honour code that bound a feudal lord to his serfs and vassals. It's unclear why being honour-bound would not be a matter of having duties (namely, those duties proper to one's privileged position); but, in any case, even if God's goodness should not be understood in terms of God's duties to creatures, God's goodness surely would still pertain to the way God relates to his creatures. In that case the concern raised by Perszyk and myself (mentioned above in Section 4) will still arise even if Adams is right in holding that God is not subject to moral obligations. That concern (as argued) is the source of another potential LAfE which goes so far as to concede the reality of an unlimited post-mortem existence for human persons. Once again, though, that argument is a normatively relativized one—yet none the less decisive for those for whom the normative stance invoked is a compelling one.

Could it be, though, *that God is not a moral agent at all*—not merely a moral agent whose special position makes him subject to morality in a unique way? Sterba attributes the claim that God is not a moral agent to Brian Davies, or, more precisely, to Davies as interpreting Thomas Aquinas (Davies 2011). Sterba's main argument in response is that if God is a rational agent, then the moral law for all rational agents, which itself arises from God's goodness, must apply to God himself (see Sterba 2019, p. 116). This reply seems cogent: if God is a (personal) rational agent, then God surely has to be also a moral agent. Sterba argues further, however, that, even if it is conceded that God somehow escapes being a moral agent, then, if God is the agent who creates the world, God still remains causally responsible for 'far more evil than that [which] has been produced by all the great villains among us' (Sterba 2019, p. 117)—and that surely is a serious obstacle to ascribing worship-worthy goodness to God.

[7] There are scriptural verses which compare God to a potter and his creatures to the clay: for example, Jeremiah 18: 2–6, Isaiah 64: 8 and Romans 9: 20–23. If these verses are read through the lens of a metaphysics which takes God to be a moral agent (which, in the light of what I shall argue below, they need not be), morality as it applies to God imposes no constraints and thus appears a sham.

[8] John Stuart Mill's response to the imagined circumstance of falling under the total control of a supreme being seems apt–though one suspects that Mill's self-assurance owes something to his conviction that no such circumstance could possibly obtain:

> Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go. (Mill 1964, p. 43)

6. Divine Agency, Divine Simplicity, and Analogous Predication

Sterba seems to have missed, however, the radical nature of the claim that God is not a moral agent. This 'Davies/Aquinas claim' is not that God *is* a rational agent, only just not a moral one (Sterba is surely correct to find *that* proposal unstable); rather the claim is that God is not a moral agent, *because God is not 'an' agent at all—nor, indeed, any kind of 'being amongst beings.'* According to this claim, then, God's power is not an individual agent's power, neither is God's goodness an individual agent's virtue. Thus, if—as 'Mackie-tradition' LAfEs claim—certain actual evils would not have existed had a supreme all-powerful and perfectly virtuous individual also existed, there is no implication that *God* does not exist, since the existence of God is not a matter of the existence of such an individual.

Davies has drawn attention to the importance of recognizing two opposing ways of interpreting the theism of the Abrahamic religious traditions, which he has called *classical theism* and *theistic personalism*.[9] Theistic personalism is familiar from most contemporary discussion of theism in analytic philosophy; it holds that God's existence is the existence of a supernatural, immaterial, person with the omni-properties ('the personal omniGod'). However, according to the classical theism of Aquinas, for example (and, for example, Maimonides in the Jewish tradition, and Ibn Sina in the Islamic), though personal language is revealingly used in conveying truths about God in scripture, and properly used in addressing God in prayer and worship, when faith seeks understanding it recognizes that God's reality is *not* that of a supreme individual person or mind like a human person or mind only vastly greater. As source and ultimate end of all that exists, God's reality absolutely transcends the reality of any particular being or entity amongst other beings or entities. God is not 'a' thing, 'a' substance, or 'a' being at all—not because God is unreal, but precisely because God's reality is complete reality ('pure act' to use one of Aquinas's descriptions). God may be said to be 'no-thing,' yet this emphatically does not entail being nothing in the sense of not-being. To the contrary, God's reality is so great—to recall Anselm (of course, another classical theist)—that nothing with greater reality could even be conceived.

We may conclude, then, that if Sterba's LAfE succeeds in showing that there is no personal omniGod, it will nevertheless fail to support atheism if a classical theist divine ontology is correct. This is an important limitation—and one which Sterba comes close to recognizing when he acknowledges the objection that the natural law grounded in God's goodness may not apply to God because 'natural law only applies to beings in virtue of their belonging to a certain kind or kinds, and God does not belong to any kind of being, and so natural law does not belong to him' (Sterba 2019, endnote 9, p. 137). This claim that God does not belong to any kind of being is a consequence of the teaching that God is 'simple,' in the sense that there is no 'composition' in God. This teaching is central to classical theism: in particular, with reference to the Aristotelian metaphysics it deploys, God lacks the 'composition' of essence and existence. Creatures exist only because God 'composes' each individual's existence with the essence of the kind of creature that they are. But God, who is absolutely *a se* ('from himself'), does not depend on anything else to give him existence, and is thus necessarily not an instantiation of any kind of thing (*a fortiori*, then, God is not an individual person or mind, however supreme and exalted).

But Sterba dismisses the claim that God does not belong to any kind of being: 'Nevertheless,' Sterba writes, 'God is said to be rational, and it is in virtue of his being rational that the same (moral) natural law applies to God as to ourselves' (*ibid.*). Classical theists will indeed agree that 'God is said to be rational'—and they will speak of God as knowing and willing—but they will understand these ways of speaking as an *analogous extension* from the human personal context in which they are at home and where their meaning is understood. They will not accept that this language is transparent to an underlying metaphysics of God as 'a' human-like (though supremely exalted) rational being with

[9] For Davies' outline of these different interpretative approaches, see (Davies 2004, chp. 1).

human-like (though infallible) knowledge and a human-like (though always finally unimpeded) will. On a classical theist view, God may be said, and said truly, to be rational, and we understand what this means on the basis of our understanding what it is for us to be rational; yet we cannot comprehend what it positively amounts to, in reality, for God to be rational. Our comprehension is limited to the negative recognition that divine rationality (and knowledge, and will) are not just further instances, possessed by a supreme being and appropriately 'extended', of these properties as possessed by finite humans. Thus, classical theists block the very inference Sterba makes: though we may truly say that God is rational, the moral law grounded in God's goodness which applies to all rational beings does *not* apply to God *as to* one rational being amongst all others. That God is rational involves an *analogous predication*, which has readily intelligible consequences—in particular, it excludes the possibility that the divine purposes in creation could be at odds with one another (we may be sure, for instance, that God does not hate anything that he has made). However, *what it is* in divine reality that makes it true that God may be said to be rational is beyond our full comprehension, though we may clearly understand that the truth-maker for this claim is *not* the existence of a supreme individual personal being possessing the property of rationality.

7. The 'Classical' Alternative to 'Personal-omniGod Theism'

Sterba has not, then, closed off a 'classical theist' reply to his LAfE. It might be that God is not a moral agent because God is not a rational agent at all, even though God may rightly be said to be rational by an analogous predication. Admittedly, this shortcoming is not much of a handicap in the contemporary analytic philosophers' debate, since classical theism—with its doctrine of divine simplicity—is widely rejected by analytic philosophers as unintelligible or absurd.[10] Furthermore, some philosophers expert in mediaeval philosophy maintain that classical theism—in the normative sense of the authentically transmitted tradition—is not the non-personalist 'classical theism' defined by Davies, but, rather, the personal-omniGod theism familiar from the 'analytic' debate.[11] Still, within the context of the 'standard' assumption that God is (or is, near enough) the personal-omniGod,[12] Sterba's argument poses a significant challenge. As I have suggested above, Sterba's argument gives decisive grounds for personal-omniGod-atheism to those who endorse the argument's normative assumptions. At the same time, however, there may be good prospects for personal-omniGod theists to defend the coherence of their worldview by rejecting or suitably amending those assumptions. Arguably, the underlying ethical debate here is not rationally resolvable, so that neither side can claim that its position is 'the' only rational stance to take. Unless one thinks that there can in principle be a completed rationally grounded normative ethics, it must be allowed that such an inherent evaluative rational impasse is possible—and then it is a matter for judgment whether impasses of this kind do indeed make an appearance in normative-assumption-based arguments from evil.

Those who *do* find a logical argument from evil compelling (because they are committed to the values that, according to that argument, render an all-powerful agent morally flawed for permitting certain actual evils or kinds of evil) need not rationally commit themselves to atheism if they can endorse a 'non-personalist' understanding of theism, such as is provided, according to Davies and others, by classical theism with its key doctrine

[10] See, for example, (Plantinga 1980; Hasker 2016).

[11] This is true, for example, of both Marilyn Adams and Eleonore Stump. Adams, speaking of the scholastics as recognizing what she calls 'the Metaphysical Size Gap' expresses what she takes their view to be thus: 'God as immeasurably excellent is in a different ontological category from creatures, and yet is still a "personal" agent who acts by thought and will to do one thing rather than another in the created order' (Adams 2013, p. 22). And Stump (2014) claims that, for Aquinas, God is both *esse* (being itself) and *id quod est* ('that which is,' an individual being, who acts by thought and will). Stump compares this apparent inconsistency with contemporary physical theories which hold (also apparently inconsistently) that light is both a wave and a stream of particles.

[12] I add 'or near enough' here just to acknowledge that there are several lively debates about how to fill out the paradigmatic prevailing 'personalist' account of divine metaphysics–for example, about the nature and limits of omnipotence, the scope of omniscience, and the implications of omnibenevolence for omnipotence. The boundaries of the 'personal omniGod' paradigm may thus not be entirely clear.

of divine simplicity.[13] The possibility that Sterba dismisses, then, may be of considerable intellectual and existential importance to many people.[14]

Analytic philosophers' tendency to reject as incoherent the idea that God is not 'a' personal being, nor, indeed, 'a' being of any kind, might be seen as a refusal to allow that ultimate reality could be 'incomprehensible' in the sense that it transcends all the categories limited human minds have available for comprehending anything.[15] But what could justify such a refusal? Physical reality's (relative) comprehensibility seems compatible with the 'incomprehensibility' of the ultimate meaningfulness and purposiveness of reality which religion may affirm. Our physical scientific understanding of reality in its most abstract and general nature is subject to certain inherent limits; how much more limited, then, might our understanding be of reality at its most concrete, namely in its working out of an ultimate purposiveness such as theism posits?

Nevertheless, even if the essence of divinity is beyond our comprehension in the sense that it is beyond our intellectual mastery (in some supposed theoretical metaphysical science), commitment to theism has to be intelligible as a particular and distinct stance on 'how things ultimately are.' The metaphysics of the classical theism of the mediaevals is largely apophatic—affirming that God is atemporal, immutable, impassible (not such as to undergo any process or experience), necessary (not contingent, not able to not exist), and simple (not in any way 'composed,' and so, not a thing of any kind, nor a thing which 'possesses' its attributes). Some account of what the God who is none of these things positively *is* would be welcome—though we must recall that mediaeval apophaticists had no doubt that the atemporal, immutable, etc. One was revealed in their various traditions as (for example), the One who brought Israel out of Egypt and gave the law to Moses, the One who is Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ crucified and risen, or the One whose messenger, Muhammed, received the final revelation of the Qur'an—and these, of course, are distinctly positive descriptions. Still, philosophers will surely be keen to seek a positive metaphysical account from within the theist perspective of what it is for God to exist if God is 'no-thing'—an account that might satisfy *fides quaerens intellectum* even when such faith humbly accepts that full comprehension is beyond the created mind.[16]

8. Classical Theism and the Problem of Evil

Sterba quotes Davies (or, Davies interpreting Aquinas) as claiming that the problem of evil as usually understood by contemporary philosophers of religion 'is not a serious problem at all but rather the result of a confused way of thinking about God' (Sterba 2019, p. 111). In response to this claim, Sterba's strategy is to argue that the clarifications Davies/Aquinas makes to correct this 'confused way of thinking' do not in fact render the problem of evil as usually understood less 'serious.' According to Sterba, even if these 'classical theist' clarifications are accepted, a 'logical' argument from evil (the detailed one he himself proposes) remains standing. In the previous Section, I have criticised Sterba's strategy, arguing that he fails to recognize just how radical the Davies/Aquinas clarification about divine ontology actually is. It is not just that God is not a *moral* agent, God is not a

[13] For further elucidations and defences of divine simplicity see, for example, (Burrell 1987; Davies 2000; McCabe 1987).

[14] It should be noted that some who accept Sterba's (or any other) NRLAfE might hope to retain rational theist commitment without taking the option I am here highlighting for a non-personalist divine metaphysics. There are accounts of the divine as a supreme person which unmistakeably depart from the omniGod paradigm. 'Process' theologies (inspired by Whitehead and subsequently developed by Charles Hartshorne) provide a significant example: they understand God as co-evolving with the world, and God's power as the power of love rather than of dominating control. For a useful introduction to process theism, see (Cobb and Griffin 1976). The question 'What if God is a moral agent, but not an omnipotent one?' is not raised in Sterba's discussion, however: he presumably shares Mackie's expectation that, although denying God's omnipotence is indeed an 'adequate solution' to the problem posed by the LAfE, theists won't be keen to endorse it.

[15] As Vallicella (2019) says, in summing up the force of the doctrine of divine simplicity, 'God is *uniquely* unique. He is not unique as one of a kind, but unique in transcending the distinction between kind and member of a kind. God is unique in his very mode of uniqueness.' Necessarily, that which is 'unique in its very mode of uniqueness' will be 'incomprehensible,' just in the sense that it cannot be fully understood for what it essentially is by human minds–though (as I'm about to emphasize) *not* in the sense that it is sheerly unintelligible.

[16] Ken Perszyk and I have been exploring just such a positive account by appealing to a 'euteleological' metaphysics, according to which reality is inherently directed upon the realization of its *telos*, the supreme good, and the contingent Universe exists only because that *telos* (or, end, purpose) is realized within it. For more discussion see, for example, Bishop and Perszyk (2014, 2017).

rational agent either, nor any kind of agent, nor 'a' being of any kind at all. Though talk of God as exercising rational agency is apt, and (from the perspective of faith) may convey revealed truth, it does so through an analogous extension of the language of agency and of beings and their properties. Indeed—to extend a little my earlier remarks—even our referring to God as some*thing* that can be the subject of (analogous) predication is *itself* a significant piece of analogising and thus not transparent to, nor grounded in, an ontology of a (divine) substance 'having' attributes.

This 'Davies/Aquinas' clarification of how to think about God needs to be seen, I believe, as an honouring of the absolute transcendence and incomprehensibility of divine reality—transcendence, that is, over the created world of our experience and the categories that make that world intelligible for us. As I've noted, analytic philosophers typically find that such an 'honouring of transcendence' descends into unintelligibility—and there clearly is an important issue here as to whether showing Abrahamic theism to be an intelligible worldview requires a properly anthropomorphic understanding of God's reality or else demands that we disown it. I will not attempt to address that issue any further here. However, there is one final item of business for the present discussion, concerning how 'the problem of evil' stands if one *does* concede to Davies/Aquinas that thinking of God as—literally and metaphysically—a supreme all-powerful and morally perfect being is 'a confused way of thinking about God.'

If one does agree that God is not any kind of agent, nor any kind of being at all, then it is clear that the problem of evil as usually understood by contemporary philosophers ceases to be a serious problem. In fact, the problem then does not arise at all, since, as usually understood, 'the problem' is the intellectual one posed by a 'logical' argument from evil—and 'logical' arguments from evil in the Mackie-tradition simply assume the ontology of God as an all-powerful and morally perfect personal agent.

It is important to emphasize, however, that a classical theist ontology in which God is not 'a' being does not side-line evil as a problem altogether. Evil presents an *existential* problem, which theist faith purports to help us resolve. Faith assures us that, through God's grace and mercy, we may overcome evil and persist in the pursuit of the good in the well-founded hope that we may thereby find our own fulfilment as the kind of beings we were created to be. A soteriology is essential to any theist worldview—which could hardly be so if theism did not hold that evil presents a serious problem. However, an *intellectual* problem of evil still remains for classical theism—even though it is no longer the *specific* intellectual problem of how an ultimately all-controlling person who sustains evil can possibly be fully virtuous. For classical theism, the world is God's creation and God is perfectly good. How could this possibly be so given the horrendous evil that mars this (supposedly) good creation? One might suspect that the Davies/Aquinas clarification about how we should think about God tips us out of the frying pan into the fire so far as understanding how evil can exist in the first place, if—as theist soteriology assures us—God can ultimately deliver us from it.

In fact, however, classical theism offers a way of understanding what evil is—namely as *privatio boni*, the privation of the good—which (as I shall shortly explain) makes it clear that evil's existence is logically compatible with God's goodness. This understanding of evil is, of course, an understanding from *within* a theist perspective—but this is enough to dispel the charge that theist commitment is irrational *because it is commitment to a worldview that cannot possibly be true on account of its internal logical incoherence*. (However, it is important to recognize that the charge that theist commitment is irrational because it goes against the weight of all our available evidence may yet remain.)

Philosophers often take the idea that evil is privation of the good as implying that evil is illusory.[17] But that is a mistake. This is because the claim is that evil is the privation, or lack, *of the good that there ought to be*: accordingly, where there is evil, this lack in what

[17] Mackie, for example, treats it as implying that 'evil that would really be opposed to good does not exist' (Mackie 1955, p. 201).

does exist is anything but illusory and can amount to something quite horrendous.[18] Where creation is understood to exist for a supremely good purpose—into which fit the particular, naturally discernible, ends (*telē*) of the diversity of creatures—what 'ought to be' is, of course, the good that God wills. Thus, as Aquinas argues, there can be no evil in this sense unless God exists, so that evil, so understood, is clearly logically compatible with God's existence.[19] However, it may still seem puzzling how it could actually turn out that God's creation does contain privations of the good that God wills, even though this is a logically coherent possibility. Furthermore, the worst horrendous evils seem to weigh strongly as evidence against the actual existence of a sovereign divine goodness. Indeed, it may seem that the worst horrors need classifying as inherent evils, rather than as privations of the good that ought to be. Much more needs to be said, then, to respond fully to evil-generated doubts about God's existence. One thing theists will need to maintain, I believe, is that privative evils are inherent in the concrete realization of the highest forms of good in any finite, material and historical world. For a full response to these evil-generated doubts, theists will no doubt need to deploy theological resources specific to their particular religious traditions (such as, in the Christian case, the soteriological significance of the Incarnation). However, it is beyond my present focus on the question of theism's internal logical coherence to attempt any elaboration along these lines here.

Within my present focus, then, I believe I have said enough to show that we may give an affirmative answer to Sterba's *specific* title-question, 'Is a good God *logically* possible?' There is no internal contradiction in a theist worldview that accepts that evils exist. A proviso is needed, however. There is no internal contradiction, provided we accept a classical theist account of evil as the privation of the good and the classical doctrine of divine simplicity. If it is insisted, however, (contrary to divine simplicity) that God (if God does exist) is a supernatural personal being who is both all-powerful and morally perfect, then the threat of internal contradiction in the theist worldview remains. For, if such a theist metaphysics is insisted upon, one may well find oneself, with Sterba, committed to moral values which do indeed entail that an all-powerful personal being could not be fully virtuous in sustaining certain actual kinds of evils.

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[18] For a classical statement of the *privatio boni* doctrine see Aquinas (1993) *Summa Theologiae* I, Q48. Note that, according to this doctrine, *all* evil is the lack of what ought to be: thus, for example, a genocidal tyrant's freely chosen wrongdoing is a free exercise of a power which exists for wholly good purposes which he grossly perverts.

[19] '[T]here would be no evil, if the order of good were removed, the privation of which is evil: and there would be no such order, if there were no God.' (Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, book IIIa, chp. 71; Aquinas 1934, p. 177) Of course, this is not a *proof* of God's existence from the existence of evil, since one would accept that evil exists in the relevant sense only if one were already accepting a theist perspective. Furthermore, some contemporary moral realists would claim that 'the order of good' can exist without God's existence. That claim wouldn't make sense for Aquinas, for whom God and real goodness are not distinct–and, as I have already observed, God's *willing* the good involves for Aquinas an analogous predication (so there is not the least hint of the good just amounting to whatever God wills as a personal agent). But my present point is simply about the *logical compatibility* of the existence of evil (on the 'privationist' account) with the existence of God and God's goodness.

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The Problem of Evil Remains Logically Binding

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Abstract: Most contemporary discussions of the problem of evil assume that "logical" formulations of the problem are untenable, and that we should operate with "evidential" formulations instead. I argue that this consensus is founded on a mistake and that there is no legitimate reason to abandon logically binding formulations of the problem of evil. I conclude by arguing that, though it is possible to formulate a genuinely "evidential" problem of evil, logical formulations of the problem of evil are preferable in all cases.

Keywords: problem of evil; Mackie; Plantinga; Sterba; logical; evidential

Most philosophers nowadays appear to think that "logical" formulations of the problem of evil are untenable. And so the titular question of Sterba's (2019) book—"Is a Good God Logically Possible?"—might cause raised eyebrows amongst a generation of philosophers educated under this consensus. Has that question not been settled? Haven't we moved on? Hasn't Plantinga shown that asserting an outright logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil is an impossible task, and so we should deploy "evidential" formulations of the problem of evil instead?

This consensus seems to be a consequence of the perceived refutation of Mackie (1982) canonical presentation of the logical problem of evil by, amongst others, Alvin Plantinga (1977). Mackie's original formulation has three original propositions:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is omnibenevolent.
3. Evil exists.

To which he adds:

4. "Good is opposed to evil in such a way that a being who is wholly good eliminates evil as far as he can."
5. "There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do." (Mackie 1982, p. 150)

Mackie claimed that the first three propositions form a logically inconsistent set, given the addition of the "quasi-logical rules" of 4 and 5, and therefore that this "logical problem" presents itself to any theist for whom these premises are *prima facie* true. In response, Plantinga pointed out that there is still no explicit contradiction (of the form "P & ~P") within this set, even with Mackie's additions. Furthermore, in order for there to be an implicit contradiction within the original three propositions, the additional "quasi-logical rules" must be necessarily true, which they are not. Plantinga deploys his "Free-Will Defence" to show this, which has been discussed extensively elsewhere; I will not add to that discussion here.

Since Mackie's formulation of the logical problem of evil seemed doomed to failure, philosophers (Rowe 1979) were keen to shift towards "evidential" formulations of the problem of evil. That is, versions of the problem that do not rely on a notion of logical incompatibility between God and evil (or God and certain types of evil), but instead rely on a non-deductive probabilistic argument based on the perception that the evils of the world render it incredibly unlikely that God exists. This shift was, I think, a mistake. Plantinga has not given us sufficient reason to abandon all logical formulations, even if

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he has successfully shown that the most basic version—in the form of Mackie's original formulation—will not cut it. It is still quite possible to formulate logical formulations of the problem of evil that rely upon some notion of deductive validity, or logical inconsistency, as Sterba's book illustrates. I will argue that we can and should do so, and that we have no good reason to shift towards "evidential" formulations of the problem of evil. I will show that any contrast between logical and evidential formulations either a) fails to represent a significant difference between the two formulations, such that the two formulations—evidential and logical—are to be treated any differently, or else b) fails to offer a sufficient motivation to warrant shifting from logical to evidential formulations. The conclusion of my arguments will be that we have no good reason to dismiss logical formulations of the problem of evil, formulations that rely upon a strong sense of deductive or logical inconsistency, and are therefore logically binding. In my closing remarks I conclude that logical formulations are the most appropriate way to tackle the problem of evil.

As such, my purpose in this paper is to defend the *approach* of Sterba's argument, rather than the argument itself. That is, I argue that we can and should formulate the problem of evil, and any arguments based thereon, in a "logical" rather than "evidential" form. Posing the problem of evil in such a "logical" form is best suited to the task of "clarifying and if possible reconciling" a set of beliefs, which I take to be the underlying intention of any discussion on the problem of evil.

1. Deductive versus Inductive Formulations

The starting point here is what followed from the debate between Alvin Plantinga and J. L. Mackie. The perception is that Plantinga showed Mackie's logical formulation to not be deductively valid, and therefore any future formulations of the problem of evil would need to abandon the aspiration towards deductively valid argument. Inductive argument would present the next best alternative, and this is what evidential formulations of the problem of evil aspire to achieve.

I will argue that Plantinga's response, though remaining a successful refutation of Mackie's formulation, does not offer us sufficient motivation to warrant shifting away from all logical formulations of the problem of evil. We can easily reformulate the problem of evil to evade Plantinga's challenge to the problem's *validity*, even if his challenge would remain a challenge to the *soundness* of any argument based on the problem. I will then move on to questioning some other motivations for shifting towards evidential formulations, those concerning the recognition that a premise within the problem of/argument from evil contains a crucial inductive step. Because of the presence of this inductive step, it is concluded that the argument from evil is better formulated as an inductive argument. I will argue that this is a mistake.

Having dealt with the motivations for shifting from logical to evidential formulations of the problem of evil, I will conclude by pointing out that no significant shift has really occurred. Things have always been as they are now; the old-fashioned logical argument was always based upon inductive "evidence", and the new-fangled evidential formulations are just as deductively binding as their logical forebears ever were. We therefore have no reason to abandon logically binding formulations of the problem of evil.

1.1. Plantinga Evaded

One of Plantinga's central assumptions in responding to Mackie's formulation of the problem of evil is that any proposition that is additional to the original three propositions of the "inconsistent triad" (God is omnipotent, God is omnibenevolent, evil exists) must be "necessarily true" if it is to expose an implicit contradiction and thus render Mackie's argument deductively valid (Plantinga 1977, p. 13). But the special requirement that these additions be necessarily true is only a product of needing to go looking for an implicit contradiction. If we reformulate the problem of evil in such a way that the contradiction is explicit or formal, then we lose this special requirement. The first thing to ask, therefore, is why on earth we should feel bound to Mackie's formulation? We can easily reformulate the

problem of evil in such a way that a contradiction is made explicit or formal. The easiest way to do this would be to build the additions into the premises from the outset, expressing both the relevant divine properties and the perceived incompatibility between God and evil, giving something like:

> A1. A maximally-good, maximally-powerful creator of the universe would not create or permit any evil in its creation.
>
> A2. Some evil exists.

Additional modifications are obviously available, such as "gratuitous", "horrendous", etc., but they are not relevant to the point that I am making. If we now add the proposition "A maximally-good, maximally-powerful creator of the universe exists", then we could have a straightforwardly inconsistent set. The contradiction would be formal, in this case, since it is capable of yielding a contradiction of the form "P & ~P" via the application of logical rules. With a formal contradiction, we therefore have no need to go looking for an implicit contradiction, and therefore lose the requirement that any of these premises, or any component thereof, be necessarily true. Plantinga's response, in the form of his free will defense, would no longer threaten the deductive validity of the problem of evil, for it would only (at most) show that one of the premises is not necessarily true, and that is an issue of soundness, not validity.

Why, then, should we not adopt this formulation of the problem of evil? Well, it might be argued that, whereas Mackie's formulation moves from propositions that are readily *prima facie* acceptable to most theists, this formulation is not so obviously acceptable. Though most theists would readily consent to God being both maximally-good and maximally-powerful, fewer (at least if Plantinga's response is anything to go by) would so easily consent to the notion that, because of this, God would not permit any evil in His creation. Any argument that is based on this formulation of the problem of evil would hold little weight with such a theist, and this might be considered a significant failure, if the intention of the problem of evil were to provide some foundation for an argument from evil that would have some persuasive power for all theists.

But this is not a very good reason to reject the formulation. After all, Mackie's formulation included a claim that not all theists were willing to accept; namely, that evil existed. The history of the discussion of the problem of evil is replete with examples of theists who have denied that this premise was true: Alexander Pope's *Essay of Man* comes to mind, or else the Augustinian notion of *privatio boni*. The point is not whether the premises within the argument from evil are *ultima facie* acceptable to all theists, but only that the premises are *prima facie* true to most theists most of the time (or even some theists some of the time). And it certainly seems to be *prima facie* true for most theists that a maximally-good, maximally-powerful God would prevent any evil in His creation: otherwise we would struggle to account for the intuitive contradiction within Epicurus's Old Riddle.

That the premise is not necessarily true is not a threat to the validity of the underlying problem, only to the soundness of any argument that is based upon it. That the problem is deductively valid entails that it remains a "logical" formulation, and certainly remains logically binding: no one can consistently maintain the truth of all three propositions in this inconsistent set. This is all the problem of evil ever sought to achieve—to offer the theist the task of "clarifying and if possible reconciling" their set of beliefs (Mackie 1982, p. 150) —and as such ought to be considered successful in this form.

And yet, there is a sense in which those who call for a shift to evidential formulations of the problem of evil are inclined to think otherwise. The motivation for this seems to stem from a willingness to adopt a notion of "logical" argument that extends Plantinga's original requirement that any premises added to Mackie's original three propositions be necessarily true to *every* premise in the argument from evil. This is a mistake; I will now show why.

1.2. Post-Plantinga: William Rowe and Michael Tooley

Here is William Rowe's formulation of the argument from evil:

R1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
R2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
R3. [Therefore] There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. (Rowe 1979, p. 336)

Rowe concedes Plantinga's point that it remains logically possible that any instance of evil is in fact justified by greater goods, etc., but argues that it nevertheless remains reasonable to believe otherwise. It is very difficult to see what possible good could result from a deer suffering a painful death over the course of five days after having been burnt in a forest fire. What good could be achieved by a five-day death that could not be achieved by a four-day death, for example? Rowe concludes that the existence of such evil remains evidence against the existence of God, even if it cannot count as conclusive proof.

Rowe still considers his argument valid (Rowe 1979, p. 336), which it is, but concedes that it is not necessarily sound, for premise R1 is not necessarily true. This concession alone seems to have motivated the shift towards evidential formulations of the argument from evil. But given what I have said in the previous section, why should we consider this a threat to the logical problem of evil? All that Rowe allows to be open to doubt is whether a premise within the argument is true or not; that is, he doubts the soundness of the argument, but not the validity of the underlying problem. It remains the case that *if* there are instances of intense suffering such that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented them without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, and R2 is true, *then* there cannot exist such an omnipotent, wholly-good being. The theist must still deny one premise here, just as the logical problem maintains.

So if Rowe thinks the potential falsity of one premise within his argument is sufficient to warrant abandoning "logical" formulations of the problem of evil, then he seems to think that any "logical" formulation must not only be valid, but must also be made up of entirely *necessarily* true premises. And he is not alone in thinking this, it seems. Consider, for example, Michael Tooley's summary. (It is important to acknowledge here that Tooley is writing for the purposes of a survey article, so I take his words only to be representative of a general consensus view, rather than specifically his own. None of what I say here challenges the excellent work Tooley has done in the field of inductive arguments from evil: I question only the implied claim that deductive formulations are no longer viable or desirable, and specifically the claim that they are no longer viable or desirable for a certain set of reasons.)

> How would one go about establishing via a purely deductive argument that a deer's suffering a slow and painful death because of a forest fire, or a child's undergo [*sic*] lingering suffering and eventual death due to cancer, is not logically necessary either to achieve a greater good or to avoid a greater evil? [. . .] If a premise such as [R1] cannot, at least at present, be established deductively, then the only possibility, it would seem, is to offer some sort of inductive argument in support of the relevant premise. But if this is right, then it is surely best to get that crucial inductive step out into the open, and thus to formulate the argument from evil not as a deductive argument for the very strong claim that it is logically impossible for both God and evil to exist, (or for God and certain types, or instances, of evil to exist), but as an evidential (inductive/probabilistic) argument for the more modest claim that there are evils that actually exist in the world that make it unlikely that God exists. (Tooley 2015)

If we were to read this in an unsympathetic way, we could respond with an incredibly trivial answer here. In order for the problem of evil to be considered "logical", we want a "purely deductive" argument that establishes the truth of a premise like R1; that is, R1 must be the product of a deductively valid argument that contains no inductive premises or steps. This is, strictly speaking, an incredibly easy thing to achieve. For example: "One plus one equals two; if one plus one equals two then R1 is true: therefore, R1 is true." This is a deductively valid argument that establishes the truth of R1, and it contains no obviously inductive steps, but it is not a good argument and is clearly not what we are looking for. What we want is for R1 to be supported by an argument that is purely deductively valid (i.e., including no inductive steps), relevant, and sound. This, as Tooley is aware, is a very difficult thing to achieve. As a result, he concludes that the problem of evil ought not to be formulated as a logical problem.

What emerges is a simple claim: If a premise within an argument cannot be established "purely deductively", then the argument is better formulated as an inductive (evidential/probabilistic) argument. I take this to be the consensus view when it comes to the problem of evil. It seems that, according to the consensus view, in order for an argument from evil to the non-existence of God to be considered "logical" it must be deductively valid and composed of premises that are themselves the product of deductively valid arguments; that is, they must include absolutely no inductive steps. I will call this feature "deductively valid all the way down" (DVATWD), and it seems to me to be a very bad criterion for what we are to consider "logical" arguments.

I will argue that DVATWD is an unreasonable demand to place upon what we are to consider "logical" arguments. It restricts the potential list of "logical" arguments to a vanishingly small number of largely uninteresting tautologies.

"Logical" Arguments

It seems to me that whether an argument is logical or not is primarily dependent upon deductive validity. And not all logical arguments are good arguments: you can have bad logical arguments, arguments that are valid but composed of junk premises. Good arguments require validity and true premises, and whether premises are true or not is an issue of soundness, not validity. Sound arguments might be a strong indication of good arguments, and a certain indication (by definition) of logical arguments, but that does not mean that only sound arguments are logical arguments.

It seems that Rowe and Tooley et al. disagree with this point. They require that, in order for the problem of evil to be considered "logical", it and its premises must be deductively valid all the way down. This entails that logical arguments are only those that contain absolutely no inductive steps. I will call this the "consensus definition". This cannot be correct, for it places an utterly unreasonable demand upon what we can consider to be "logical" arguments.

Consider, for example, what we would make of this good logical argument:

1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man.
3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The "Socrates is mortal" example is an archetypal "logical" argument. And yet, is it deductively valid all the way down? Consider 1: "All men are mortal." How would we establish "via a purely deductive argument" the truth of this premise? Well, one might wish to go down the route of claiming that "by definition, human beings are mortal", but I do not think that this is commonly what people would take to be adequate justification for the truth of this premise. If this premise is true, then it is because all the evidence available to us tells us that it is so! It is because every human we have ever known of has died that we conclude that "all men are mortal". If tomorrow we find a human that cannot die, we change our view; this is a logically possibility. It is an empirical claim, and therefore relies, ultimately, upon an inductive step. The same applies to 2, "Socrates is a man", since this is also an empirical claim. Therefore, this archetypal logical argument is not deductively

valid all the way down, and as such ought to be, according to the consensus definition, formulated as an inductive argument. This is an "evidential argument for the mortality of Socrates".

But it is absurd not to call the Socrates argument "logical". Therefore, the consensus definition is incorrect.

Note that the same applies if we include a DVATWD premise. Consider:

1. All bachelors are unmarried men.
2. Mike is a bachelor.
3. Therefore, Mike is an unmarried man.

This is a deductively valid argument, of the same form as "Socrates", but where we had a logically contingent claim of "all men are mortal", we now have a logically necessary claim: "All bachelors are unmarried men." This is necessarily true, it is deductively valid all the way down. But premise 2 is not. Though Mike might actually be a bachelor, it could never be necessarily true that he would be, and it could never be established "purely deductively" that he is. Again, 2 is an empirical claim, and as such cannot be deductively valid all the way down. Once again, according to the consensus definition, this is not a logical argument. We should "get our inductive step out into the open" and formulate this as an inductive argument for the conclusion that Mike is (probably) an unmarried man.

What can be considered a "logical" argument, according to the consensus definition? The answer is clear: hardly any argument. Specifically, only those arguments that are deductively valid all the way down. That is, only arguments that are deductively valid, whose premises are themselves deductively valid, etc., and that contain no inductive steps. Which means, ultimately, only those arguments that are composed entirely of necessary truths. This seems to have extended Plantinga's original requirement that any *additional* premises be necessarily true to apply to *all* premises within the problem of evil, whatever its form. To my mind, this is an unreasonably strict standard of "logical" argument.

Surely, if we mean anything at all by calling an argument "logical", we mean *only* that it is deductively valid. Whether its premises happen to be true or not, potentially true or not, possibly false or not, is entirely beside the point; those are issues of soundness. That Plantinga has successfully shown that a premise within the argument from/problem of evil is possibly false makes absolutely no difference to the status of the argument/problem as being a "logical" argument/problem.

1.3. "Evidential" Arguments

Having said all that, we might still be intuitively inclined to call it an "evidential" argument, in that (a) it is an argument for the non-existence of God, and therefore counts as evidence against the sort of cumulative case argument for the existence of God presented by Richard Swinburne (2004), and (b) it is an argument for the non-existence of God that is based on evidence. But though there is clearly an ambiguity in how we describe evil as "evidence against the existence of God" (Tooley 2015), with some philosophers no doubt taking this to mean "an argument based upon evidence" and others as "an argument counting against the probability of the existence of God", this linguistic carelessness (as Bishop and Perszyk (2011, p. 111) call it, "terminologically inept") does not justify abandoning the notion that the problem of evil can be a logically binding problem, relying upon a notion of deductive logical inconsistency. Because nothing has really changed here. The logical argument from evil always counted as "evidence against" God's existence, but that (alone) did not render it an "evidential" argument. Furthermore, the logical argument from evil was always based upon "evidence", in that even Mackie's formulation contained the claim that "evil exists", and, as I have mentioned, this was always a disputed claim.

We are left without cause to shift away from deductive formulations of the problem of evil towards inductive versions, and so no cause to abandon logically binding formulations of the problem of evil.

2. Strong versus Weak Conclusions

Perhaps there is another option to support evidential formulations of the problem of evil over logical formulations along these lines, in terms of contrasting the differing force of their respective conclusions. Perhaps the relevant difference between logical and evidential formulations of the problem of evil is not primarily about deductive or inductive reasoning, but instead that logical formulations assert the strong conclusion that the existence of evil entails the logical impossibility of God's existence, whereas evidential formulations only assert the weaker conclusion that the existence of evil renders God's existence unlikely. Logical formulations express necessity, whereas evidential formulations only express contingency. For some, this might be the most intuitive option, but although it sounds like a reasonable distinction to draw, the distinction cannot be sensibly maintained and quickly collapses into the already-discussed distinction between deductive and inductive formulations; it can therefore be dismissed with the same criticisms. I will not repeat those criticisms excessively but will focus my efforts into showing how this option collapses into the previous.

Reducing "Strong versus Weak" to "Deductive versus Inductive"

What is it to say that the existence of evil renders God's existence unlikely, rather than impossible? Given that this statement is taken as the conclusion of an argument, there are two possibilities: Firstly, one could be asserting that one's argument is not necessarily deductively valid, even though one's premises are true. This would leave the argument from evil as an inductive-style argument whereby the truth of the premises does not confirm the truth of the conclusion; the argument is not based upon any notion of logical inconsistency. This seems to have been what those who followed Plantinga were seeking to assert, but they instead fell back into presenting the second possibility: Second, one could be asserting that though the argument is deductively valid, one or more of the premises are not necessarily true. Therefore, the conclusion is true only to the extent that the premises are certain. The premises are not certain, though likely, and therefore the conclusion is limited to a probabilistic claim. This seems to be what Rowe et al. opted for.

The first possibility is a viable option and would quite genuinely, I think, count as a properly "evidential" argument from evil to the non-existence of God; it is one that I will consider in my concluding remarks, since it represents what I take to be the most legitimate claim to an "evidential" formulation of the problem of evil. It is a viable option, only no one seems to choose it. Instead, we go for deductively valid formulations of the problem of evil and then debate the probabilistic truth of the premises. That is, we opt for the second possibility. This leaves the conclusions of these "evidential" arguments as being logically binding *conditionally upon the truth of their premises*. This leaves these formulations in precisely the same position as any other deductive argument, and therefore given that the "logical" alternative is purported to be a "necessary" conclusion (rather than a contingent one), the difference between "logical" and "evidential" formulations is going to boil down to, once again, the requirement that some or all components within the argument be DVATWD.

Requiring that any component of an argument be DVATWD is a mistake, as I have already argued. This new option now repeats this mistake, so the same criticism applies. If the key difference between logical and evidential formulations is understood to be the necessary or non-necessary status of their conclusions, and each variation is understood to be deductively valid, then the necessary/non-necessary status of their respective conclusions will boil down to the necessary/non-necessary status of their premises. Having necessarily true premises is not something that we should ask of a logical argument, so insisting on its failure on this basis is untenable: it would, once again, warrant no shift towards evidential formulations.

The viable alternative for evidential formulations would be to construct a genuinely inductive argument from evil to the non-existence of God, one in which the truth of the premises does not logically compel the truth of the conclusion. This, however, would return

us to our original distinction, since logical formulations, by contrast, would be deductive arguments. This, then, seems to be the only sensible distinction to be drawn between "logical" and "evidential" formulations; that of "deductive" versus "inductive" arguments.

Although much of what I have said should render logical formulations perfectly viable under this distinction, nothing I have said so far rules out the viability of genuinely inductive arguments from evil to the non-existence of God, and it might be that these are preferable to deductive formulations of the problem of evil. I will now argue that they are not preferable.

3. Genuinely "Evidential" Arguments

For all that I have said against the distinction between logical and evidential formulations of the problem of evil, I think that there is a relevant and helpful distinction to be drawn between logical and evidential arguments generally. But this distinction cannot just be that evidential arguments are deductive arguments with evidence-based or otherwise non-necessary premises. The relevant distinction must lie in the contrast between "inductive" and "deductive" argument forms. This distinction is a genuine distinction, and it is helpful because some things are more appropriately dealt with via inductive arguments, whilst some are better dealt with via deductive arguments.

I illustrate this with an example. Imagine that I am trying to convince someone of the ineffectiveness of homeopathy. I could offer a strictly evidential/inductive argument:

E1. Study 1 shows that homeopathy is ineffective.

E2. Study 2 shows that homeopathy is ineffective.

E3. Study 3 shows that homeopathy is ineffective.

E[. . .]. [. . .]

E10. Study 10 shows that homeopathy is ineffective.

E11. Therefore, homeopathy is ineffective.

This is a strictly inductive argument. It is certainly reasonable to believe the conclusion based upon the premises (especially if the premises are supplemented with the addition of further studies showing homeopathy's ineffectiveness), and it is intuitively clear that the premises increase the probability of the conclusion, but no one is logically bound to accept the conclusion even though they might accept the truth of the premises. Quite feasibly my opponent could accept the truth of all my premises and yet reject my conclusion. All I could say in response, at this point, is something akin to "you are being unreasonable", or "you are ignoring the evidence", etc. But these will not necessarily be conclusive or convincing responses.

Alternatively, I could offer a logical argument for the ineffectiveness of homeopathy, with the aim of showing that those who believe that homeopathy is effective believe a logically inconsistent set of propositions:

P1. Homeopathy is effective.

P2. If homeopathy is effective, then it will be effective under reasonable experimental conditions.

P3. Homeopathy is not effective under reasonable experimental conditions.

One of these propositions must be rejected, since the set is logically inconsistent, and yet all three seem to be at least *prima facie* true for those who believe that homeopathy is effective (and are aware of the evidence against it). If I am so inclined, I can convert this "problem of homeopathy" into an argument for the ineffectiveness of homeopathy by adding the conclusion: "Therefore, homeopathy is not effective." But this conclusion would only be true to the extent that I was sure that P2 and P3 are true. This logical formulation lays no claim to any of its components being necessarily true, or DVATWD, and is quite open about the fact that P3 is an overtly empirical claim. But it is clearly distinct from the evidential/inductive formulation just mentioned, and the relevant difference is that this

logical formulation relies upon a notion of logical inconsistency. My opponent *cannot* accept the truth of my premises yet reject the truth of my conclusion. If they wish to maintain a denial of my conclusion, then they *must*, with the force of a logical must, reject one of my premises, in this case P2 or P3. This logical formulation is *unavoidable*, whereas the evidential formulation could potentially be left unresolved.

It might be that the practical difference between these two options does not amount to all that much, since in the first instance we would end up debating the strength of the (inductive) entailment between the premises and the conclusion, and in the second we would end up debating the truth of the premise that asserts this entailment outright. But it would remain the case that there is an important theoretical distinction, and it seems to me that, depending on the beliefs of my interlocutor, one or other argument form might be more appropriate. If, for example, my interlocutor is simply ignorant of the many studies that show homeopathy to be ineffective, then presenting a list of premises in an inductive argument might be more persuasive than constructing a deductive argument out of premises that they are not in a position to appreciate the truth of. If, on the other hand, I know that my interlocutor is fully aware of the many studies that show the ineffectiveness of homeopathy—the "evidence" is fixed, as it were, as a common ground—then it will be clear to me that simply adding to the list is not going to get to the root of the disagreement between us. Instead, it might be more helpful for me to present a deductively valid problem to them, and pinpoint precisely what it is that they reject in my argument. If it is simply the strength of the inductive entailment, as expressed in premise 2, then at least we now know where we stand.

For many such disagreements, where the "evidence" is not fixed or known to all parties, offering inductive-style arguments in the form of adding further premises to the list of propositions that, on balance, increase the probability of one conclusion or another is an entirely appropriate way to go about persuading people of things. If, however, the evidence is shared as a common ground, then adding to the list is not so helpful. The disagreement is then more *logical* in nature; it is about "what follows from what", "what entails what", and as such is better dealt with via deductive arguments. In a deductive argument, you can still debate the truth of the premises, but at least now you will know where your disagreement lies.

Evidential Formulations Are Inappropriate for the Problem of Evil

An important point to recognize here is that though it is clearly suitable to debate the effectiveness of homeopathy in evidential terms, it is not so clearly the case with the problem of evil. We can generate evidence for or against the proposition of homeopathy's effectiveness without difficulty, but it is very difficult to see how we would go about generating any more or less evidence for the comparable issues in the problem of evil. Everyone is surely aware that there have been instances of terrible evil in the world and that more are likely to come. Unlike the homeopathy example, it is not as if any further evidence is likely to have any effect on the outcome of the debate concerning the problem of evil. This calls into question the suitability of evidential formulations to tackle such a problem.

In the case of homeopathy, we are (arguably) debating the evidence; we are asking an overtly evidential question, "Is it the case that homeopathy works?", so this question is reasonably dealt with evidentially. However, in the case of the problem of evil, we are not debating the evidence; there is no further evidence that we can bring in to help us find an answer to this question; we are debating what we should believe on the basis of the evidence. The issue is about "what follows from what", and so we must simply reflect, *a priori* if you will, on our set of beliefs and try to establish a coherent set. This is not a task that further evidential work can help with. Evidential formulations of the problem of evil, therefore, seem inappropriate.

4. Conclusion: The Problem of Evil Remains Logically Binding

We have no good reason to stop formulating logically binding formulations of the problem of evil. It seems to me that we have simply been careless in taking the non-necessary truth of a premise within an argument as good reason to call that argument "evidential" rather than logical, and have further concluded from this that, since the argument is merely "evidential" and inductive, the conclusion is not logically binding. This is a mistake. Valid, logically binding arguments only ever established the truth of their conclusions *conditionally upon the truth of their premises*, and this remains the case in the argument from evil. All that has happened, with responses such as Alvin Plantinga's, is that the premises within the argument have been shown to be not necessarily true. But this was always the case.

There is, therefore, nothing preventing us from operating with a simple and logically binding formulation of the problem of evil that can achieve the aim of forcing the theist to "clarify, and if possible reconcile" (Mackie 1982, p. 150) their set of beliefs. And this is precisely what I see Sterba's argument to be: an argument that forces the theist to reconcile the set of beliefs that includes beliefs about God, beliefs about the existence of evil and suffering, and beliefs about ethical and political rights and principles. He presents a series of arguments to show that there is no consistent set of beliefs here, and as such, belief in God is not compatible with the existence of evil: or, as he puts it: "All three sub-arguments conclude to the logical impossibility of God." (Sterba 2019, p. 199)

The success of that formulation will depend on the truth of the premises, clearly, but there is virtue inherent in presenting the argument in this logical form. It forces us to find *reason* to reject the conclusion, if we deny it. It allows us to clearly pinpoint where and to what extent we consider the argument to break down, if we do, and therefore precisely the reasons why we might not accept the conclusion on the basis of that argument. It is this that allows us to clarify and reconcile our set of beliefs.

For example, Sterba argues: "there is a logical contradiction between the existence of God, our moral requirements, and what would have to be God's widespread failure to prevent the loss of significant freedoms in our world resulting from moral actions." (Sterba 2019, p. 77) As such, the claim is that the following set is inconsistent: God's existence, our moral requirements, and the evils of the world. The argument, so stated, is valid, so this is a "logical" problem of evil. It might not necessarily be sound. It can be resolved by rejecting one of the propositions. So at what point does the theist disagree? Denying the existence of God is not the one (as a theist); denying the existence of evil is also not likely to be the one (though it remains an option . . .); the obvious candidate is "our moral requirements". And not, it is likely, in themselves; that is, the theist probably will not reject the moral requirements as stated. The resolution would come in the form of rejecting that these moral requirements—*our* moral requirements—really apply to God in a sufficiently unaltered form. "The ways of the most high are not our ways" (Kant 2001, p. 27), it might be claimed: "*Sunt superis sua iura! quid ad caelestia ritus/Exigere humanos diversaque foedera tempto?*"

What "evidence" can help us answer this question? What "inductive step" or "probabilistic inference" can do any work? This would seem to miss the point. This is a question about "what follows from what", calling for suitably informed philosophical reflection.

For example, for me, the argument breaks down at the analogy between the obligations of a good God and those of an "ideally just political state". As Sterba says, " . . . my logical argument against the existence of God just rests primarily on (1) exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle (Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III), and (2) the analogy of an ideally just and powerful state." (Sterba 2019, p. 169) When I reflect on these moral requirements, I find little to dispute in them, but would hesitate to apply them analogously to God—at least not straightforwardly. One reason for questioning the analogy might be that part of the essence of an "ideally just state" would seem to be its sovereign authority having been granted, ultimately, by the people. I take this to be a fairly foundational cornerstone of contemporary political philosophy, one that does no

small amount of foundational work for our concepts of rights in general, and whilst this was clearly not always the case, it is surely a hinge proposition around which most of our understanding of political authority now swings: A political state whose sovereign authority does not come from democratic mandate is not an *ideally* just political state.

But can we say the same of God's sovereign authority? Must we? It is not clear to me that we must. It seems to me that whatever sovereign authority God might have, it is decidedly nothing like the sovereign authority of an ideally just political state. Who gave God permission to create the universe? Who could? And if someone claimed to, they might invite the response of "Where were they when God created the Heavens and the Earth?" etc.

Can we creatures say, like a Pythonesque peasant, "well I didn't vote for you"? "Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help! Help! I'm being repressed!" This is not (only) a rhetorical point; it is a conceptual point. The sovereign authority of an "ideally just political state" can (possibly must) come from the will of the people who make up its body, because the people *make up* that political state. The sovereign authority of God need not (possibly cannot) come from the will of the people, for the people do not "make up" what God is—if they were to, then it would not be clear that that is properly called God.

Of course, it matters not only that the analogy breaks down, but that it breaks down in a way that is relevant and significant for the argument. I think that is so in this case. Given the essential links between "authority" and "obligation", a significant change in one seems likely to affect the other. Legitimate political authority comes with obligations for those who wield it—the failure to uphold these obligations illegitimizes the authority. Legitimate political authority also might yield obligations for those who are subject to it. So, either way, whatever is meant by the "ideally just political state" will have significant consequences for any obligations that follow.

So, are God's obligations "like" the obligations of an ideally just political state? It is not clear to me that they are, because the legitimacy of God's authority is not "like" the legitimacy of political authority. And so the grounds for the obligations of an ideally just political state are not the same as the grounds for God's obligations (whatever they might be). But whilst I disagree with the argument on this one small point, I make this point as an endorsement of the logical approach. It is only because I am pushed to find or resolve an apparent contradiction that I find the conceptual disanalogy. This is how I "clarify and reconcile" my set of beliefs. This is not the consequence of an evidence-based or probabilistic critique, but only of a suitably informed philosophical reflection on "what follows from what". I take logical formulations of the problem of evil to be the best means to this end.

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Article

God and the Problem of Evil: An Attempt at Reframing the Debate

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Abstract: This article attempts to reframe the traditional account of the problem of evil for God's existence. The philosophical debates about the problem of evil for the existence of God within the traditional framework do not exhaust the available options for conceiving of God's perfection, including our understanding of God's power and God's relationship to the world. In responding to the problem of evil, rational theists should seek a reformulation of divine perfection consistent with God's existence as both necessary and as morally relevant to human life in a manner that does not collapse in the face of the problem of evil. The neoclassical account of God's nature as developed in the tradition of process philosophy is presented as an alternative that meets these requirements.

Keywords: process philosophy; theism; ontological argument; theodicy; problem of evil; metaphysics

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1. A Little Background

J.B.: "If God is good, he is not God; if God is God, he is not good; take the even, take the odd." (MacLeish 1958)

Anselm: "God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived."

James Sterba's (2019) recent book revisits the perennial theodicy debate within traditional theism and responds to a range of contemporary efforts to defend the logic of God's existence in the face of the presence of horrendous evil in the world (both moral and non-moral). At the heart of this debate is the question of whether our experience of evil in the world counts against the existence of God understood as all powerful, all knowing, and perfectly good. If God is all powerful and all knowing, then God must not be perfectly good to allow horrendous evil, or if God is perfectly good, then God's power must be limited given that such evils occur. The argument suggests that attentiveness to the many horrendous moral and natural evils we find in the world cannot help but undermine belief in the God of traditional theism, in whom the virtues of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral goodness are thought to coincide. Take the even, take the odd.

I am generally sympathetic with Sterba's position with regard to the vulnerabilities of traditional theism to the problem of evil. My goal in what follows is to suggest an alternative account of divine perfection that is invulnerable to the line of critique Sterba advances in his book. Specifically, I want to advocate for a version of "neoclassical theism" in the vein of Charles Hartshorne's process philosophy as one such alternative that I believe avoids the pitfalls of the problem of evil while providing a compelling account of God's perfection, including God's necessary existence and relevance for the moral lives of human beings. This essay is an attempt to present and clarify how that approach to God's existence avoids the problem of evil and justifies our continued affirmation of the existence of God.

2. The Aim of the Essay

I should be clear on a few points here at the outset. As indicated above, I am generally sympathetic with Sterba's challenge to traditional theism in light of the problem of evil. I, too, find it difficult to reconcile a traditional understanding of God's perfection with the

degree of moral and natural evil the world, and he has advanced a particularly robust account of this problem. The argument I will develop in this essay takes up a different challenge: Is there an alternative way of understanding God's perfection such that the problem of evil no longer serves as a logical objection to the existence of God? I believe that there is, but the limits of this article will require me to be more suggestive than systematic in presenting this alternative. Nonetheless, I hope the view advanced here will be attractive in no small part because it presents a path for securing God's status as an unsurpassable individual and the proper object of our ultimate concern in a manner that renders the problem of evil irrelevant when defending the existence of God.

While the approach for which I advocate does not take up in great detail the specific points made by Sterba in his critique of traditional theism, there are some parallels worth noting. While the position I will advance is not a version of skeptical theism in the vein of Michael Bergmann's in chapter 5 of Sterba's (2019) book, I will suggest a way in which epistemic humility on our part might still be relevant to this topic when evaluating God's choices about the initial conditions governing a particular cosmic epoch (the natural laws of the current universe that provide the framework for coordinating the activities of finite individuals). I will also argue that God is not a moral agent and that the ascription of moral goodness as part of God's perfection is a category mistake. My development of this point, however, will not rely on the line of argument for that view advanced by Brian Davies in chapter 6 of the book (Sterba 2019). Instead, I will argue that God stands in an asymmetrical relationship with moral goodness: God experiences and values the moral goodness of finite beings as a species of goodness more generally, but properly understood, God does not exercise moral agency even as God's activity is value maximizing by necessity. It is simply the nature of divine activity to act on, and respond to, the world in a manner that optimizes value for future purpose, where part of that value includes the distinctive contributions made by moral agents. Moral goodness, on this account, should be restricted in reference to the free choices that finite rational individuals make with respect to maximizing value for future purpose, where it is always possible for such individuals to choose a lesser value.

Acts of moral goodness contribute to the divine good, but God's agency is dissimilar to our own in ways that render moral choice meaningless in the divine context. God's activity minimizes evil as a corollary of God's value maximizing, but if we understand moral agency as operating in the space of the freedom to choose between greater and lesser value (where moral evil involves the choice of a lesser value), then God does not exercise moral agency (even perfect moral agency in the sense of possessing a "holy will" per Kant, where God obeys the moral law by necessity). Because God's actions are value maximizing as a metaphysical necessity, it is simply a category mistake to attribute the conditions of moral agency to God, from which it follows that an account of the divine nature should not include the attribute "morally perfect." As counterintuitive as this might sound, particularly in the context of traditional theism, I believe this turn in philosophical theology has significant benefits, not the least of which is to remove the threat of the problem of evil to the logic of God's existence.

My aim in this essay is not to provide a full expression and defense of neoclassical theism. Rather, I want to suggest that the standard framing of the problem of evil unfolds within a particular set of assumptions about divine perfection, God's relationship to world, and how power is shared in the context of those relationships. These are traditional assumptions that reflect the dominant discourse within orthodox theism in the Abrahamic context. In advancing an alternative approach, I recognize that it will take us beyond that framework in ways that will be viewed as heterodox by most traditional theists. Still, I think it is worth recognizing that philosophical debates about the problem of evil for the existence of God within that orthodox framework do not exhaust the available options for conceiving of God's perfection, including our understanding of God's power and God's relationship to the world. In philosophical discourse, heresy should not be an objection to considering possible alternatives. There may remain options available to traditional theists in pushing back against the arguments advanced by Sterba, but my own view is that his

objections to recent apologetic efforts are persuasive. That said, where Sterba concludes from his achievement that God's existence is logically impossible, I am inclined to counter that what he has shown is the need for a better formulation of divine perfection consistent with God's existence as both necessary and as morally relevant to human life in a manner that does not collapse in the face of the problem of evil. To my mind, neoclassical theism provides such an alternative.

3. God's Necessary Existence

The problem of evil operates under the presumption that contingent, empirical matters are relevant to inferential judgments about the logical possibility of God's existence. According to Charles Hartshorne, however, this argument involves a conceptual error. "As Aristotle had seen, 'with eternal things to be and to be possible are the same.' If then the eternal God is not, the eternal God is impossible and could not have existed. But empirical arguments are addressed to contingent matters, what could be, but perhaps not, the case" (Hartshorne 1983, p. 58). With regard to the eternal, then, "empirical evidence is irrelevant" (Hartshorne 1983, p. 59). This is the point Hartshorne makes in discussing the ontological argument in the context of Hume: "[Hume] grants that its validity would dispose of the argument against theism based on the evils of the world" (Hartshorne [1965] 1991, p. 201). The greatest challenge to a coherent theism, it seems to me, is not the problem of evil but rather the problem of God's status as existing necessarily, that is, in some respect, as an eternal individual. The problem of evil emerges as a result of deficient understandings of God's nature and perfection. The solution, it seems to me, is not to develop increasingly sophisticated rejoinders to the problem of evil in defense of God's perfect moral agency but to reframe our understanding of God's nature and perfection such that it becomes clear that the existence of evil, even horrendous evil, simply is not relevant to determining whether God exists.

The more interesting challenge to a coherent theism, then, involves whether a persuasive account of God's perfection can be formulated that sustains God's necessary existence while providing clarification in terms of how God relates to the world that avoids the problem of evil altogether. Philosophically inclined theists should focus on that task rather than pursuing apologetics in response to the problem of evil. For the moment, there is broad skepticism regarding the possibility of engaging in the kind of metaphysical efforts associated with this pursuit, including the transcendental method of process philosophy. Still, there are times when the dominant consensus is wrong, and I suspect this is one of them. If there is hope of success in such a project, then I think that Hartshorne's method points us in the most likely direction of success.[1]

4. Neoclassical Theism and Divine Perfection: A Heterodox Alternative

On the approach that I am recommending, the role of the problem of evil in philosophical theology shifts. Rather than presenting an objection to the logic of God's existence, it serves merely to reveal conceptual error in a particular conception of the divine nature. The focus of the rational theist, then, should not be responding to the problem of evil by seeking to reconcile God's omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect moral agency with the amount of evil in the world. Instead, on the discovery that an account of divine perfection errs in locating God within the class of contingent beings, the rational theist should revisit her understanding of the divine nature in order to secure God's necessary existence on purely a priori grounds, that is to say, transcendentally.

In an email from 5 December 2016, Sterba suggested that my locating God within this modal category of necessary existence results, as in the case with Aristotle's First Mover, in a deity whose existence would be compatible with any degree of moral and natural evil in the world. Such a conception appears incompatible with the commitments of traditional

[1] I am inclined to think that Franklin Gamwell's development of Hartshorne's method addresses a number of potential problems, but the transcendental method employed by both is essentially the same. See, esp., Gamwell (2020).

theism and is one that Sterba suggested we should have little interest in defending because such a God would be irrelevant to our moral lives. At the very least, as Enlightenment deists recognized, while such a God may provide some explanatory benefits for thinking about the origins of the world, this God makes little contribution to our moral lives on an ongoing basis. The traditional account of God's moral perfection implies that God acts in or on the world in a morally significant manner, and it is God's moral status that grounds, in part, our attention to God in our own moral reasoning. On reflection, I believe Sterba is right, in part, in his judgment here. It is an error to characterize God as both eternal and morally perfect, as exercising agency that is in some sense subject to the general form of moral evaluation proper to finite rational beings like ourselves. The proper response, I want to suggest, is to resolve the horns of this dilemma by rejecting God's moral agency while preserving God's status as eternal. God should not be included in the class of moral agents, and as a result, we should avoid ascribing moral perfection to God. I will expand on these points later in the essay.

It is the second of Sterba's judgments that I want to challenge here: that a God conceived to be eternal is not one that we should have an interest in defending because this God is irrelevant to our moral lives. To this end, I will endeavor to show that the God of neoclassical theism plays a very different role than Aristotle's First Mover (or the deists' God), such that God's consequent nature as a universal subject preserves God's status as our final end (the comprehensive *telos* to which our activities make their ultimate contributions). In recognizing that God is not properly characterized as a moral agent or as possessing the property of moral perfection, we need not conclude that God is indifferent or irrelevant to moral goodness or that God does not do all that God properly can do to maximize value (both moral and non-moral). Unlike Aristotle's God, who initiates motion in the universe but who provides no comprehensive *telos* for the activity that follows, the God of neoclassical theism provides the cosmic purpose in relation to which all value has its final significance. This, then, the neoclassical conception of God shares with classical theism: God is both *alpha* and *omega*, first and last. God sets the initial conditions under which finite individuals realize value, and God's subjective experience is that to which all value (moral and non-moral) makes its ultimate contribution. It is in this context that we can say that God has an asymmetrical relationship with moral goodness. Moral goodness makes a distinctive contribution to the divine experience, even if God does not exercise moral agency or produce moral goodness in the exercise of God's power.

How might we go about reframing our understanding of God's nature such that God's not being a moral agent or morally perfect does not count against God's perfection and unique status in the cosmic economy of value? To achieve this end, I believe that we need to reconsider the property of omnipotence. Rather than start with the classical intuition that God's perfection implies omnipotence (literally, the possession of all power), we might reframe our approach around the idea of God's greatness in contrast to other individuals, where the relevant meaning of perfection is that God's power is unrivaled (insuperable), not that God is omnipotent. According to Hartshorne, "'Greatness' means having whatever properties it is better to have than not to have, as compared to other conceivable individuals" (Hartshorne [1965] 1991, p. 202). A better way to express God's special status as an individual, Hartshorne suggests, is to speak of God's being "unsurpassable" in contrast to other non-divine individuals. When considering God's perfection, we should keep in mind that "it may very well not be 'best' to be 'omnipotent', in the sense which generates the problem of evil in its classical form" (Hartshorne [1965] 1991, p. 202). In what follows, I want to suggest some ways in which we might reconsider God's greatness and relationship to the world using the framework of neoclassical theism that avoids the pitfalls of that God's omnipotence generates for the traditional account of the divine nature.

5. God and the World: Co-Eternal

On the traditional account of the divine nature, moral perfection is a quality attributed to God. There are two primary reasons for this. First, on the traditional account, God's

perfection is defined in terms of the possession of all positive qualities to the highest degree. If moral perfection is a positive quality possessed by any individual, then it must be found preeminently in God. Second, and related to the first, is the understanding of God's role in the creation of the world. This is the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, where the existence of all things outside of God are the result of God's creative activity, where each thing exists only insofar as it possesses imperfectly some of the properties perfectly realized in the divine nature. On the traditional account of causal efficacy, an effect is found preeminently in the cause. If God is the original cause of everything that exists, then whatever qualities and powers we find in the creation are but imperfect reflections of the fullness of those qualities and powers in God. Since we are created by God, our moral powers, imperfect as they are, must reside in their fullest sense in God, and this is what opens the door to the problem of evil as a challenge to the logic of God's existence. God's omnipotence and moral perfection are set on a collision course given our sense that God could and should have prevented the horrendous evil we find in the world. So, either God lacks sufficient power to prevent such evil, or God is not morally perfect because of the evil God permits; the absence of either attribute is sufficient to conclude that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist. Take the even, take the odd.

So, how might a neoclassical conception of divine greatness reframe our understanding of God's perfection, including God's relationship to the class of contingent, non-divine individuals, that can avoid the horns of this dilemma? In the place of omnipotence and creation ex nihilo, the neoclassical approach asserts that the class of all continent individuals is co-eternal with God (clearly not an orthodox view). Creation ex nihilo is not obviously preferable, logically speaking, to holding that the class of contingent individuals is co-eternal with God, though it involves significantly modifying our understanding of God's creative activity and the scope of God's power in relation to the world. Per Hartshorne, "greatness" means having whatever properties it is better to have than not to have, as compared to other conceivable individuals. As we will see, there is an enormous difference between God's eternal existence as a necessary individual and the necessary existence of a class of finite individuals, each of which on its own exists contingently. While creation ex nihilo is assumed within orthodox theism as part of its account of divine perfection and its understanding of causation, that by itself does not show its preferability in terms of the conceivable options, particularly if the traditional account gives rise to the problem of evil. Again, heresy is no objection within philosophical theology.

Following the neoclassical approach, God is the sole necessary individual, and the set of contingent individuals is never empty: there is always a contingent world to which God relates as a universal subject. According to Alfred North Whitehead, "the final real things of which the world is made up" are microscopic actualities or actual entities, each of which decides how to unify the past in order to serve the future (Whitehead [1929] 1978). God, too, is an actual entity, but as we will see, God's decisions about unifying the past in order to serve the future are value maximizing by necessity, in contrast to the decisions of moral agents, who are capable of choosing between greater and lesser value. To clarify the point further, God's choices are always among possibilities that maximize value equally, such that the choice among these possibilities is non-moral. Rather than omnipotent, God has all the power any one individual could have but not all the power there is, given that finite individuals also possess powers proper to their nature, powers that are not simply imperfect iterations of divine powers or subject to divine fiat. As we will see, God exerts cosmic influence, and it is in God's subjective experience that all value finds its ultimate significance. Still, there is also real, non-trivial power in the set of finite actual entities that make up the world.

While it is no longer appropriate to speak of God as omnipotent, it is still the case that God's power is "unsurpassable" by any member of the class of finite individuals. To be sure, there is a great deal at stake in this reformulation, not the least of which that it forces us to rethink the fundamental relationship between cause and effect found in the classical account (where an effect exists preeminently in its cause). More relevant for our

purposes, this shift opens space for reframing our understanding of God's relationship with states of affairs in the world, including the existence of horrendous evil. It remains, however, to flesh out the conception of God's perfection, or greatness, that follows from this metaphysical perspective (God as the sole necessarily existing individual in relation to a necessary class of contingent individuals, the set of which is never null, because "nothing exists" is impossible).[2] How might we express the idea of God's perfection under these new conditions, such that it remains proper to describe God's power as unsurpassable, or unrivaled, with respect to other individuals but that also avoids the problem of evil as an objection to God's existence?

On the neoclassical account, God interacts with the world as a whole and is affected by the world in all of its particularity. God exercises a kind of sovereign influence on the world, but this influence is constrained by the real power and freedom of finite actual entities, power and freedom that is not simply derivative of God's power through the traditional account of creation ex nihilo. Finite individuals have powers proper to their existential status, powers that are not simply imperfect manifestations of qualities found perfectly in the divine nature. One way to express God's perfection in this context involves understanding God's activity as necessarily value maximizing within the scope of God's power to influence non-divine activity in the world. This should not be understood as an exercise of divine will where God faces better and worse options but obeys the moral law by necessity (Kant's idea of a "holy will"). Instead, as a transcendental principle, divine activity necessarily maximizes the value possible as a result of the past actions of finite individuals through God's decision for future purpose. All finite individuals exercise real, non-trivial power of their own in making decisions about value for future purpose, and moral agents do so as well but with this difference. Finite rational individuals confront the possibility of choosing a lesser value in their decisions for future purpose. Because moral agents possess real freedom and power to act contrary to the divine purpose, evil, even horrendous evil, is always possible given the existence of finite rational individuals (moral agents). All existing individuals decide their contribution to future value, moral agents must choose between greater and lesser value when making this decision, and God alone acts in relation to the whole with an aim for the future that is value maximizing by necessity.[3]

Framed this way, the evil that exists in the world is irrelevant to the question of God's existence. Moral evil in particular is a potential feature of any reality in which there exist individuals with the capacity for choosing between greater and lesser value (moral agents), and moral evil is always the result of the exercise of finite freedom in spite of God's influence to the contrary. God's power to influence comprehensively is unsurpassed by our own powers of finite influence, but God's power is not absolute, since non-trivial power always exists in the members of any set of finite individuals. This difference allows space for finite individuals to contribute value to the divine life (the contribution of real novelty as a result of the exercise of finite freedom and power—something achieved by all actual

[2] I suspect that for many, the contingency of all members of the set of finite individuals suggests the contingency of the set as a whole. But there's no reason to infer this conclusion about the set based on the contingency of its members. The possibility of there being nothing at all relies on an inference from our ability to conceive of the non-existence of any particular to the possibility of conceiving of nothing at all. While "nothing exists" may appear to name a conceivable alternative to "something exists," it is worth noting that it is impossible to distinguish between "nothing at all" and the strictly inconceivable. For example, a contradiction such as a "round square" literally identifies nothing at all: it is a putative thought with no object. It follows that "nothing at all" cannot be distinguished from a contradiction, and the inconceivable cannot serve as a possible alternative to "something exists." The conclusion follows that "something exists" is logically necessary, which is precisely what is meant by stating that the set of finite individuals is never null in spite of the contingent status of all of its members.

[3] Franklin Gamwell suggests another way to make this point. Finite rational individuals recognize a difference between subjective and objective value, such that we can be tempted to choose value for future purpose that prioritizes our subjective interest over the divine *telos*, which provides the objective standard by which all value is finally measured. In other words, it is available to us as finite rational individuals to choose a lesser value as our aim for the future, to prioritize self-interest (subjective value) over the comprehensive *telos* that reason implicitly recognizes as the objective standard of value. In contrast, Gamwell suggests in an email to the author from 4 January 2019, that "God is the one individual in which egoism and altruism necessarily coincide," such that God never confronts the conditions that make moral agency possible and moral choices necessary (the potential conflict between the lesser value of self-interest and the objective standard of value: the divine good).

entities), but this space is also sufficient to allow for significant natural and moral evil, in spite of God's universal influence to the contrary.

6. God Is Not a Moral Agent

One reason to favor the alternative account of divine perfection advanced here is that it avoids what I take to be an unforced error in these disputes. This involves treating God as a sort of super moral agent. As I have suggested, this follows unavoidably from the traditional understanding of God's causal relation to the world: as creating ex nihilo with the implication that whatever powers are found in the effect of God's act of creation exist preeminently in the divine cause. In this context, God's inability to do what a finite being can do reveals a deficiency in God because it is assumed that the powers of finite beings relate to God's powers as imperfect to perfect. Furthermore, as Sterba argues in his book, wherever we attempt to account for evil based on the limitations of finite moral agents—whether in terms of their willing or in their limited powers—substituting God's agency reveals the possibility of avoiding the evils in question. But this idea of "divine moral substitution" fundamentally misunderstands the metaphysical limitations that exist in terms of the real relations among actual entities—divine and non-divine—in the world. Again, God is not omnipotent. Finite individuals are hard facts of the world in relation to which God can exercise influence through the selection of natural laws and as understood by rational beings as our comprehensive *telos*, one the one hand, and in response to which God can act to maximize value for future purpose, on the other. God's greatness, however, does not imply that God's powers are substitutable for the powers of finite individuals; the relative powers of the two classes of actual entities (divine and non-divine) simply are not substitutable in this way. Following the neoclassical account, "greatness" means having whatever properties it is better to have than not to have, as compared to other conceivable individuals, and the powers of moral agency reflect a form of finite agency incompatible with the divine nature.

What are some of the ways in which we might characterize God's perfection, or greatness, with respect to the transcendental characteristics of existence exemplified by all actual entities, divine and non-divine? On the neoclassical account, God is the only individual whose existence is compatible with any state of affairs whatsoever. Finite individuals, in contrast, are incompatible with all sorts of conditions, rendering them existentially fragile in a way that God is not. Additionally, God is the only subject in direct relation with all other individuals (as a universal subject) and capable of exercising universal influence (both in terms of setting the governing laws of each cosmic epoch and as the comprehensive *telos* at which finite rational agency should aim in seeking to maximize value for future purpose). Each finite individual interacts with a very limited portion of the world, and its influence is circumscribed by its finitude in a way that God's is not. The way to put these points metaphysically is to argue that to exist is to be in relation; to be is to experience and be experienced. The existence of finite individuals is constrained by relationships compatible with their existence; God is strictly compatible with all possible relationships (excluded by no conceivable state of affairs, or non-competitive, existentially speaking), which is precisely what it means to describe God as eternal. Finite beings are related to some but not all existing states of affairs (imperfect relationality); God is related to all states of affairs (perfect relationality).

It is worth emphasizing here that this approach is metaphysically abstemious, which I take to be a virtue. This approach avoids the difficulties of something like Aquinas's "analogy of being," where there is a fundamental and insuperable difference between how the metaphysical categories apply to divine and non-divine individuals. On the traditional account, this divide ensures that we are always reasoning analogically when applying our categories of existence to God, and there remains a gulf in what we can infer from experience regarding the divine individual's nature. On the neoclassical account, there are no metaphysical exceptions. The transcendental conditions for reality as such apply to God and non-divine individuals without exception, while still permitting the distinction

between these existential categories. Perfect and imperfect can still operate here, since we can speak of God's existence as surpassing that of any finite individual's in the ways described above. Still, to exist in all cases is to exist in relation, and one difference between God and non-divine individuals is the scope of the relations and whether an individual's existence is competitive with others. As noted, where we relate partially (imperfectly) to the world and are fragile with respect to some states of affairs (vulnerable, finite), God relates to all of reality (perfect relationality) and is strictly compatible with all conceivable states of affairs (invulnerable, eternal).

If we understand power as a type of influence exercised through relationships, then God's power is unsurpassable by any finite individual, even if it no longer makes sense, strictly speaking, to characterize God as omnipotent. In this way, both God and finite beings have real power (the ability to influence states of affairs through relationships) as actual entities. It is the scope of God's relationality and influence that characterize divine perfection, not, for example, the ability to act locally as a finite individual to secure a particular outcome, where we might reasonably evaluate whether the choice made was value maximizing with respect to the available alternatives. By framing the difference between finite beings and God in terms of perfect and imperfect relationality, where power has to do with our ability to influence that to which we relate, we retain the ability to attribute perfection to God without committing the category mistake of attributing moral agency and moral goodness to God, properties properly associated with finite rational individuals whose actions always involve a choice between greater and lesser value for future purpose.

7. The Divine Good: Beyond Aristotle's First Mover

Divine agency necessarily maximizes value for future purpose, where that future is always God's own. This is achieved, in part, through God's universal influence on finite actual entities to contribute to the divine good. One way of understanding the nature of this influence is that God seeks the greatest unity in diversity (or creativity) possible as the object of divine experience, where God's choices for future purpose always maximizes this value in light of the available alternatives. Each actual entity is internally related to its past, so its richness of feeling depends on what is inherited from that past. God, in turn, is internally related to every actual entity, such that the richness of God's experience reflects the contributions of all to the divine good. Each actual entity decides for the future in light of its inheritance and the possibilities this inheritance permits with the aim of maximizing value for the future. This is how the many (the inherited past) become one (a single subjective experience by an actual entity) and are increased by one (as the choice for future purpose results in a novel datum of experience for other actual entities—including God—that exemplifies value to a greater or lesser degree).

As Franklin Gamwell suggests, if the good is a quality that is to be realized through activity, then goodness must characterize states of affairs as possible choices for future purpose. Finite rational agency involves a moral evaluation of possibilities for future purpose in terms of this characteristic, but all actual entities contribute value in light of their activities. For finite rational individuals, such decisions imply an all-things-considered evaluation, since any conceivable state of affairs can be contemplated as a possible choice of action for a rational will. The conclusion Gamwell reaches is that "only the character of all possible things can define the good—and moral teleology is defined by a comprehensive purpose whose telos is strictly metaphysical" (Gamwell 2020, p. 128). In addition, because this characteristic is used to evaluate choices among possible states of affairs, it must be something that different choices realize to different degrees, which is what makes choice among alternatives significant. "The good defined by the possible as such is a variable," Gamwell continues, "such that all actualities exemplify it, and all future possibilities if and when realized will or may exemplify it in greater or lesser measure . . . . The final real things exemplify 'the many become one, and are increased by one' (Whitehead 1978, p. 21), that is, exemplify creative unification for the future" (Gamwell 2020, p. 135). This unity

in diversity represents the metaphysical variable to be maximized, and God both chooses the natural laws for a particular cosmic epoch with this aim and serves as the ultimate recipient of the value realized through the exercise of real, non-trivial power on the part of finite actual entities.

And what of moral goodness? What distinguishes moral and non-moral goodness on this account is not the formal standard of value as such (unity in diversity, or creativity) but rather the distinctive contribution that moral agents make to the divine good through their freely made choices to contribute maximally to the divine purpose. On this account, moral goodness is a species of goodness more generally, a subset of the more general category of value to be maximized in the divine life. Understood this way, we should anticipate a comprehensive account of value as a category to which there can be both moral and non-moral contributions. This conforms to a standard distinction within ethics between moral and non-moral value. Understood this way, however, we immediately see that value must be defined in such a way that all contributions share a common form, even as members of the class can be differentiated between moral and non-moral with respect to how the contribution is made, where moral value is realized through the choice by moral agents between greater and lesser value for future purpose with respect to the divine good.

All value represents a contribution to the comprehensive unity in diversity (creativity) realized through divine activity (which is value maximizing by necessity). A mundane way that might help us to approximate this idea is the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. When we open a new puzzle and spread the pieces out on the table, we have an example of diversity (the variety of distinct pieces) but little unity—it is just a mess of individual bits that anticipate an integrated whole. Once completed, however, we find something interesting. The diversity is still present—all the pieces are still there—but now the pieces have been harmonized into a whole, a complex unity in diversity. We find pleasure and satisfaction in the resolution of that initial disharmony and diversity into this final, creative achievement, one in which the individual parts have not been lost or effaced but merely enhanced through their integration into a greater whole that is itself a new object of subjective experience. Consider now the totality of the cosmos, where the various pieces are not simply inert objects on which a single will operates but rather a collection of individuals in relation that respond to one another, always contributing finite value in the subjective experience of other individuals through their decisions about how to realize value for the future, all of which together become a single, comprehensive unity in diversity in the decisions that God makes for future value in the divine life.

So, what is the distinctive contribution that moral agents make to the divine good such that we need to distinguish between moral and non-moral value? God, as the cosmic individual with the capacity to influence universally, chooses the natural laws within which finite individuals act toward greater unity in diversity (value maximization). As the comprehensive *telos* that reason recognizes as a condition for the possibility of a rational choice among alternatives for future purpose, God lures rational individuals—those who act with self-understanding—to maximize value for God: the divine good. What makes the value of such choices "moral" as opposed to "non-moral" is that this capacity for acting with self-understanding includes the possibility of self-contradiction, the choice of purpose that contradicts reason's recognition of a comprehensive *telos* as our proper aim. This is the possibility of moral evil, the free choice of a self-understanding that denies the responsibility to maximize value, all things considered, where the ultimate standard is the comprehensive good realized in the life of God (the divine good).

Moral agents are special insofar as they have a capacity for choosing between good and evil, and moral goodness, formally speaking simply represents the exercise of finite freedom in an act of self-understanding that decides for this comprehensive *telos* as its proper aim. Moral evil, in contrast, involves the exercise of finite freedom in an act of

self-understanding that decides against this comprehensive *telos* as its proper aim.[4] God does not choose between good and evil, since God is necessarily value maximizing with regard to God's future: this is simply what it means for God to make a decision for future value in light of what God inherits from the past, which includes the decisions made by all other finite individuals for future value. As Gamwell puts it in an email to the author from 4 January 2019, "By relating internally to strictly all things in all of their detail, God's actualities must again and again decide to pursue maximal creativity in the future as such—precisely because the future as such is the future of God." God is the ultimate beneficiary of all value, including the value that results from the moral choices of finite rational beings; however, God is not a moral agent, and it would be a category error to include moral goodness among God's perfections, since God is not choosing among greater and lesser values in God's decisions for future purpose (that is, for or against the divine good as the comprehensive *telos*). We can and should distinguish between God's being value maximizing by necessity, on the one hand (the neoclassical account), and God's being a perfect moral agent who necessarily fulfills the moral law in God's choice among greater and lesser value, on the other (possessing a holy will, or moral perfection in the traditional sense).

Some additional clarification about God's activity might be in order here. While God's existence is necessary, God's actions have a contingent aspect. There may be options available to God that are equally value maximizing, either with respect to the choice of natural laws for a cosmic epoch or in response to the value God inherits from God's own past and from the contributions of non-divine actual entities. The choice among these options is contingent and non-moral, since any option chosen among this set would be value maximizing. God's activity, then, always satisfies the metaphysical conditions implied by God's nature (always value maximizing), but this does not mean that God's actions involve no actual choice among alternatives. After all, in the absence of alternatives from which to choose, no choice can be made. Only if we assume that there is always only one way to maximize value must we conclude that God's choices are necessary both in their formal (value maximizing) and substantive (the specific choice made among equally value-maximizing options) aspects. It is not obvious that value-maximizing choices always imply a single option, such that, in effect, God never chooses but merely acts in whatever way is necessary to maximize value for future purpose. In addition, the neoclassical account implies limits on God's foreknowledge (contrary to the classic account of divine omniscience) in light of the real freedom of finite actual entities within the limits of any cosmic epoch. In other words, God can anticipate how the ordering of a particular cosmic epoch will provide broad conditions for coordinating the activities of actual entities in the world, but God cannot know (because it is unknowable in principle) precisely how those actual entities will use their freedom under those conditions. It may be that God's value-maximizing choice involves uncertainties that preclude the resolution of conceivable alternatives to a single, necessary option. Thus, God must choose in light of those uncertainties, always, of course, with the aim of maximizing value for God's future experience.

While God's agency is not moral in the sense of involving the choice between greater and lesser value, God's existence is morally significant for us. This is the sense in which God stands in an asymmetrical relationship with moral value, benefitting from it but not producing it through divine activity. This is because the divine good is properly the rational *telos* of all our choices as finite rational individuals. This involves our understanding of the exercise of our finite agency as requiring a choice among alternatives for future purpose, where the rational standard is to maximize value, with the recognition that we can (and

[4] This involves a self-contradiction, since such a choice simultaneously recognizes, at least implicitly, that every choice of self-understanding for the future involves the judgment that this rather than some available alternative is more valuable, all things considered, and only a comprehensive *telos* can provide a rational means of evaluating such choices, since it alone provides a comprehensive standard of value by which an all-things-considered judgment can be made. A choice for a lesser value (e.g., in preference of self-interest over the divine good), then, results in a contradiction, since it involves the simultaneous affirmation and denial of a comprehensive *telos* as the standard of objective value.

often do) choose lesser values. Still, it is never rational to choose a lesser value, all things considered, and reason affirms that it is the divine good that is the ultimate standard of value for us. Why is this so? As Gamwell suggests in an email from January 4, 2019, "Decision with understanding cannot relate to its own final nullity: such decision is 'all things considered,' and the thought that any value we achieve or difference we make will eventually be erased is meaningless. Unless there is something ultimate at stake in what we do, then ultimately there is nothing at stake." The future to which we make an ultimate difference is the future of God as the universal subject who exists eternally and who is internally related to all things in the world. The ultimate meaning and value of our actions, then, rests on the difference they make to the divine life, however else we might also value them. As an eternal subject always apprehending the whole, God's experience is the sole good to which our actions can contribute permanent value: the divine good.

On the neoclassical account, God is the only individual that exists necessarily because, as Gamwell indicates in an email to the author on 18 February 2021, "God is the one individual definable entirely in metaphysical terms." God includes both an absolute pole (God's abstract, eternal nature understood as non-competitive with all other states of affairs) and a relative pole (God as universal subject internally related to the world in all of its particularity). In terms of God's perfection, God alone both influences universally and is universally affected. God values all existing individuals with respect to their unique contributions to the divine life as part of the harmony (unity in diversity, or creativity) that God seeks through God's universal influence and that is realized in God's decisions about value for the future in which those contributions find their final significance. Again, in terms of God's perfection, this reveals how God's existence in relation is comprehensive (universal, perfect) in a way that meaningfully contrasts with our finite existence in relation (partial, imperfect).

8. God's Power and Moral Goodness

God's power should be understood in relation to what God contributes to the world, both through God's universal influence and as the *telos* toward which all finite individuals contribute value. Such power far exceeds the power of finite beings, though there are actions possible for finite beings that are not available to God. Again, having discarded creation ex nihilo, there is no reason to believe that divine and non-divine powers relate to one another as perfect to imperfect in the traditional sense. As I have noted (following Hartshorne), in terms of greatness, there are some powers that are better, all things considered, not to have, and God's greatness includes all of the power proper to God in light of God's unique metaphysical status. Finite rational individuals bear the ultimate responsibility for moral good and evil, and God's subjective experience is diminished by our moral failures (since our failures contribute less value than was possible had we chosen differently). Again, God does all that God can do to maximize value through God's universal influence (the choice of natural laws for a cosmic epoch) and as the sole universal subject in relation to which all value finds its ultimate reference (the comprehensive *telos* with respect to which finite rational individuals make moral choices), and this is enough to establish God's greatness in contrast to our limited influence and experience.

At issue, then, is not whether events and conditions in the world satisfy our expectations for God as a super moral agent (omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect) but rather what is proper to God given God's unique metaphysical status. That God's influence on the world is universal (all existing entities are influenced by the divine reality) is compatible with God's causal efficacy being limited locally in light of the actual freedom and power of contingent beings (the reality of non-trivial freedom and power in the existing members of the class of finite individuals acting under the laws of nature of a particular cosmic epoch). God provides structure and order, including a cosmic *telos*, but this power to shape the whole does not override the finite causal powers of actual entities, even as it exerts universal influence on their actions and lures rational individuals to maximize

value for God.[5] Here, the analogy of the conductor of an orchestra might offer some partial insights into divine activity, keeping in mind that the conductor, unlike God, is also a finite individual in this example.

There are things that the conductor can do in terms of ordering the actions of the individual players in an orchestra in ways that integrate their efforts into a harmonious whole. No one of the individual players can accomplish this, and in this sense, the conductor's power is unsurpassed by any of the other members of the orchestra. That being said, the conductor cannot prevent an individual performer from playing a sour note or missing her entrance, each of which mars the beauty of the whole production. A good conductor does all that a conductor can to encourage excellent musicianship, both in setting the conditions for performance generally and when engaged in conducting a particular performance. In both cases, the conductor exercises powers of influence and persuasion unavailable to the other members. If she is a good conductor, then she does all that is proper to her to promote musical excellence (value) and minimize disharmony (evil) as these relate to the musical performance of the orchestra through her unique influence on the other members. Still, the conductor does not play the instruments for the players, and the conductor's ultimate achievement involves her influence on, and response to, the decisions freely made by the individuals in the orchestra.

While the analogy is imperfect, since the conductor is herself a finite individual with the powers (and limits) appropriate to that status, it provides some insight into God's activity in relation to the world. God plays a cosmic role in harmonizing the activity of the members of the class of finite individuals to the degree possible given God's unique metaphysical status. God is the sole individual whose influence is felt by all of the members simultaneously (in the laws that structure a particular cosmic epoch), and it is God's experience alone that realizes the harmony of the whole that is possible in light of God's universal influence and the actual decisions made by finite individuals (the understanding of which provides the lure for rational individuals to choose the divine good as their comprehensive *telos*). For rational beings, the divine good provides the condition for the possibility of rational choices among possible options for future purpose, all things considered. We might understand evil (both natural and moral) as discordance within the harmony that God seeks to maximize through God's universal influence on the class of finite individuals. God cannot prevent all discordance as the result of local, non-divine activity, even as God does all that is within God's power to maximize value through the universal influence that God exercises (the natural laws that provide the conditions for coordinated activity among finite actual entities) and the choices for future purpose that integrate finite contributions into a cosmic whole, which also provides the comprehensive *telos* of finite rational individuals (moral agents). Thus, God's activity is value maximizing in the sense relevant to God's unique agency, even while it remains inappropriate to attribute moral perfection to God's nature, since, strictly speaking, God does not choose between better and worse alternatives for future value in the manner of moral agents.

9. A Role for Skeptical Theism

On this account, God is doing all that God can to prevent evil, and it is here that there might be an appropriate role for a version of skeptical theism: the argument that we cannot judge God's actions because we lack sufficient knowledge of the tradeoffs that God is making. This has to do with God's choice among possible options for cosmic order—the scheme of natural laws for a particular cosmic epoch. To be clear, however, this version of skeptical theism is very different from something like Michael Bergmann's. As Sterba presents it in chapter 5 of his book, Bergmann's version of skeptical theism is meant to operate under the rules of classical theism, where God remains omnipotent and morally perfect, in spite of the challenges presented by the problem of evil, and the insufficiency in

[5] Whitehead writes: "More than two thousand years ago, the wisest of men [Plato] proclaimed that the divine persuasion is the foundation of the order of the world, but that it could only produce such a measure of harmony as amid brute forces it was possible to accomplish" (Whitehead [1933] 1961, p. 160).

our knowledge of the conditions under which God chooses are meant to insulate God from our moral judgments.

Something like what I have described as the "substitution hypothesis" is at work in that context, it seems to me, so that for any state of affairs in the world where we can imagine a standard moral agent failing to prevent some evil, God's agency could "substitute," thus preventing the evil in question. As a super moral agent (omnipotent), God possesses all conceivable power. Bergmann suggests that one way to preserve God's existence on the traditional account against the problem of evil is to argue that we lack all of the relevant knowledge necessary to evaluate God's particular moral choices in such contexts. Sterba argues, however, that there remain insuperable problems for this line of apology for divine inactivity.

My understanding of Sterba's argument is that to see the problem with skeptical theism's defense we do not need to focus on individual cases where we might remain uncertain as to whether God's failure to intervene might be evidence against God's power or goodness, where a particular tradeoff might potentially be justified had we all of the relevant information. Instead, we should consider more generally what moral goods God might be understood to be advancing and consider whether it is possible to attain those goods in a world with significantly less evil. I find myself persuaded that Sterba is right in this context; once we consider the range of goods that we might imagine God pursuing as an omnipotent moral agent, it is not beyond our capacity to judge whether the apparent tradeoffs evident in the world (e.g., permitting things like the Holocaust, the miseries of slavery, and the suffering of the innocent from accidents and disease) seem warranted. If we can conceive of alternative ways to order the world that achieves those goods while also avoiding horrendous evil, then the skeptical position is undermined. Framed this way, Sterba argues that we do have the relevant knowledge for making the kinds of moral judgments sufficient to sustain the objection from evil. There are conceivable worlds with less evil or possibility of evil in which a range of significant moral and non-moral goods can be realized in contrast to the arrangement of our actual world, and an omnipotent God should have chosen one of those alternatives.

My objection here, however, is that the exchange between Sterba and Bergmann presupposes the traditional account of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection, where among the possibilities available to God are fundamental alterations in the powers of finite individuals. As the omnipotent creator, God can make whatever tweaks to the nature and powers of God's creatures, so it is always within God's power to realize any conceivable world, including worlds in which the power and freedom of finite beings are constrained in ways that allow for the various goods at which God might aim to be realized without the risk of horrendous moral outcomes that are all too evident in our actual world. On Sterba's account, take any good that might require the exercise of creaturely power and freedom, the world can be arranged structurally so that there is power and freedom sufficient for achieving these goods while also ensuring that misuse of power and freedom never produces horrendous evil. If such a world is conceivable, then the actual world presents an objection to the logic of the traditional God's existence.

In the case of the God of neoclassical theism, however, the skeptical argument operates a bit differently. God is not simply a super moral agent, perfect in will and omnipotent, in contrast to our conflicted wills and imperfect powers. God does not create finite individuals and bestow on them their particular natures and powers as imperfect exemplifications of divine qualities. Actual entities, both divine and non-divine, exemplify the transcendental characteristics of existence, though these characteristics are self-differentiating between the divine individual and the class of finite, continent individuals. On the neoclassical account, it is a category mistake to ascribe moral agency to God precisely because God does not act in the world under the same conditions as finite rational beings, conditions that permit choices between greater and lesser value for the future. In considering God's relationship to value, including moral value, we have to take God's unique metaphysical status into consideration, not as a super moral agent but as a necessary individual that influences and

experiences comprehensively in the manner previously discussed. Again, God is active in the world in two primary ways proper to God's metaphysical status.

At one level, God provides the fundamental laws and structures for a cosmic epoch within which relations among finite individuals play out. Such laws and structures play a significant role in coordinating the activity of finite actual entities and allowing for the emergence of various degrees of harmony and order (unity in diversity) through the exercise of their non-trivial freedom and power. This suggests the possibility of different systems of natural laws among which God might choose in establishing the structures within which finite individuals exercise their power and freedom and contribute to the divine good. Our ability to evaluate whether a particular natural system is better than some conceivable alternative almost certainly runs up against the skeptical objection that we lack sufficient perspective to judge God's choices at this level. This version of the skeptical argument does not run into the same objections raised by Sterba in the case of traditional theism precisely because we are no longer speculating about the tradeoffs being made in the world by a super moral agent where our moral knowledge and experience seem sufficient to render the relevant judgments. We are not in a position to make comprehensive judgments about the merits of different systems of natural laws with regard to the tradeoffs involved for maximizing value over the course of a cosmic epoch, where finite beings necessarily possess the non-trivial powers and freedom appropriate to their natures and to which God's response is always value maximizing.

At another level, God provides a comprehensive *telos* for the activity of finite rational beings. As the universal subject of experience, all value realized by contingent beings is value realized, ultimately, for God, including moral value. As finite beings come into existence and disappear, they contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the divine life (whatever else they can be said to accomplish). These contributions make an objective and eternal (though mostly trivial) difference to God. We might imagine, though, that the contributions of rational beings are significantly less trivial in their contributions as a result, in part, of our moral agency. On the whole, God influences both rational and non-rational individuals in ways that aim at greater harmony and less discordance through the natural laws selected for a cosmic epoch; however, the power of actual entities is real and non-trivial, and the freedom of moral agents includes the choice between greater and lesser value for future purpose. The value available to be maximized by God's choice for the future is limited by the free choices of finite individuals, but the potential disharmony is also minimized as far as God's universal influence coordinates activity in the direction of greater creativity and moral choices are made by finite rational individuals in light of their understanding of the divine good as the comprehensive *telos*.

There are things we can do locally that God cannot, e.g., save a child from drowning, but examples like this simply reveal a difference between God's agency and the agency of finite individuals, not evidence of divine weakness or imperfection. Only if we start with traditional accounts of omnipotence would God's inability to act in the manner of a finite individual imply a deficiency in God, since on that account, any power found in a creature must be found more perfectly in God as creator. In contrast, the God of neoclassical theism offers an alternative understanding of divine perfection (God's greatness) that does not run afoul of the standard form of the objection from evil. God's activity is necessarily value maximizing in response to the acts of finite individuals who exercise non-trivial freedom in their own choices for future value. A God so understood, I believe, can serve as the proper object of our ultimate concern as finite rational beings even if this God is not the God of traditional theism in the Abrahamic traditions.

10. Another God of the Gaps?

There is a final area of concern might be helpful to address. In my original correspondence with Sterba, the issue arose as to whether the conception of deity I was defending resulted in "one cause too many" when discussing God's relationship to the world. I believe that Sterba was concerned that the neoclassical deity who operates comprehensively

and intimately in terms of being related to all existing things and exercising universal influence generates a "God-of-the-gaps" problem with respect to the inquiries of the natural sciences. His suggestion was that we did not need a God so understood to explain the cosmos, favoring instead the empirical findings of the natural sciences. It might be helpful to spend a little time on this topic, since it is a perennial one in philosophical theology and cosmology.

As I suggested previously, God exerts cosmic influence, but our knowledge of divine activity is not empirical. This knowledge is properly transcendental, the result of reflection about the nature of reality as such in light of common human experience and reason, and it is not the product of the observation and measure of particular, contingent events in the world. God sets the general conditions for a cosmic epoch within which finite individuals exercise their freedom and powers as actual entities, and God provides a comprehensive *telos* that serves as the condition of the possibility of making all-things-considered judgments of value for future purpose by finite rational individuals (moral agents). It is with respect to the divine experience of the whole that all value makes its ultimate contribution. If reason commands choices that maximize value for future purpose, then God's future is the only purpose that gives such choices ultimate significance, since only in God are the differences such choices make preserved for eternity (and a choice that makes no ultimate difference for the future is ultimately meaningless). Neither of these divine activities—establishing the laws of a particular cosmic epoch or serving as our comprehensive *telos*—are within the purview of the natural sciences to investigate.

The natural sciences are very helpful for describing the furniture of the cosmos and the various ways in which that furniture is arranged, including the natural laws that govern a particular cosmic epoch. But the natural sciences do not take up fundamental philosophical questions regarding how the actual conditions found in the universe relate to the range of alternatives that might be possible (e.g., why these particular cosmic constants—natural laws—as opposed to some conceivable alternatives?). The natural sciences do not consider whether the transcendental conditions of possible existence require that "something exists" is necessary or whether "God exists necessarily." These simply are not the kinds of topics addressed by the natural sciences, and the philosophical inquiry into these matters does not directly impinge on the empirical methods of those disciplines.

Similarly, the natural sciences are methodologically agnostic about whether there is any purpose in the universe, including anything like a comprehensive *telos* in relation to which determinations of value are ultimately made by rational beings such as ourselves. The account of value and the understanding of moral agency previously provided suggest that what is distinctive about our activity as finite rational beings is that it involves a choice among possible alternatives for the future, where reason directs us to maximize value but where the choice of lesser value is always available to us. The choice among values must make a difference for the future (otherwise, the choice is ultimately meaningless), and the denial that there is anything in terms of which different choices can be rationally evaluated with respect to the future nullifies the possibility of rational choice; such a denial is self-defeating. I have suggested that the neoclassical God provides the necessary *telos* with respect to which such choices can be rationally made. Only by contributing to the divine good do the efforts of finite beings make a permanent difference for the future, and the value of those contributions is ultimately measured by their positive contribution to the divine life. The divine good is the condition of the possibility of the meaningful choice of purpose for finite rational beings. Again, the natural sciences simply have nothing to say about a cosmic *telos* of this sort or the role it plays as a transcendental presupposition of our practical reasoning (as a condition for the possibility of rational choice among options for future purpose).

There is another point of distinction that I also think is worth making here. Regarding the role of something like astrophysics as a mode of empirical enquiry, I have every confidence in its ability to contribute to our knowledge of the contingent features of reality as they comprise an object of knowledge suitable to the methods of that discipline

(including the actual laws of nature for a particular cosmic epoch). That said, there is no discipline within the empirical sciences—astrophysics included—that can provide the basis for an experience of the universe as a whole. By "experience," I literally mean that some subject is capable of experiencing the referent of a concept, not merely that a subject is warranted in the use of the concept as a meaningful abstraction. We can have a concept of the universe as a whole, but it is not an object of experience for us and can never be, given our finitude. This is what makes the concept of the universe as a whole an abstraction for us: it is a concept that may have an objective referent, but that cannot be confirmed by our experience. In principle, "reality as a whole" is always merely an abstract idea for finite rational beings. Another way to put this point is that the abstract becomes concrete in experience, and for the cosmic whole to be more than an abstract idea, this whole must be an object of actual experience for some subject.

This inability to comprehend the whole in our experience is not merely a question of available technology or the need for innovations in our methods. As finite parts of the whole to which the concept of the whole refers, we simply are incapable of such an experience in principle. As finite members of this whole, the totality cannot be an object of discrete experience for us, and yet we cannot avoid presupposing that the whole exists as a concrete totality in spite of our fragmentary experiences of its various parts. It is a methodological presupposition of empirical cosmology. What grounds such a presupposition? If the abstract becomes concrete in experience, then for the cosmos to exist as a single, integrated whole, not merely as an abstract idea but in concrete specificity, then this implies some meaningful way in which that whole is an object of experience. To exist as something concrete is to be experienced in concrete specificity by a subject. To my mind, the only candidate for such an experience of the whole universe as a concrete totality is God.

The divine experience renders the cosmos a unity in diversity in concrete specificity, not merely as an abstract inference from finite experience but as an actual object of divine experience. Here, the empirical sciences are rendered moot, since there is no way, in principle, for the natural sciences to provide anything more than an abstract conception of the whole as a methodological presupposition for ongoing empirical inquiry. All of this is simply to suggest that nothing in the neoclassical account implies a conflict or competition with the methods and findings of the natural sciences (astrophysics included). The existence and activity of the neoclassical God does not attempt to provide supernatural solutions for natural mysteries that we can anticipate being resolved at a later time through innovations in the technologies and methods of the empirical sciences. Instead, this understanding of God does conceptual work for us in accounting for the initial choice of cosmic constants (the natural laws of a cosmic epoch selected by God), providing the ultimate grounds of practical reason for finite individuals (the divine good), and grounding the methodological presupposition of the natural sciences that our abstract conception of the universe exists as a concrete, unified whole (as an abstraction made concrete in the subjective experience of God). This is no God of the gaps.

11. Conclusions

As I indicated at the outset, my efforts in this essay were meant to be suggestive. I have not sought to provide systematic presentation of neoclassical theism in complete detail. My goal has been to challenge the idea that the problem of evil for traditional theism constitutes an objection to the logic of theism generally. As a result, I did not seek to counter Sterba's arguments against traditional theism and its apologists within this dispute. Instead, I have tried to argue that the conclusion we should reach as a result of his efforts is not that the existence of God is logically impossible but rather that we need to rethink our understanding of God's nature to avoid mischaracterizing God's existence as vulnerable to the problem of evil in the first place. To that end, I have tried to highlight what a neoclassical conception of God might do for us, with particular attention to how such an

account overcomes various objections to which traditional theism appears vulnerable with respect to the problem of evil.

In my original correspondence with Sterba, there seemed to me to be two main objections that are related to one another. I believe that at least part of his response was based on my initial mischaracterization of God as morally perfect. I am grateful to Gamwell for helping me to see my error in continuing to attribute moral perfection to God, as if God were simply a special type of moral agent. In that original context, Sterba's objection that the neoclassical God is an extremely weak moral agent made sense. This had to do with my insistence that while God affects the general conditions under which moral value is realized, God is incapable of acting locally to prevent moral evil. I believe I have addressed that error in this essay. While it may be counterintuitive in the context of traditional theism, the solution is to reject both omnipotence and moral perfection as divine attributes. To that end, I have endeavored to clarify both what this would mean in a neoclassical context and how the result is still a compelling account of God's nature that distinguishes God's greatness in contrast to our finite limitations. I hope I have done a better job here showing that moral agency applies properly to a subset of finite individuals—those with the capacity to choose between greater and lesser value for the future—and represents a category mistake when applied to God, whose actions are, by necessity, always value maximizing in relation to the whole. It is simply the nature of God's activity to maximize value for future purpose, where that future purpose, all things considered, is God's subjective experience of the cosmic whole.

The second objection that seemed particularly important to me from that original correspondence had to do with the problem of God's abstractness as an eternal being. The suggestion was that the eternal nature of the neoclassical God, like Aristotle's First Mover or the God of deism, renders God infinitely remote from ongoing events in the world, shielded from the problem of evil but also of little import to the moral lives of finite individuals. I have tried my best to address that concern by drawing on the process distinction between the eternal and consequent aspects of God's nature. God is existentially non-competitive and invulnerable (eternal), on the one hand, and God is affected by all other individuals as a universal subject (God's consequent nature), on the other. God is an eternal subject in intimate relationship with the world and provides the comprehensive *telos* in reference to which all value (moral and non-moral) finds its ultimate significance. In doing so, I have tried to steer between the danger of describing God's agency in a way that would inadvertently result in God's falling into the category of moral agents (and to whom the property of moral perfection would then apply and for whom the problem of evil would loom large), on the one hand, and leaving God's relationship to the world so obscure as to render God's existence practically meaningless (like Aristotle's First Mover or the deists' God), on the other. The reader can judge whether I have enjoyed any success in this effort.

The neoclassical tradition is rich and varied and represents a distinct alternative to classical theism. I believe that one of its major virtues is that it avoids the characterization of God's nature in a manner that is vulnerable to the problem of evil while still providing us with a robust framework for philosophical theology. I want to thank Jim for the opportunity to explore these issues further and for his assistance in thinking through these matters more systematically (both through our correspondence and in his fine book). I would also like to express my profound gratitude to Franklin Gamwell for his contributions to my thinking on these issues. Whatever clarity I bring to these matters is largely the result of his guidance. The deficiencies that remain are wholly my own.

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The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil

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Abstract: In his book 'Is a Good God Logically Possible?', James Sterba argues that the existence of much of the evil to be found in the world is logically incompatible with the existence of God. I defend the Thomistic view that when one properly understands the nature of God and of his relationship to the world, this so-called logical problem of evil does not arise. While Sterba has responded to the version of the Thomistic position presented by Brian Davies, I argue that his response fails.

Keywords: problem of evil; theodicy; Thomas Aquinas; James P. Sterba; Brian Davies

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Is the existence of God logically compatible with the existence of evil? Or is there a strict contradiction between the two? The "logical problem of evil" is the problem facing the theist of showing that the appearance of contradiction is illusory. J. L. Mackie famously argued that the contradiction is real, so the problem cannot be solved and theism is refuted.[1] Alvin Plantinga is widely thought to have shown that Mackie was wrong, so the most that the atheist can aim for is an "evidential argument from evil" according to which the reality of evil makes God's existence improbable but not impossible.[2] James Sterba has recently argued that Mackie was right after all, or at any rate that Plantinga and others have failed to show otherwise.[3] Central to his argument is the assumption that God is obligated to obey moral imperatives such as the "Pauline Principle" that we may never do evil that good may come of it. If God existed, Sterba claims, he would be violating this principle by either willing or permitting evil for the sake of a greater good, and therefore be less than perfectly good himself. Indeed, in light of the evil that actually exists in our world, he would be "more immoral than all of our historical villains taken together."[4]

In this paper, I will explain why, from a Thomistic point of view, the so-called logical problem of evil (and, for that matter, the evidential problem of evil) cannot arise.[5] For the Thomist, when one properly understands what God is and what morality and moral agents are, it simply makes no sense to think of God as less than perfectly good or as morally obligated to prevent the evil that exists. The "problem" rests on a category mistake. The reasons have nothing essentially to do with the arguments of Plantinga and company, which I will not be defending. They *do* have to do with considerations raised by the Thomist philosopher Brian Davies, to whom Sterba has responded.[6] But while I agree with the substance of Davies' views and will be defending him against Sterba, I will largely be focusing on Thomistic considerations other than the ones that Sterba addresses when replying to Davies.

Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition to which his thought gave rise have, of course, been extremely influential in the history of theology and philosophy of religion, and that alone makes it worthwhile to consider how the problem of evil looks from the Thomist's point of view. But I hasten to emphasize that the main ideas I will be expounding by no means reflect merely that particular point of view. On the contrary, though some of my

1 (Mackie 1955).
2 Cf. (Plantinga 1977). The "evidential" version of the problem of evil is famously presented by (Rowe 1979).
3 (Sterba 2019).
4 Ibid., p. 192.
5 For a survey of Thomistic writing on the problem of evil, see chapter 5 of (Shanley 2002).
6 Cf. (Davies 2006). Sterba responds to Davies in chapter 6 of (Sterba 2019).

formulations will be distinctively Thomistic, the overall picture reflects the broad tradition of classical theism, which has ancient roots in Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism; was developed in medieval times by Anselm, Aquinas, and other Scholastics in the Christian context, Maimonides and others in the Jewish context, and Avicenna and others in the Islamic context; and deeply informs the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the earliest Protestant Reformers alike. In other words, the conception of God and his relationship to the moral order that I will be presenting is, historically speaking, the mainstream position.

As Davies has in several places lamented, much contemporary philosophy of religion, whether atheist or theist, presupposes a very different and excessively anthropomorphic conception of God that he has labeled "theistic personalism."[7] That is certainly true of recent discussion of the problem of evil, and of Sterba and Plantinga alike. For it is only when we attribute to God features that can intelligibly be said to belong only to finite agents that it can seem appropriate either to attack *or* defend his moral virtue. That is not because God is less than a morally good person, but precisely because he is infinitely more than that.

1. The Natural Order

Here is the executive summary: For Thomists and other classical theists, God is utterly distinct from the natural order of things, creating and sustaining it in being ex nihilo while being in no way affected by it in turn. But the "logical problem of evil" implicitly presupposes that God is himself part of the natural order, or at least causally related to it in something like the way that entities within that order are related to one another. Hence, the "problem" rests on a category mistake, so to expose the mistake is to dissolve the problem.

Naturally, this needs spelling out. Let us begin with the Thomistic account of the natural order.[8] The first thing to say is that this order comprises a collection of interrelated substances, each with its own distinctive essence or nature, and manifesting properties and causal powers grounded in those essences or natures. For example, sulfur is a substance, which, by virtue of its essence, is yellow in color and has a power to generate flame, which is triggered when the sulfur is heated. A tree is a substance which, by virtue of its essence, sinks roots into the earth so as to stabilize it and take in water, grows leaves and bark, and carries out photosynthesis. A beaver is a substance which, by virtue of its essence, has iron-rich teeth, uses them to gnaw at and fell trees, and then uses the wood from the trees to build damns and shelters.

These are examples of *physical* substances, which in Thomistic metaphysics are taken to be composites of *form* and *matter*.[9] Matter is what individuates physical substances, tying down the essence definitive of a natural kind to a particular individual, time, and place. Form is what organizes the matter so that the resulting substance operates in the way characteristic of things of that kind. For example, there is *treeness* considered as an abstract universal, and there is the concrete particular tree standing at the rear left of my backyard, the concrete particular tree standing in my neighbor's front yard, and so on. Though having *treeness* in common, these concrete particulars are distinct individuals because they are associated with different bits of matter. That the matter constitutes a tree in each case rather than some other kind of thing is due to its having taken on the form or organizational structure characteristic of trees.

Form, matter, and causal powers are in turn analyzed by the Thomist in terms of the notions of *actuality* and *potentiality*. Matter considered in abstraction from form is

[7] For example, in (Davies 2021), chapter 1. Though Davies does not use the label in (Davies 2006), theistic personalism is the view he has in mind when criticizing the ideas of philosophers like Richard Swinburne at pp. 52–54, 59–62, and 93–95 of that book.

[8] For a detailed exposition and defense of the metaphysical ideas discussed in this section, see chapter 2 of (Feser 2009), and for an even more detailed exposition and defense, see (Feser 2014b).

[9] Thomists also hold that the larger created order includes incorporeal substances—namely angels, conceived of as creatures of pure intellect. But since the points I want to make do not strictly require a discussion of angels, and since this paper is long enough as it is, I will put the topic to one side.

merely *potentially* a tree, or a beaver, or sulfur. The form it takes on *actualizes* one of these potentials, resulting in a physical substance of a specific kind. The powers characteristic of that substance are, in turn, themselves potentialities, and they can be of either an *active* or *passive* sort. An active potentiality is a capacity *to affect* other things, such as sulfur's capacity to burn other things when ignited, or a beaver's capacity to damage or fell a tree. A passive potentiality is a liability *to be affected by* other things, such as a tree's liability to be felled or a beaver's liability to be killed by a predator.

Potentialities of either kind always involve a *teleology* or *directedness* of at least a rudimentary sort, where this directedness is toward ends or outcomes that reflect the distinctive essence of the thing which has the potentiality. Sulfur is by virtue of its nature directed or aimed toward generating flame when the right triggering conditions are present. A tree is by virtue of its nature directed or aimed toward sinking roots into the ground and growing leaves and bark. A beaver is by virtue of its nature directed or aimed toward gnawing at trees, felling them, and then using them to construct dams and shelters. The matter of which any physical substance is composed is directed or aimed toward taking on the form of a different kind of substance when the conditions are right. For example, the matter that makes up a tree is directed or aimed toward becoming ash when flame is applied to it long enough, toward becoming dry and dead wood when the tree is felled, toward becoming nutritive material when an organism like a termite ingests it, and so on.

A law of nature, in Thomist metaphysics, is essentially a description of the way a physical substance will tend to operate given its nature or essence. For example, to say that it is a law of chemistry that sulfur generates flame when heated is a roundabout way of saying that given the nature or essence of sulfur, it has a power of generating flame which will be triggered when it is heated. To say that it is a law of physics that an object at rest will stay at rest and an object in motion will remain in motion unless acted on by an outside force (Newton's law of inertia) is a roundabout way of describing how a physical object will tend to move or not move given its nature or essence. And so on. Other laws describe how *systems* of physical substances behave. For example, Kepler's laws of planetary motion describe how, by virtue of their natures, physical substances of a certain mass will behave relative to one another when they are in proximity to each other. Thus, the natures or essences of things, which underlay their properties and powers and thus determine the ways they tend to behave when those powers are manifested, are metaphysically more fundamental than laws.

Goodness or badness as general features of the world are, on this account, to be analyzed in terms of how fully a substance actualizes the potentials which, given its nature, it needs to actualize in order to be a flourishing instance of its kind. For example, a tree's nature aims or directs it toward sinking roots into the ground, growing bark and leaves, carrying out photosynthesis, and so on. To the extent that a tree realizes these ends, it is a *good* tree in the sense of a good specimen of the tree kind. To the extent that it fails to realize them (due, say, to termite damage, or disease), it is a bad tree in the sense of a defective specimen.

Sometimes what is good for one kind of physical substance, given its nature, will be bad for another kind, given its different nature. For example, it is good for beavers to gnaw at and fell trees. They cannot flourish as the kinds of things they are without doing so. But obviously, their doing so is not good for trees. Now, a natural order with both beavers and trees in it has more kinds of goodness in it than a natural order without both. Hence, an increase in the amount of goodness in the world can in some cases entail also an increase in certain kinds of badness as a necessary concomitant.

2. The Moral Order

Obviously, so far, none of this has to do with goodness or badness in the *moral* sense. Rather, I am describing more general kinds of goodness or badness of which, for the Thomist, distinctively moral goodness and badness are species.[10]

This brings us to human beings, whose nature or essence, according to Thomism, is to be *rational social animals*. We are a kind of animal because among our powers are those characteristic of animals—taking in nutrients, going through a growth cycle, reproducing ourselves, taking in information about the world via sensory experience, being prompted to action by appetites, and having the capacity for locomotion or self-movement. We are *rational* animals insofar as, unlike other animals, we can form abstract concepts, put these concepts together into propositions, and reason logically from one proposition to another. A byproduct of these rational powers is *will* or rational appetite, which is the capacity to be moved to action by what reason apprehends to be good (as opposed to by mere sensory input or by pleasure or the avoidance of pain). If a thirsty dog sees water, its thirst will prompt it to drink unless there is some countervailing impulse, such as a feeling of fear generated by the sight of an approaching predator. As animals, human beings will also be influenced by such appetites—but, on top of that, will be able rationally to assess the situation and, if they judge it to be best to do so, to override the stronger appetite that would have determined what a non-rational animal would do. This capacity to be guided by reason rather than sensation and appetite alone is what constitutes the *freedom* of the will.

Now, as with other physical substances, what is good or bad for us is determined by our nature and the powers that nature gives us, and is to be analyzed in terms of what either facilitates or frustrates the realization of the ends toward which those powers are aimed or directed. For example, as rational creatures our minds are aimed or directed toward knowledge, so it is good for us to acquire knowledge and bad for us to remain ignorant or fall into error. As animals, we need food of a certain kind and amount in order to be healthy, so it is good for us to eat such food and bad for us to have either too little of it or to eat to excess. And so on. These are objective facts rather than matters of personal taste or social convention. That ignorance and gluttony are bad for us is no less objectively true than that having damaged roots or insufficient water is bad for trees.

Morality enters the picture because, unlike trees, we can know what is good or bad for us and choose to act accordingly. A tree that fails to sink sufficiently deep roots into the ground is not a *morally* bad tree, because it neither knows nor can choose what it does. But a human being can know that it is bad to deceive oneself or to be a glutton, and can choose either to avoid self-deception and gluttony or to engage in them. An action is morally good when it is consistent with the realization of the ends toward which our nature directs us, and morally bad when it frustrates the realization of these ends. A person who habitually performs actions of the former kind has a morally good character, and a person who habitually performs actions of the latter kind a morally bad character.

Virtues and vices concern specific respects in which a person's character might be morally good or bad. For example, a person whose eating habits are conducive to good health and who does not pursue the pleasures of the table in a manner that leads to neglect of more important needs exhibits, at least to that extent, the virtue of temperance. A person who habitually overeats or obsesses over food to the neglect of higher goods exhibits the vice of gluttony.

Now, because we are social animals, what is good or bad for us is also determined in part by our relations to other human beings. For example, like other sexually reproducing animals, we are aimed or directed by nature toward mating with members of the opposite sex, and we thereby produce offspring who are helpless for many years after birth. They need a stable source, not only of material provision, but—since they are immature rational animals—of discipline and instruction in what is useful and good for them. Such biological

[10] For detailed exposition and defense of the moral theory discussed in this section, see chapter 5 of (Feser 2009), and (Feser 2014a).

facts are the foundation of the family as a natural institution, and part of what is good for us by nature is to fulfill our roles within the family. For example, a father is directed or aimed by nature toward providing materially and morally for the family he has played a role in bringing into being. To the extent that he does so, he exhibits a good moral character, and to the extent that he fails to do so he exhibits a bad moral character. Children are directed by nature toward obeying the reasonable instructions of their parents, and exhibit good or bad moral character to the extent they habitually do so or fail to do so. And so on.

There are larger social formations too—local communities, nations, the international order—and what is good or bad for us is also in part a matter of how we relate to members of all of these social orders. Rights and duties of various kinds follow from the different kinds of relations we bear to these other members. For example, since a father is by nature directed toward providing for and instructing his children, they have a right to have their father provide for and instruct them, and the father has a right to the obedience from his children that he needs in order to do those things effectively. And he therefore has a duty to provide these things for them and they have a duty to obey him.

Natural law in the moral sense has to do with the principles for action that follow from these various facts about our nature. For the Thomist, our intellects have as their natural end knowledge of the truth about things, including the truth about what is good for us given our natures. The will, meanwhile, has as its natural end the pursuit of what the intellect takes to be good. Hence, a properly functioning intellect and will—and thus an agent who is thinking and acting rationally—will grasp what is in fact good for us and seek to pursue it. For example, such an agent will see that ignorance and gluttony are bad for us, and thus will choose to avoid these things and to cultivate the virtues that will facilitate doing so. That doing so is morally good for us is a matter of natural law in something like the way that sinking roots into the ground and taking in water through them is good for a tree as a matter of physical law.

In addition to the principles of natural law that reason tells us we ought to pursue, there are human laws—the directives of lawmakers—to which we can be bound. But even these are grounded in the natural law. For example, in order properly to provide for and instruct his children, a father has to be able to issue various directives, some of which go beyond what can be known from natural law. When he tells them that it is bad for them to hit each other and that they ought therefore to refrain from doing so, he is simply calling to their attention something that, had they sufficient use of reason and knowledge, they would see to be true as a matter of natural law. But when he tells them that they have to do their homework before dinner time, he is, as it were, issuing a piece of legislation that goes beyond anything in natural law. That does not, however, make such a directive a mere arbitrary whim. On the contrary, given that it is motivated by facts about the nature of children together with facts about the contingent concrete circumstances in which the family finds itself, it has a perfectly reasonable and objective basis. And that they need, for their flourishing, directives of this kind from their father entails that children ought to obey them no less than they ought to obey those principles more directly grounded in natural law.

It goes without saying that all of this raises many questions and requires elaboration and various qualifications. Working out the details is what moral theory in the Thomistic natural law tradition is about. The point for present purposes is simply to explain in a general way how morality is grounded in the natural order of things. Indeed, the moral order is a part of the larger natural order. Human beings are bound by natural law and human law in the ways that they are because they are physical substances of a certain natural kind, and cannot flourish qua specimens of that kind without obedience to these laws.

3. Divine Causality

Now, where does God fit into this picture? The answer is that he does not fit *into* it at all. He is no more a part of the natural order—and thus no more part of the moral order

that is a segment of the natural order—than an author is part of a novel or than a painter is part of a painting. Rather, he is the necessary precondition of there being any natural order at all, just as an author is the necessary precondition of there being any novel at all and a painter is a necessary precondition of there being any painting at all. And conceiving of God on the model of a natural substance is like conceiving of an author as an additional character in a novel, or conceiving of a painter as one of the images in a painting.

That there *is* indeed something standing outside the natural order as its necessary precondition, and that this something has a divine nature, is argued for by the Thomist in various ways. Here I will summarize only the ideas most relevant for present purposes.[11] In addition to the metaphysical components of physical substances already referred to—form, matter, causal powers, etc.—the Thomist posits two most fundamental parts: a thing's *essence* and its *existence*. Suppose you describe, for someone who has never before heard of any of them, the essence of a lion, the essence of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and the essence of a unicorn. Suppose you went on to tell him that, of these three creatures, one exists, one used to exist but has gone extinct, and another never existed but is purely legendary. And suppose you asked him to tell you which was which, based on his new knowledge of their essences. Even if your description of the essences of these things was complete and the person you were describing them to had flawless understanding and powers of deduction, he would be unable to tell you. This illustrates the Thomistic thesis that the existence of a natural substance is something *distinct from* its essence. If it were not, then perfect knowledge of the latter would afford knowledge of the former.

For the Thomist, an essence considered by itself is at most only *potentially* part of the natural order. That existence is added to an essence is what *actualizes* this potential. Now, lions are here and now part of the natural order, while Tyrannosauruses used to be part of it but no longer are, and unicorns never were. That entails that existence is being added to the essence of lions, but not to the essences of Tyrannosauruses or unicorns. And whatever is adding it must be doing so here and now and at any moment at which lions exist, and not just at the moment they first came into being. For the essence and existence of a lion remain distinct parts of it now no less than they were before lions were around. Something must, in other words, be *conserving* or *sustaining* lions in existence here and now and at every moment at which they exist.

Now, if what is doing this were some cause which itself has an essence distinct from its existence, then it too would need a conserving cause, and we would have an explanatory regress. Such a regress can terminate only in something that can conserve things in existence without itself having to be conserved in existence, something that can actualize the otherwise merely potential existence of other things without itself having to be actualized. The Thomist argues that what can function as an ultimate conserving cause of this sort can only be something in which there *is no* distinction between its essence and its existence—something whose very essence *just is* existence, so it need not have existence *added* to it. It would have to be something devoid of any *potentiality* for existence standing in need of actualization, but instead be already entirely actual. To use the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic jargon, it would be *actus purus* ("pure actuality") and *ipsum esse subsistens* ("subsistent being itself").

Now, what is true of lions is true of everything else—sulfur, trees, beavers, human beings, and every other substance to be found in the natural order. With each of these things, its essence and existence are distinct, and thus with each of them, it can continue in being as part of the natural order only insofar as existence is continually imparted to it by that which is pure actuality and subsistent being itself. Thomists also argue that, on analysis, there can in principle be only one thing that is pure actuality and subsistent being itself. So, it is the same one conserving cause that is sustaining the entire natural order in being at every moment.

[11] For detailed exposition and defense of the theological ideas discussed in this section and the next, see chapter 3 of (Feser 2009), and for an even more detailed exposition and defense, see (Feser 2017).

Thomists also argue that anything that is pure actuality and subsistent being itself must have a number of further attributes. For example, it must be *immutable*, given the Aristotelian-Thomistic analysis of change as the actualization of potentiality. For since it is purely actual and without passive potentiality, it cannot be changed. Similarly, it must be *immaterial*, given the Aristotelian-Thomistic analysis of matter as the potentiality to take on form. It must be *eternal* in the sense of being altogether outside of time, given its immutability together with the Aristotelian-Thomistic analysis of time as the measure of change. It must be *simple* or non-composite given its pure actuality together with the fact that anything composed of parts would have potentiality in need of actualization (insofar as it would not exist unless its parts are combined). It must exist of *necessity* rather than contingently given that it is pure actuality and simple or non-composite, together with the fact that a thing is contingent only if it has potentiality in need of actualization and parts in need of combining.

A further Thomist thesis about the relationship between the natural order and its conserving cause is that the former depends at every moment on the latter for its *operation* no less than for its existence. Natural substances have their causal power in a secondary or derivative way—like a stick which can move a stone only insofar as it is used by a hand to do so, or an electric motor which can move the wheels of a car only insofar as it draws power from a battery. Hence, without drawing causal power from their conserving cause at every moment at which they operate, natural substances would be as inert as a stick that the hand has dropped to the ground or the motor that has been disconnected from its battery. Since all possible causal power derives in this way from the conserving cause of things, that cause can also be said to be *omnipotent*.

What I have been summarizing here are the *Doctrine of Divine Conservation*, according to which the natural order could not continue in being for an instant without God's continually sustaining it; and the *Doctrine of Divine Concurrence*, according to which natural substances cannot exercise their causal power even for an instant without God's concurring or cooperating with that exercise. It is only in light of these doctrines that we can correctly understand what Thomists, and classical theists in general, mean when they characterize God as First Cause of the natural order. They do not primarily mean "first" in the temporal sense of having gotten the universe going at the Big Bang. To be sure, most classical theists think that God did indeed cause the world to begin at some time in the past, but some think that the world has always been here without beginning. All classical theists agree, however, that whether or not the natural order had a beginning in time, the more important point is that it could not *persist* in being without divine conservation, and that that is the *fundamental* way in which God is creator or cause of the world. When speaking of God as First Cause, they also do not mean "first" *as opposed to* second, third, fourth, etc. The number of members in a causal sequence is not what is at issue. What they mean is that God has causal power in a *primary* rather than *secondary* way. That is to say, whereas natural substances have causal power only insofar as they borrow or derive it from something else, God has causal power in a *built-in* or *underived* way. For the Thomist, only what is pure actuality with no potentiality requiring actualization can be such a cause in an absolute or unqualified sense.

Because his causal power is of this unqualifiedly primary kind, and because he is immutable, immaterial, eternal, and simple or non-composite, God's causality is radically unlike that of natural substances. When a natural substance brings another into being, it does so by transforming preexisting materials. But that is not how God causes the natural order to exist, because in this case, anything that could serve as preexisting material is itself among the things being caused. When a natural substance brings about an effect, it works through parts (such as the hand you use to move a stick) and itself undergoes change over time as it does so (as when your arm flexes and changes position when moving the stick). Nothing like this happens with divine causality, since God is non-composite, immutable, and eternal. When a natural substance exercises causal power, it does so in accordance with the laws of nature that describe its characteristic mode of behaving. But God is not

governed by laws of nature, since those laws are themselves precisely among the things he causes in creating the natural order that the laws describe.

For these reasons, the Thomist holds that the language we use when describing God and his causal relationship to the world must be understood in an *analogical* way, where analogy is a middle ground sort of usage lying between the univocal and equivocal uses of terms. By way of illustration of the idea, consider how we speak of the number 3 as being *larger* than 2, as standing *between* 2 and 4, as *nearer* to 1 than it is to 10, and so on. We are using terms that usually describe spatial relationships, but we are not using them in that sense when describing numbers, which do not exist in space. But we are not using them in an entirely unrelated or equivocal way either. Though 3's standing between 2 and 4 is not exactly the same sort of thing as your house's standing between your neighbor's houses, it is *analogous* to that. Note that analogical language of the sort in question here is not metaphorical. 3 really is literally between 2 and 4. It is just that "between" is not used in an identical or univocal sense when we describe numbers and when we describe houses.

"Cause" and related terms are, for the Thomist, to be given an analogical interpretation when applied to God. God's causing the natural order is *analogous* to a human being's building a house or making a sculpture, but it is very far from being exactly the same sort of thing as that, given divine immateriality, immutability, eternity, simplicity, etc. Indeed, much of what we have to say about the divine nature is along the lines of apophatic or negative theology—saying what God is *not*, how radically he differs from the natural order he conserves in being.

Now, many theological errors, not only on the part of skeptics but also on the part of naïve religious believers, derive from a failure to keep in mind points like the ones I have been making. For example, skeptics and naïve believers alike often conceive of God and his relation to the natural order on the model of a "god of the gaps." That is to say, they think that the way arguments for God's existence work is by identifying some unusual phenomenon for which we have not yet found a natural explanation, and then appealing to special divine action to fill this explanatory gap. The standard criticism of such arguments is to note that they stand at the mercy of scientific advance, with God having less and less to do the more existing gaps in explanation are filled by further research in physics, chemistry, and so on.

The "god of the gaps" approach is indeed feeble, but it has nothing to do with the arguments of Thomists and other classical theists. They are not trying to fill explanatory gaps *within* the natural order studied by science, but rather explaining what empirical science itself presupposes but cannot account for—namely, the fact that there is any natural order at all in the first place. The "god of the gaps" approach is like supposing that to say that a painting presupposes a painter amounts to positing an as-yet unseen person lurking somewhere in the image ("Where's Waldo?" style), or that to say that a novel presupposes an author amounts to positing a character in the story who somehow escaped the reader's notice on a first reading. It is a category mistake, resting on a conflation of the primary causality unique to what is pure actuality and subsistent being itself with the secondary causality characteristic of natural substances.

4. Divine Goodness

Now, a similar fallacy, I am claiming, underlies the so-called logical problem of evil. To see how, though, a little more stage-setting is required. Let us note first that, despite everything said so far and despite Davies' apt emphasis on distinguishing classical theism from what he calls "theistic personalism," Thomists and other classical theists do *not* regard God as impersonal. On the contrary, Thomists and most classical theists would attribute intellect and will to God, and these are the properties characteristic of persons. For the Thomist, whatever is in an effect must in some manner preexist in its cause, and since God is the cause of any possible reality other than himself, the essences or natures of all the possible things he might create must in some way exist in him. The traditional way classical theists have understood this is in terms of the thesis—famously associated with

St. Augustine and adopted by Aquinas—that such essences exist in God in a manner analogous to how ideas or concepts exist in an intellect, and function as the archetypes by reference to which God creates. Given the further Thomistic thesis that will follows upon intellect, if there is something in God analogous to intellect, there must also be in him something analogous to will.

Here as elsewhere, though, it is absolutely crucial to keep in mind the Thomist view that the terms we predicate of God must be understood in an *analogical* rather than univocal way. God's intellect and will are no more like ours than his causality is like ours. For example, God does not come to know things or engage in any sort of reasoning process, because that would entail change, and he is immutable and eternal. What God knows he knows in a single eternal act; and since he is purely actual and thus without potentiality needing actualization, his knowledge and wisdom are perfect. God's manner of knowing the natural order does not involve any sort of observation of it, because he does not need to be (nor indeed can be, given his immutability) affected by anything distinct from himself in order to know it. Rather, he knows the natural order by knowing himself as the cause of it, just as an author knows the story he has written by virtue of knowing his own mind. Given divine simplicity, we cannot attribute distinct thoughts to God; rather, what he knows he knows in something like a single intellectual act. And so on. God is not *im*personal, but neither is he like a *human* person.

The trouble with what Davies calls theistic personalism is that it models God precisely on human persons, in something like the way that "god of the gaps" theories model God on secondary causes operating within the natural order. It conceives of God as undergoing change and therefore being in time, as causally affected by the natural order, as coming to know that order by observing it, and so on. To be sure, like classical theism, it also thinks of God as immaterial and omnipotent. But given its deviations from classical theism, it nevertheless reduces God's power and independence from matter to something comparable to what we see in the gods of the ancient pantheons. God becomes like Zeus or Odin, or like a character from a modern superhero comic book or movie. (David Bentley Hart aptly characterizes theistic personalism as "monopolytheism"—committed to a view of the divine nature that differs little from that of polytheists except that it reduces the membership of the pantheon down to one.[12]) Theistic personalism unwittingly makes of God just another part of the natural order, albeit the most powerful part—not like an author at all, but merely a character in the novel who has superpowers, and not like a painter but merely the most striking image in the painting.

This is the context within which to understand the sense in which God is good, and Davies' objection to characterizing God as a "moral agent."[13] The first thing to say is that the Thomist certainly does conceive of God as good, indeed as supremely good. For as I have indicated, goodness, for the Thomist, is to be analyzed in terms of the actualization of the potentials that a thing's nature directs it toward actualizing, and badness in terms of the failure to actualize them. But God is pure actuality, with no unactualized potentiality. Hence, he is perfectly good. To be sure, unlike other things, he is also devoid of potentialities that would have needed actualization in the first place, but that entails *more* in the way of goodness rather than less. If it is good to actualize a potential for X, it is better still never to have been merely potentially X, but always to have been actually X.

As Barry Miller has suggested, a divine perfection as classical theism understands it is to be understood as a kind of *limit case* rather than a *limit simpliciter*.[14] A limit simpliciter differs only in degree from other instances of that to which it is the limit. For example, the speed of light is the fastest speed at which a physical object can travel, but it differs only in degree from lower speeds. By contrast, a limit case differs absolutely from the instances to which it is a limit, rather than in degree. For example, a speed of 0 km/s is not a lowest

12 (Hart 2013, p. 127).
13 (Davies 2006, p. 92).
14 (Miller 1996, pp. 7–10).

speed, because it is not a speed at all. Still, the ways that the different degrees of speed are ordered *point to* this limit case. Divine goodness too can be thought of as a limit case (though, unlike a speed of 0 km/s, as a maximum rather than a minimum). The degrees of goodness to be found in the natural order point to it, not as a highest degree in the series, but rather as something outside the series on which the series' members converge and can only ever approximate.

Alternatively, divine goodness can be thought of as a kind of *paradigm case*. A paradigm case is not merely one instance of a kind among others, but rather the standard by reference to which something counts as a member of the kind. For example, the standard meter in Paris was not merely one meter alongside the others, but the standard by reference to which anything else counted as a meter. Or, to take a better example (because it does not involve human convention), Plato's Form of the Good is not merely one instance of goodness alongside the others, but rather the standard by reference to which anything counts as good. For the classical theist, divine goodness is like that. It no more makes sense to think of God as less than perfectly good than it does to think of the Form of the Good as less than perfectly good, or to think of the standard meter as less than a meter long.

Now, this is one obvious respect in which divine goodness is not like the moral goodness exhibited by human beings, which does come in degrees. But there are other respects. For example, human goodness involves possession of moral virtues such as courage, which is the disposition to do the right thing in the face of danger, and temperance, which involves moderation in indulgence of one's appetites. Since God cannot possibly be in danger and has no appetites, he cannot intelligibly be said to possess virtues like courage and temperance. More generally, God is not subject to the natural law, any more than he is subject to physical laws. The natural law is grounded in human nature, just as physical laws are grounded in the natures of physical substances more generally. As the cause of human beings and of physical substances in general, and thus as the cause of the very existence of the natural law as of the existence of physical laws, he can hardly be governed by it.

By no means does this entail, however, that God could by fiat make just *anything* morally obligatory, such as torturing babies for fun. For, again, what is good or bad for human beings is determined by their essence or nature. Given the essence of human beings, it cannot possibly be good for them to torture babies for fun, so a world in which this is morally obligatory is like a world with round squares—not one that even God could create. (Perhaps God could make creatures of *some* kind for which torturing babies for fun would be good, but they would not in that case be *human*, because such a thing could not be good for something with our nature.) So, to suppose that *either* there exists some moral standard independent of God that he did not create, *or* he could command just any old thing by fiat—the standard Euthyphro dilemma scenario—is, for the Thomist, a false choice. Nothing at all can exist, including the natural law, unless God creates it. But at the same time, *if* he creates human beings, and thus the natural law that governs them, then what he commands is constrained by what it is to be a human being.

Since God just is subsistent being itself and the law of non-contradiction is, for the Thomist, simply a reflection of the very nature of being, God's creating things in accordance with this law is ultimately to be analyzed as a matter of his creating in accordance with his own nature. And his doing so entails that there is a sense in which he creates with perfect *justice*, though there is another sense in which the concept of justice no more applies to God than the notions of courage or temperance do. Traditionally, a distinction is drawn between two main types of justice. *Commutative justice* has to do with justice in the ways that members of a community deal with one another with regard to respecting property rights, honoring contracts, and the like. *Distributive justice* has to do with the way that a ruler ensures that those who are under his or her authority receive what is due to them. Now, as Aquinas argues, the notion of commutative justice does not at all apply to God,

but there is a sense in which the notion of distributive justice does apply to him.[15] For on the one hand, since God is not a part of the natural order, neither is he a part of the moral order that is a component of the natural order. Hence, he is not subject to natural law and thus not subject to the rules of commutative justice that govern the relationships between rational social animals.

On the other hand, it would be contrary to God's perfect wisdom to create an incoherent world—for example, one in which beavers exist but the trees they need to build their dams and shelters with do not, or in which trees exist but the water they need to draw in through their roots does not. Hence, God creates in such a way that what they require given their nature is provided them—trees for beavers, water for trees, and so on. In that sense he can be said to act in accordance with distributive justice, not because he is indebted to anything he creates, but because the incoherence of creating a world in which things are by nature directed toward ends they cannot even in principle achieve is contrary to God's wisdom.

Of course, while it is true that in *general* beavers have the trees they need, trees have the water they need, and so on, there are of course many individual cases in which things are not in fact able to realize the ends their natures set for them. There are beavers which cannot find enough trees to fell, trees which die from lack of water or indeed because they are felled by beavers, and so on. But this is because of the aforementioned fact that some natural substances are by nature at cross purposes. Again, for beavers to realize what is good for them requires them to do what is bad for trees. Hence, if you are going to have in the natural order the particular kind of goodness exhibited by beavers, accepting the kind of badness they inflict on trees is "part of the deal." More generally, if you are going to create a natural order with all the specific kinds of goodness that ours exhibits—the goodness of lions, gazelles, birds, worms, bacteria, and so on—then, given their natures, certain sorts of badness (gazelles eaten by lions, worms eaten by birds, diseases caused by bacteria, etc.) are going to be a concomitant. The overall order is good, and the badness that accompanies it is a necessary part of that good, without which that particular kind of good could not exist. You might have a world with things that *looked* like lions but did not eat gazelles, but they would not be *lions*. If you want lions, the occasional dead gazelle is part of the package. Indeed, though it is bad for the individual gazelle that it is eaten, it is *good* for the overall order of the world that it be eaten. For part of the point of their existence is to provide food for lions and thereby contribute to the overall order of things. Hence, while the *proximate* end of a gazelle (to stay alive) is frustrated, the *remote* end (serving as lion food) is fulfilled.

In this way, Aquinas argues, the badness in the world is not only not incompatible with divine omnipotence and goodness, but in fact manifests divine omnipotence and goodness insofar as God is able to produce a greater good out of evil.[16] And this is true for human beings no less than for other creatures. Now, as rational animals, human beings are capable of far greater suffering than non-human animals. But for the same reason we also have, unlike non-human animals, immortal souls—since, the Thomist argues, our rationality entails that our souls are incorporeal and thus do not perish with the death of the body.[17] Hence the good that God may produce out of the evil we suffer is not primarily to be found in this life but in our unending afterlife. And it includes the offer of the beatific vision, which infinitely outweighs any suffering we could undergo in this life, and which will be refused only to those who refuse the offer. With human beings no less than with the rest of the natural order, then, a greater good will ultimately be drawn out of all the evil that exists. All will in the long run receive no less than what they merit, so perfect justice will be achieved.

[15] *Summa Theologiae* I.21.1.

[16] *Summa Theologiae* I.2.3.

[17] For detailed exposition and defense of the immateriality and immortality of the soul, see chapter 4 of (Feser 2009), and my articles (Feser 2013), and (Feser 2018).

5. Sterba Contra Davies

Let us turn, then, to Sterba's response to Davies' presentation of the Thomistic approach to the problem of evil. As I have noted, Davies frames the Thomistic view in terms of the thesis that God is not a "moral agent."[18] I have also explained why seeing Davies' point does not entail taking God to be impersonal or denying that he is good and just, any more than denying that God is part of the natural causal order governed by physical law entails denying that he is a cause. As when attributing causality to God, so too with attributing goodness to him, we must always keep in mind the ways in which he *differs* from the natural order no less than the ways he is analogous to it. Davies' point is that atheistic arguments from evil, and too many theistic responses to such arguments, *fail* to keep this in mind. In particular, they involve fallaciously attributing to God aspects of the goodness of human moral agents that cannot intelligibly be attributed to him, any more than every aspect of natural causes can be attributed to him.

As I have also indicated, a key element in Sterba's formulation of the logical problem of evil is an appeal to the "Pauline Principle" that we may never do evil that good may come of it.[19] Now, where the evil actions of human beings are concerned, the Thomist position is that God does not *cause* them but merely *permits* them. But Sterba points out that at least in some cases, the Pauline Principle would rule out even permitting certain evils, and not merely the doing of evil. For example, a parent who could easily have prevented a child from falling and breaking an arm but refrained from doing so could hardly claim to be blameless on the grounds that he merely permitted the injury in the hope that the child would learn a valuable lesson in safety. To be sure, Sterba also thinks that there are cases where evils permitted, or indeed evils done, are minor enough and the good to be gained great enough that violations of the Pauline Principle could be justified. But he thinks that this is not true of all the evils that exist in the world, so if God existed, then in permitting these evils he would be guilty of an unjustifiable violation of the principle.

But there are two fatal difficulties with this argument. First, the Thomist maintains that the reward of the blessed in the afterlife is of *infinite* worth, so that, as St. Paul famously writes, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18, RSV). And God permits the moral evil that exists precisely because he draws this infinite good out of it. Since we are rational animals, we have free will, and thus by nature are directed toward shaping our own destinies. Since we are also social animals, we are also by nature directed toward contributing to shaping the destinies of the larger communities of which we are members, by way of our choices. For God to *systematically* prevent our choices from having their natural effects (as opposed to the occasional ad hoc miracle) would be to render this natural order pointless, giving us the power to shape our destinies without allowing us actually to do so. That would be as contrary to divine wisdom as making a world with beavers but no trees, or trees but no water. In order to flourish as the kinds of creatures we are, then, we must be permitted to shape our destinies, for good *or ill*—and, if the latter, then to choose whether or not to face up to the consequences of sin and repent of it. And in doing so we thereby shape our souls and prepare them for the hereafter—where, again, we face the prospect of a reward of *infinite* magnitude that cannot fail to make the painful process that leads up to it worthwhile. To be sure, Thomists do not think of either the "Free Will Defense" or "Soul-Making Theodicy" as the whole story where evil is concerned, nor do they conceive of them as exonerations of God, because God (not being subject to natural law) does not need exonerating. But free will and soul-making are nevertheless *part* of the story of why moral evil is permitted to exist.

[18] I should note that Davies' fellow Thomist Brian Shanley has objected to this way of putting things, though Davies has defended himself against Shanley. (Cf. Shanley 2002, pp. 110–17; Davies 2006, pp. 98–103). But it seems to me that, at the end of the day, the dispute is largely semantic and that the substance of the Thomistic response to the logical problem of evil does not stand or fall with whether or not one agrees with Davies' way of formulating it.

[19] Sterba introduces this theme at pp. 2–4 of (Sterba 2019) and returns to it many times throughout the book, deploying it against Davies in chapter 6.

Now, Sterba would respond that by interfering with the freedom of evildoers, God would be preserving the freedom of their victims, and Sterba would point out that we take human beings to be morally obligated to prevent horrendous acts of evil even when this would remove some opportunities for soul-making.[20] So, should not God interfere to prevent such acts? One problem with this response is that it assumes a view about the value of freedom that the Thomist would reject, thus begging the question. Sterba speaks of freedom as if it had to do with there being a finite bundle of opportunities for unconstrained action that stand in need of distribution, where the question is how many of these opportunities should be doled out to evildoers and how many to the innocent. The problem, as he sees it, is that doling out such an opportunity to an evildoer effectively cancels out the opportunity that an innocent person might have (insofar as the latter might be injured, stolen from, etc., and thus to that extent lose out on some opportunity for unconstrained action).

But that is not at all how the Thomist conceptualizes the matter. There is no question of the freedom of evildoers canceling out that of the innocent *in the relevant sense*. For the freedom *of the will* of the innocent is in no way affected by the actions of evildoers. If I maim you or steal from you, then I thereby remove from you the opportunity to use a certain body part or piece of property. But I have not thereby taken from you your *free will*, and thus I have not taken from you your capacity to mold your own moral character. And *that* is what matters to realizing the possibility of an everlasting reward in the hereafter—one which infinitely outweighs any harm that an evildoer could do with respect to your opportunities for unconstrained action in this life.

Now, Sterba is of course correct that human beings are in general obligated to prevent horrendous acts of evil even though this would remove certain opportunities for soul-making. But this brings us to the second fatal difficulty with his argument from the Pauline Principle. Human beings are obligated to prevent such horrendous actions—and, more generally, are obligated to obey the Pauline Principle—because they are members of the community of rational social animals governed by natural law, of which the Pauline Principle is a part. Preventing fellow human beings from carrying out such actions is part of the way in which their free choices can positively contribute to shaping the destiny of that community, where making such a contribution is part of the reason they have free will in the first place.

But God is not a part of that community, and thus he is not governed by the natural law, and thus he is not subject to the Pauline Principle. To be sure, that does not entail that God might will or cause moral evil, which for the Thomist he does not. Again, God merely permits such evil.[21] But even permitting it would violate the Pauline Principle as Sterba understands it, and the point is that God is not bound to refrain from permitting it. To claim that, by permitting horrendous evils, God is violating the Pauline Principle, is like claiming that, by creating the natural order ex nihilo he is violating the law of the conservation of mass, or like claiming that the doctrine of divine concurrence conflicts with the law of inertia. All such claims are category mistakes. God is not a part of the order of natural substances, whose behavior reflects their essences in the ways described by laws of nature. Rather, he stands outside that order of natural substances as its cause, and thus stands outside the laws of nature that follow from the essences of those substances. And for the same reason, he is not part of the community of rational social animals, which is a part of that larger natural order and which is governed by natural law. Rather, he stands outside that community for the same reason that he stands outside the natural order as a whole, and thus stands outside the natural law for the same reason that he stands outside the laws of physics, chemistry, and the like.

Again, this by no means entails that God might arbitrarily make just any old thing morally obligatory, such as torturing babies for fun. God need not make beavers, trees, or

[20] Ibid., pp. 130–34.

[21] I thank an anoymous referee for pointing out the need for clarification here.

any other physical substance at all. If he does not make them, then there will not be any laws of nature, because laws of nature presuppose the existence of physical substances whose natures the laws describe. Hence, since the very existence of laws of nature depends in this way on God, he can hardly be subject to them. All the same, if God *does* make such physical substances, then beavers will need trees and trees will need water, because that just follows from what it is to be a beaver or a tree. Similarly, God need not make human beings at all. And if he does not make them, then there will be no natural law, since the natural law presupposes the existence of rational social animals whose nature the natural law reflects. Hence, since the existence of the natural law in this way depends on God, he can hardly be subject to it. All the same, if God *does* make human beings, it will be bad for them to torture babies for fun, since that just follows from what it is to be a human being. To suppose (as Sterba appears to[22]) that God is *either* subject to natural law *or* liable to arbitrary commands and actions is, from the Thomistic point of view, to posit a false choice. And that there is intellect, will, supreme wisdom, and perfect goodness and justice in God by no means entails that *every* moral quality we attribute to human beings can intelligibly be attributed to him, or that he is subject to the Pauline Principle or other principles of natural law.

Sterba's arguments, like "god of the gaps" arguments, implicitly presuppose a conception of God as one part of the natural order alongside others, albeit an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly virtuous one—a "moral agent of the gaps," as it were. He compares God to a superhero who ought to be intervening to prevent evil the way that Spider-Man would.[23] He also compares him to a just political state which has a duty to protect its citizens from criminals.[24] In short, he operates with what I referred to earlier as a "theistic personalist" or "monopolytheist" conception of God. And since the world does not actually look the way we would expect it to if such a God-as-superhero or God-as-just-political-state existed, Sterba concludes that God does not exist. But for Thomists and classical theists more generally, the whole analysis is flatfooted, because that is simply not what God is in the first place. (As Aquinas says, "it would be absurd to praise God for His political virtues."[25])

Once again, the analogy of the author of a novel, though not exact, is useful. Sterba's argument is analogous to that of someone who conceives of a good author as a character in the novel who makes sure to prevent other characters from doing bad things—and then, when finding no such character upon reading the novel, concludes that the book has no author. Of course, that is not what an author, whether good *or* bad, really is. An author stands outside the novel altogether, and though for that reason he is not subject to the rules that govern characters within the novel, there are nevertheless distinctively authorial criteria by reference to which he can intelligibly be said to be a *good* author—such as skillful plotting, elegant prose, and the ability to construct a gripping story with a satisfying denouement. And an author who puts his characters through the wringer for a few chapters before reaching that denouement would be thought much *better* than one whose characters are boringly free of difficulty. God, for the Thomist, is analogous to such an author, having created a world whose order reflects his omnipotence and supreme wisdom, and which will culminate in the righteous living happily ever after and the wicked getting their just deserts.

6. Further Problems

So much for a general critique of Sterba's response to Davies. Let us now turn to addressing various specific points and criticisms raised by Sterba—which, as we will see, also tend either to misunderstand or beg the question against the Thomistic position. For example, Sterba's discussion of divine justice presupposes that God has obligations of

[22] Ibid., p. 114f., where he raises the Euthyphro objection.
[23] Ibid., p. 19.
[24] Ibid., chapter 4.
[25] *Summa Theologiae* I.21.1, quoted from (Fathers of the English Dominican Province 1948).

justice to human beings in just the same sense in which we have such obligations to one another.[26] But as we have seen, from the Thomistic point of view, the notion of *commutative* justice cannot apply to God at all, and the notion of *distributive* justice can apply to him only in a qualified sense.

When commenting on Davies' claim that God does not "intervene" in the natural order, Sterba appears to miss the point.[27] In particular, he seems to think that Davies is not entirely consistent, insofar as Davies does not deny that God causes miracles. But what Davies means is that neither miracles nor anything else God does are "interventions" in the natural order *in the sense* in which a human being (who is one natural substance alongside others) might be said to "intervene" in events involving other natural substances, or in the sense in which a "god of the gaps" might "intervene" in the goings-on of a clockwork universe that otherwise operates independently of him. For, again, in the Thomistic view, God is not properly conceived of either on the model of one natural substance acting on others or as a "god of the gaps." But only if he *were* conceived of in either of those ways could it make sense to blame him for failing to "intervene" to prevent harm, in the way that a human being governed by natural law might be blamed for failing to intervene to prevent harm from befalling another human being.

Sterba says that if, as Davies allows, it would be contradictory for God to command us to do something that is contrary to our nature as rational agents, then it would also be contradictory for God not to follow the same moral laws to which we are subject, since he too is a rational agent.[28] But this is doubly fallacious. First, the moral obligations we have under natural law follow from our nature as rational *animals*, specifically, not "rational agents" generically. Since God is not a rational animal, he would not be subject to the same laws we are even if he were subject to law in some other way (which he is not). Second, rationality is in any case to be predicated of God in an *analogical* sense, not in the same or univocal sense in which it is predicated of human beings.[29]

Sterba ignores the Thomistic account of goodness as actuality and of God's perfect goodness as a consequence of his pure actuality, even though these are among the considerations cited by Davies.[30] Sterba does discuss another of Aquinas's arguments for God's goodness that is cited by Davies, but Sterba both misunderstands the argument and begs the question against it.[31] Both Davies and Sterba formulate this argument as follows:

(1) All things seek their good (that which attracts).
(2) All things seeking their good are effects of God (things made to be by God).
(3) Effects are somehow like their causes.
(4) Therefore, the goodness which creatures are drawn to is like God, who can therefore be thought of as attractive (or good) like the goodness to which creatures are attracted.

Now, this would not be my own preferred way of reconstructing Aquinas's argument. I think his argument is much stronger than this formulation would indicate. But let that pass for present purposes, which are to show that Sterba's objections are not good ones. He says, first, that the argument presupposes "an Aristotelian worldview that is no longer credible today."[32] But this begs the question against the Thomist, who argues that the relevant ideas from Aristotle *are* still defensible today. Indeed, recent years have seen a revival of mainstream interest in Aristotelian essentialism and teleology.[33]

[26] (Sterba 2019, pp. 112–13).
[27] Ibid., p. 113.
[28] Ibid., p. 116.
[29] Sterba also appears to assume that God could change our nature and thereby change what is good or bad for us (Sterba 2019, p. 136, note 8). But from the Thomistic point of view, this makes no sense. To create something that had a nature different from ours would just be to create something that is not a human being in the first place, even if it were in some respects similar to human beings.
[30] (Davies 2006, pp. 100, 203).
[31] The argument can be found in *Summa Theologiae* I.6.1. Davies discusses it at pp. 204–8 of (Davies 2006) and Sterba at pp. 117–19 of (Sterba 2019).
[32] (Sterba 2019, p. 118).
[33] I survey the relevant literature in (Feser 2014b) and (Feser 2019).

It does not help that Sterba seems to be operating with a superficial understanding of the key Aristotelian notions. For instance, though Davies devotes several pages to explaining exactly what Aquinas means by step (3), Sterba's objection does not engage with the thesis seriously. He cites what modern science says about the emergence of more complex forms from simpler ones as a counterexample, but as Thomists have pointed out, it is nothing of the kind. Later and more complex life forms do not arise from earlier and simpler forms *alone*, but from earlier and simpler forms *together with* genetic recombination and mutation and the environmental circumstances that determine the fitness of a trait. And the information content present in the effect does not outstrip that of the *totality* of these causal factors. Hence, the example does not conflict with Aquinas's premise (3), properly understood.[34]

Furthermore, to suggest, as Sterba does, that rocks do not aim at their own good and that this somehow refutes Aristotelian teleology is to attack a straw man.[35] Properly understood, the teleology of any inorganic phenomenon has simply to do with its tendency to generate a certain characteristic effect or range of effects in a lawlike way, and this is as true of rocks as of anything else.[36]

Naturally, these metaphysical claims raise a number of questions and require further exposition and defense. The point, though, is that Sterba's criticisms of Thomistic theological claims are once again undermined by his failure to understand or seriously engage with the metaphysical underpinnings of those claims.

In explaining why God is not the cause of moral evil, Davies points out that in the Thomistic analysis, evil is a *privation* or the absence of a good that a thing ought to possess. God, the Thomist argues, causes what is good in a thing, but not the sorts of privations involved in moral evil, which are due to the sinner. In response, Sterba claims that if this would exonerate God from causing moral evil, it would exonerate the sinner as well.[37] But this misses Davies' point. Davies is not saying that, because it is a privation, a moral evil does not in *any* sense have a cause (which would indeed entail that the sinner no more causes it than God does). He is merely saying that it is not the sort of privation of which God can be said to be a cause. But it still has a cause, namely the will of the sinner.

Related to this misunderstanding is Sterba's misunderstanding of Aquinas's view that God permits moral evil but does not will it even indirectly. Sterba says that if, as Davies says, God is the cause of the reality of things, then he must be causing moral evil and therefore willing it at least indirectly, not merely permitting it.[38] But that does not follow, precisely because moral evil involves a privation or *absence* of reality, which absence God does not cause (though the sinner does), so God can intelligibly be said not to will it even indirectly but merely to permit it.

Finally, Sterba devotes a long discussion at the end of his chapter on Davies to trying to show that God cannot be exonerated for permitting the evil he does on the basis of appeal to any greater good he draws out of it.[39] Various distinctions are made and thought experiments developed, but the whole treatment is vitiated by several fundamental begged questions and other mistakes. Some of these I have already mentioned. For one thing, the argumentation assumes that God is subject to the Pauline Principle—which, as I have argued, is not the case. For another, it fails to acknowledge, much less respond to, the Thomist position that the notion of commutative justice does not intelligibly apply to God and that distributive justice applies to him only in a qualified sense.

Another problem is that Sterba's discussion fixates on the loss of the worldly goods that those who suffer evil are deprived of, while ignoring the Thomist position that what ultimately matters are the goods of the next life—and, in particular, the supernatural end

[34] For further discussion of this issue, see (Feser 2014b), pp. 154–59.
[35] (Sterba 2019, p. 137, note 12).
[36] For further discussion of this issue, see (Feser 2014b), pp. 88–105.
[37] (Sterba 2019, p. 120).
[38] Ibid., pp. 123–24.
[39] Ibid., pp. 124–34.

of the beatific vision, compared to which even the highest goods of this life are trivial. Furthermore, Sterba characterizes the harms of this life in terms of the frustration of the "preferences" of those who suffer such harms. But from the Thomistic point of view, what determines what is truly good for us are the ends toward which we are *by nature* and *by grace* directed, not the ends that we merely happen as a matter of contingent fact to want to pursue.

Hence, just as Sterba's attempt to revive the logical problem of evil presupposes too anthropomorphic a conception of God, so too does it presuppose too this-worldly a conception of human happiness. From a Thomistic point of view, he not only fails to hit the target, but has been aiming his fire in the opposite direction.[40]

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Article

Reconciling the God of Traditional Theism with the World's Evils

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Abstract: Replying to James Sterba's argument for the incompatibility of the world's evils with the existence of the God of traditional theism, I argue for their compatibility, using the proposition that God has reasons for permitting these evils. Developing this case involves appeal to an enlarged version of both the Free Will Defence and Hick's Vale of Soul-Making Defence, in the context of God's decision to generate the kind of natural regularities conducive to the evolution of a range of creatures, including free and rational ones. Sterba writes as if God would be required to authorise frequent infringements of these regularities. Sterba's arguments from ethics and from the inadequacy of post-mortem compensation are problematised. Predicates used of God must bear a sense appropriate to the level of creator, and not of a very powerful cosmic observer. The ethics that applies within creation should not be confused with the ethics of creating.

Keywords: moral evil; natural evil; Free Will Defence; laws of nature; miracles; James P. Sterba

1. An Argument for the Compatibility of God and the World's Evils

James Sterba has presented arguments (both in a book and in an article) intended to show that the existence of the God of traditional theism (who is understood to be omnipotent and all-good) is incompatible with the evils of the actual world. Hence, there can be no such God (Sterba 2019, 2020).

While there is insufficient space to reply to all of Sterba's arguments (a book-length endeavour in itself), I would like to reply here to some central and crucial ones. Thus, I hope to present at least the makings of an approach that can reconcile the God of traditional theism with the world's evils.

I will begin by ventilating an argument for the compatibility of the existence of the God of traditional theism and the evils present in the actual world. A standard way to establish that two distinct propositions (A and B) are consistent, and thus their compatibility with each other, is to find and specify that a third proposition which is consistent with A is possibly true, and which, in conjunction with A, implies B. This procedure has been outlined by, for example, Stephen Davis in his own essay in his collection *Encountering Evil* (Davis 1981).

So let us consider, by way of a relevant additional proposition, the claim that God has reasons unknown to us for creating a world having all the evils of the actual world. This claim (let's call it "C") certainly seems consistent with the existence of the God of traditional theism (a proposition which for present purposes we can designate as "A"); it appears to be possibly true; and (whether in conjunction with A or not) it implies the existence of all the evils of the actual world (a proposition which we can designate as "B"). Accordingly, this argument appears to show the consistency of A and B, and thus the compatibility of the existence of the God of traditional theism with that of the evils of the actual world.

Now C would be rather unsatisfactory if the argument were intended to persuade others of the probability of God's existence, because of its appeal to unknown reasons. There again, I am unsure whether it is actually true, since at least some of God's reasons might be known to, or at least grasped by, some of us. But none of this matters for our present purposes. For all that is needed (apart from C

being consistent with A, which is unproblematic, and implying B, which similarly raises no problems) is that it is possibly true, or, in other words, not necessarily false. And that is just what it appears to be.

Sterba could, however, question this claim about C. God, he might claim, being omnipotent and all-good, could not have reasons (known or unknown to us) for creating all the evils of the actual world. This is because an all-good God with powers of omnipotence would prevent some of these evils, and would therefore not create a world in which they were present (Sterba 2019, pp. 71–97), nor have reasons to do so. This reply must also, to serve its function of rendering the argument for compatibility unsuccessful, claim that C is not even possibly true, but is necessarily false. This may seem rather a heroic move; but it is still apparently a possible one.

Now the proposition that serves the role of C is not the only one that has been proposed for this role in arguments for the compatibility of God's existence and the evils of the actual world. Thus, Davis has proposed a different one (Davis 1981, p. 72), and I a different one again, and one that is slightly more plausible at that (Attfield 2006, p. 135). But in each case, Sterba could attempt to make a parallel move, provided that in each case the additional proposition refers to God as its subject. And if it does not refer to God, but still implies the existence of the evils of the actual world, then he could claim that there is the same inconsistency between the pair comprising it and A as he purports to find between the pair comprising A and B.

However, the imagined reply to the above compatibility argument, namely that God could not have reasons, known or unknown, for creating a world having the evils present in the actual world, can itself be criticised by presenting reasons that God might have. This kind of reply, of course, could be held to concede that not all of God's reasons are unknown to us. Yet if some possible reasons can be presented, this can be done without any claim to know fully what God's reasons are. For there being possible reasons that could serve to reconcile actual evils with God's existence would suffice to overthrow the claim that God's existence and the evils of the actual world are incompatible, and also the claim that God could not have reasons (of any sort) for creating a world having all the evils of the actual world.

2. A Possible Reason for God's Creation of Our World

One of the reasons that God could have for creating a world with evils like those of the actual world is the value of free will and its implications, such as freely chosen actions and the freedom of thought that it presupposes. A world containing creatures with this kind of freedom can be held to be much more valuable than one without such creatures, even if some of their choices are morally wrong, and even if some of their freely chosen actions have evil consequences. This line of thinking gives rise to the "Free Will Defence", a sophisticated version of which has been presented by Alvin Plantinga (Plantinga 1965, 1974).

Sterba, however, contests this defence in a chapter called "There is No Free-Will Defense" (Sterba 2019, pp. 11–34). According to Sterba, God has failed to promote (let alone to maximise) the kind of freedoms that would be protected by a just state, freedoms including access to resources needed for human flourishing; and some of these freedoms are more significant than the freedoms, for example, of assailants to injure, maim or kill their victims (which the free will defence regards God as upholding). While I do not altogether endorse Sterba's version of political libertarianism, there is no need to explore the relevant reservations here. For, even if the evils that befall the victims of assailants or the poor whose lack of access to resources prevents their flourishing are understood as absences of welfare or well-being rather than as absences of freedom, a case parallel to Sterba's could be mounted that a good God would have prevented these evils, and promoted their flourishing in that way, rather than promoting the freedoms which the Free Will Defence turns on. Indeed, Sterba maintains that "there is no free-will defence" at all, since God does not intervene to prevent the violation of what Sterba regards as significant freedoms.

But this argument neglects the differences between the situation of a creator and of moral agents such as ourselves, or such as governments or the state; and it also neglects the crucial importance of

freedom of the will (which some call "metaphysical freedom"). Let us consider the second point first. Those who deploy the Free Will Defence are not seeking to explain how or whether God promotes personal or political freedoms. They are instead concerned to explain why a good God might permit those evils that result from human choices (and the free choices of other animals, if there are any such free choices). Here, like Sterba, I am assuming an incompatibilist understanding of freedom, rather than a compatibilist one. The freedom to choose is fundamental to the kinds of action characteristic of human life and culture, and without it human life would lack autonomy, making human beings robots or puppets governed by their genes and their environment. Other personal and political freedoms are for human agents and societies to promote and defend, through the exercise of this basic freedom. And since it sometimes results in evils, God's permitting of these evils can largely be justified by the significance of this kind of freedom, and relatedly his or her creation of creatures equipped with it.

Another way of expressing the distinction between the freedoms of Sterba's argument and the freedom which is the focus of the Free Will Defence has been presented in a review of Sterba's book by Michael Almeida. To be significantly free is to have metaphysical freedom of this kind, freedom of choice that can be exercised in a wide range of moral situations. The freedoms that Sterba emphasises, such as political freedoms, are politically significant, and ones that the state should defend, but they lack the crucial significance that attaches to metaphysical freedom. Besides (as Almeida proceeds to show), these two kinds of freedom are independent of each other. "We can have significant freedom and possess no political freedoms at all. Further we can possess every political freedom and totally lack metaphysical freedom." (Almeida 2020) This latter claim needs to be qualified, because someone so brain-damaged as to lack metaphysical freedom would lack some political freedoms as well (such as the freedom to vote) in all practical respects, even if still possessed of this freedom in abstract theory. Yet it remains that a good God might decide to create a world containing creatures equipped with metaphysical freedom while not interfering with respect to political freedoms and leaving the widespread attainment of these freedoms to human agents (with all their created capacities) and their political societies.

Here we should return to the matter of some of the differences between the situation of a creator and that (or those) of moral agents. The sheer breadth of the powers of an omnipotent creator means, as Almeida remarks, that if God were to preclude certain wrong actions, then we would all be rendered unable to perform them. But this would arguably prevent the valuable actions and valuable omissions of most moral agents, who freely refrain from performing these wrong actions. Just (political) states, as he adds, "should initiate policies to prevent such evils, because, unlike divine policies, doing so would not seriously diminish the moral value of the world" (Almeida 2020). Further, I would add, the legislation of just states would not change the entire order of the world across space and time, which is precisely what a divine decree would be liable to do. But this is a theme to which I will return below in a different context.

Accordingly, the Free Will Defence has a role to play in a reconciliation of God's power and goodness and the world's evils (or theodicy), because it explains how significant freedoms, together with many of the evils that they give rise to, are facilitated by the creator. It does not completely explain all the evils that result from human choices, for it does not explain, without supplementation, why God does not interfere to prevent the most horrendous of evils resulting from free but immoral actions. However, together with supplementary explanations (see below), it performs a key role in any acceptable theodicy.

3. Hick's Irenaean Theodicy

There is another theodicy, regarded by its author, John Hick, as a replacement of the Free Will Defence, but in my view complementary to it. (Hick also supplies a defence of the Free will Defence against critics such as Mackie (Mackie 1955; Hick 1977, pp. 266–77), but still finds it theologically defective (Hick 1977, pp. 277–80).) Hick considers its origin as in some part due to Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 202), who held that humanity was first created morally immature and needed to gain in

maturity and also to attain in each generation the full stature of humanity and moral character (Hick 1977, pp. 211–15, 253–55). A major strength of Hick's adaptation of this approach lay in his relating it to evolution and to the development of humanity through descent from pre-human ancestors (Hick 1977, pp. 280–87). Thus, human development involved overcoming difficulties and temptations, rather as the life of human infants does on the way to the maturity of adulthood. Accordingly, a world affording unstinted pleasure or unmitigated happiness was inappropriate to the development of moral character, or, as Hick names it, "soul-making". Had he been aware of Sterba's book, he might have added that a world in which moral and political freedoms were maximised would have been equally inappropriate.

Sterba is aware of this theodicy, but regards it as not explaining the worst outcomes of free human action, any more than the Free Will Defence does. For many of the sufferings and injuries inflicted by humans upon their fellows arguably impede the development of moral character, or, in the case of the infliction of premature death, prevent it, at least in this life. Hick, for his part, held that the process of moral development can continue into the next life, and Sterba spends some of his book discussing such matters (Sterba 2019, pp. 35–48). In any case, a theodicy centred on "soul-making" appears to need to be supplemented with some further theodicy if God's permitting the worst outcomes of free human action is to be explained.

Nevertheless, the Irenaean theodicy could be held to explain many other aspects of human existence and of the world around us. For the development of moral character appears to require an environment of dangers and difficulties, which each generation has to learn either to surmount or to live with. The development of character also presupposes a journey or trajectory along many forking paths, each of the alternative pathways appearing attractive to one or another element in the blend of desires that we inherit from our pre-human ancestors. Mary Midgley has well explained how such inherited drives as the desire to protect offspring and the potentially conflicting desire to take flight or to join migrations together with conspecifics, drives supplied by our evolutionary ancestry, actually made freedom of choice possible among incipiently rational early human beings (Midgley 1994, pp. 160–61). Such dilemmas are needed for the development of moral character in every generation.

Hick himself contributed another strand to such a theodicy. God's desire for human beings freely to choose to enter into a relationship with him or her, and freely to take the path of right action, required the correctness of these pathways not to be clear and manifest, but to be hedged about with doubts and hesitations. Thus, in keeping with this desire, God would be likely to install a cognitive or epistemic distance between humanity and God. Hence, the principles of right action are obscure, and belief in God's very existence is far from obvious. This divine policy could even be held to dovetail nicely with the current debate about the compatibility of God's existence and the world's evils, where the truth is particularly difficult to discern.

Thus, Hick's Irenaean theodicy helps explain how an all-good God might decide to create a world with living creatures undergoing an evolutionary process, both for their own good and for that of the human beings of which such evolved creatures were the ancestors. It can explain many of our epistemological problems, as we learn to distinguish reality from illusions, and our moral problems, as we learn to distinguish right from wrong. It can even help to explain the very development of our capacities for free choice, emphasised in the Free Will Defence, and many of the bad and often disastrous consequences of our choices, and of God's permitting them to come about; for their prevention would frequently block the route to the development of moral character.

Yet this theodicy does not explain God's permitting atrocities, or, in Sterba's phrase, the "horrendous evils" that human action sometimes generates, any more than the Free Will Defence does. Or, at least, it does not do so without a considerable expansion in our awareness of the kind of framework that the "soul-making" theodicy involves. How to expand this theodicy and the Free Will Defence will be considered in Section 5, after a brief discussion of some ethical principles in Section 4.

4. The Pauline Principle and the Principle of Double Effect

The Pauline principle is expressed in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 3:8: Do not "do evil that good may come". But this form of words needs to be disambiguated. One possible meaning is "Do not do wrong that good may come"; but the people who attributed "do evil that good may come" to Paul could not have meant this question-begging command. They (and Paul in his response) must rather have meant (Do not) "cause bad things to happen that good may come (of it)".

But, as Almeida says, this principle cries out for qualification, as Sterba himself acknowledges. For Sterba acknowledges that it could be right, as "the only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocent people" to "shoot one of twenty innocent hostages to prevent, in the only way possible, the execution of all twenty" (Sterba 2019, p. 50).

Yet there is a vastly wider range of cases than this particular one (devised originally by Bernard Williams) where it may be right to cause bad things to happen. Thus, it may often be right to punish children and animals to secure better behaviour. Farmers believe that it can be right to castrate rams and billy-goats so as to rear them better, and, while they may form this view with too little reflection, it is implausible to claim that they are invariably wrong about this. Those of us who believe that living creatures are moral patients, and thus matter, morally speaking, still consider it right to trim hedges for the sake of the general good of a garden. And to come closer to the treatment of human beings, all states appear to believe that it can be right to coerce people from driving on the wrong side of the road, and to punish both citizens and other residents so as to prevent infringements of the law, and promote the law-abidingness of society.

A principle requiring such a wide range of exceptions for human agents can hardly be one that is mandatory for God if God is to count as all-good. Sterba considers that the permissible exceptions "allow us to do evil that good may come of it only when the evil is trivial, easily reparable, or the only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocents". He concludes that "it is difficult to see how God's widespread permission of the harmful consequences of significantly evil actions could be a justified exception to the Pauline Principle" (Sterba 2019, p. 50). But the Principle can be held to require a much ampler range of exceptions. Thus, coercive actions that prevent harm to non-innocents as well as to innocents are assumed to be widely permissible in law. Trials do not take place to assess the moral guilt or innocence of possible victims, before perpetrators of violent crimes are deemed eligible for punishment. More significantly, acts of significant violence are widely considered justifiable in a justified war, a relevant example being when the war is fought to overthrow tyranny or to establish a just peace—or, in other words, that good may come.

The Pauline principle, then, admits of too many exceptions to show that God should intervene to prevent evils. A slightly more presentable principle could instead be considered, the Principle of Double Effect, a principle that makes agents morally responsible for the intended consequences of their actions, but not for the foreseeable ones. If such a distinction can be made in the case of God, then someone might imaginably argue that God should not permit evils, even when he or she can foresee a range of good which could result, or for which the evils were necessary conditions. But Sterba actually rejects the distinction between intended and foreseeable consequences in the case of God (Sterba 2019, pp. 51, 67, n. 4), holding perhaps that God's power and knowledge are such that consequences that God foresees as emerging from actions or omissions that he or she intends are just as much intended as what are understood as God's intentional actions and omissions. Accordingly, Sterba does not make appeal to the Principle of Double Effect. It could be replied to this stance that just as human agents need not be held to intend the bad states of affairs that they bring about with a view to producing good outcomes, or as necessary conditions of good outcomes, no more should God be held to intend the bad outcomes of events and actions that she or he permits with a view to these events and actions making good outcomes possible. Accordingly, the distinction between intended and foreseeable consequences applies as much to God as to human agents.

Here we need to make a distinction between God's antecedent will and God's consequent will, a distinction that has been well drawn by Keith Ward (Ward 2007, pp. 48–55). Antecedently, God

wills there to be a world with its system of laws and its array of creatures, some of them rational and equipped with free will. The actions of these creatures, and their (often undesirable) outcomes, are dependent or consequent on God's will, but many of them need not be regarded as wanted by God. As Ward puts matters: " . . . one can certainly say that many things can happen in a created order, wholly dependent for its existence upon God, which God does not intend, desire or approve of" (Ward 2007, p. 55).

But none of this makes the Principle of Double Effect a suitable basis for arguments against (or indeed for) belief in God's goodness. For there are numerous strong objections to this principle, even with regard to human agents. I have set out some of these objections in *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (Attfield 2020, pp. 129–32), and in *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (Attfield 2019, pp. 128–31); this is not the place to repeat them. This Principle has also been criticised by Judith Lichtenberg (Lichtenberg 1994). Thus, the Double Effect Principle is morally dubious itself, even when applied to contexts relating to human action, let alone to that of divine action. It is time to turn instead to a broader understanding of the context in which both the Free Will Defence and Hick's Irenaean theodicy may be taken to operate.

5. The Broader Context: Cosmic Regularities

Sterba holds that an all-good God would intervene to prevent the significantly bad impacts of freely chosen human actions. He recognises that if God were to intervene in this manner, then the world would not be regular in the way in which the world actually is. As he puts this objection:

> Still, it might be objected that if God did intervene to the degree to which I am claiming he would have to be intervening, we would no longer be living in a world governed by natural laws, and so no longer able to discover such laws and put that knowledge to work in our lives.

But he at once presents a reply to this objection:

> Clearly, there is no denying that a world where God intervened, as needed, to prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would be a different world from the one we currently inhabit. But such a world would still have regularities. They would just be different from the regularities that hold in our world.

And he proceeds to argue (in the same single-paragraph reply) that this differently regular world would still provide opportunities for "soul-making". (Sterba 2019, pp. 63–64).

However, this reply underestimates the problem of relatively frequent divine interventions. The problem is also understated by Almeida, who envisages that such interventions would be compatible with a world governed by laws of nature, but would be one where different positions and configurations of objects would generate different outcomes, apparently more benign in some regards than those in the actual world. (As will be seen later in this section, Almeida's interpretation of "differently regular" probably does not correspond to Sterba's.)

For relatively frequent divine interventions would involve counter-instances to most if not all the laws that operate in the actual world, the laws that govern gravity, light, sound, fluid dynamics, electro-magnetism, nuclear forces and the rest. Even if these laws are probabilistic, this frequency of interventions would still prove incompatible with them. Thus people about to become road casualties (for example, ones who had been pushed into a carriageway in front of a fast-moving vehicle) would be mysteriously lifted from the road and restored to a safe part of the adjacent sidewalk/pavement, or the oncoming vehicle would suddenly stall or mysteriously change direction without action on the part of the driver. Bullets in mid-air, already fired with murderous intent, would find their way back into the barrel of the gun they had been fired from. Bridges that had been negligently or fraudulently constructed with defective materials and were visibly beginning to collapse and bring the motorists and pedestrians using them to a certain death would mysteriously be reinstated and resume their

normal functioning. People who had been pushed from balconies would mysteriously cease to fall and be wafted up to a different, safer landing-place. People unjustly locked inside pitch-black underground dungeons would mysteriously receive light (coming from no discernible source) that showed them a previously non-existent tunnel to safety. And so on, including cases where fatal poisons already irretrievably administered would be counteracted by previously non-existent antidotes, and cases where the victims of fatal doses of deliberately deposited radioactivity would mysteriously be restored to health and vitality. The catalogue of cases would be lengthy and extend to infringements of a wide range of well-established natural laws.

Rather late on in his book, Sterba explicitly acknowledges that God's interventions, at least to prevent the more horrendous outcomes of natural evil, would have to take the form of miracles. Thus he writes:

> Of course, many of God's interventions would have to be miraculous, although they do not always have to appear as such. (Sterba 2019, p. 162)

His example of an intervention that might not appear to be miraculous is a cloudburst, that quenches enough of a forest fire to allow forest animals to escape being burned to death. But even if this might not appear miraculous, it would in fact constitute yet another infringement of natural regularities, and involve God superseding the laws that govern meteorology, and taking direct charge of the weather. It would also involve God subverting his or her own created order, and quite frequently too. Sterba certainly asserts that God's intervening to prevent horrendous evils would itself take place with law-like regularity, or "always" (Sterba 2019, p. 189). But such recurrent interventionism would not resemble the natural regularities discoverable by science; rather it would perpetually undermine them. Here doubts creep in about whether acting in this way can be expected of a good God, let alone expected as a requirement of God being good.

Even if there were some remaining natural regularities in such a world, there are large questions about whether a good God would create such a world of comparative chaos, lacking reliable regularities of the everyday kind, on which living creatures depend, and which have allowed them to evolve into the species that we find around us. So we should consider whether an all-good God, intent on making provision for living creatures and eventually for rational creatures, would or would not be likely to select for creation a world of natural regularities (without exceptions of the above-mentioned kinds), and whether he or she would be likely to select for creation a world with the regularities that obtain in the actual world.

With regard to the first of these questions, the answer appears to be affirmative. The actual laws of nature governing sound, light, gravity, heat, fluid pressures and the rest are the context of the evolution of living creatures, and it is hard to see how such creatures could have evolved in their absence. However, the central point is that some set of natural regularities would have to be selected if life was to be possible; and recent scientific findings suggest that there was a very narrow range of possibilities for cosmic constants such as that of gravity if the emergence of life was to be feasible. The universe seems to be "fine-tuned" for life, in terms not only of the positions of stars and planets but also of the operative laws of nature (see Attfield 2006, pp. 100–6, 120–23). Ward has argued cogently that just such a system of nature is the kind of system that a good God would be likely to select for creation (Ward 2007, pp. 68–73).

Besides, if a good God wanted to make provision for rational creatures, capable of understanding the world around them, and learning to act in ways generating largely predictable outcomes, then the creation of a regular world appears the only option. It is also an option that makes pursuits such as science possible, and thus a scientific understanding of the world in which we live.

But the second question is also important (and it is here that the present essay probably makes its most original contribution). Would a good God be likely to select for creation a world with the regularities that obtain in the actual world, or with different ones? This question is relevant, among other reasons, because Sterba writes of a world that would be regular, but differently regular, consistent

with interventions of the kind that he believes that an all-good God would instigate. However, as has been mentioned, the range of sets of natural regularities compatible with the emergence of life is a narrow one; and it is within this narrow range that anyone seeking to object that a different set of regularities from those of the actual world would be an improvement would have to locate a better set. Furthermore, this set would have to be better across the whole extent of space and the entire duration of time; granted that some kind of regularities are needed, it is not enough to depict laws that would benefit particular potential victims on a limited set of occasions only. The prospects for identifying a better set of natural regularities thus seem remote.

What is clear, however, is that there is probably no set of regularities that would facilitate the above-listed set of examples, comprising what we would regard as divine interventions to the laws of nature of the actual world. The mysterious eventualities listed above are unlikely to be consistent with any comprehensive set of natural laws or regularities applicable across space and time. And while there might remain some of the regularities of the actual world in a possible world in which these eventualities took place, a world with such eventualities is not compatible either with possibilities for "soul-making", or with the emergence of life, let alone with that of rational creatures, the kind of creatures eligible for "soul-making".

A world suited to the emergence of life and eventually of rational life would, by contrast, have characteristics such as universal regularities, alongside most of the other features that Ward lists in his chapter "The Integral Web" (Ward 2007, pp. 69–73). And as he remarks, persons "who have the same general nature that we do must be parts of a world of processes very similar to those of our own world" (Ward 2007, p. 68). Such a world is nothing like the possible world of the mysterious and seemingly miraculous "interventions" depicted above.

Here it should be added that the need for a world of living creatures (as well as for a world of rational creatures) to have such regularities is also relevant to the problem of natural evil, and thus of how an all-good God could create a world in which evils are present that do not derive from human action, but from natural forces and factors—evils such as disease, suffering and premature death. For evils of these kinds are, arguably, an inevitable outcome of such natural regularities. Sterba's argument eventually focuses on natural evils, and on God's non-prevention of the more significant kinds of such evils impacting both human beings and non-humans (Sterba 2019, pp. 157–80). I would reply, as before, that a good God would create a world governed by natural regularities, and not bring about infringements of them.

It might be suggested that a good God would constrain human freedom of action (as opposed to freedom of the will) and also opportunities for "soul-making" somewhat more than is actually the case, with a view to some degree of limitation of the current extent of suffering in the world. This suggestion, however, assumes that there is a trade-off between freedom of action and opportunities for "soul-making", on the one hand, and the reduction of suffering, on the other. But in fact, the very existence of rational and free creatures (as in the actual world) depends on the world being structured either by the natural regularities of the actual world, or of closely similar ones. If the world were structured with natural regularities outside this narrow range, or with none at all, free and rational creatures could not have evolved, and would not be present with their capacity to do the right freely. Hence, any relevantly differently structured world would not merely reduce freedom of action and opportunities for the development of moral character, but remove their possibility altogether, contrary to the spirit of the suggestion under consideration, which seeks to combine the presence of some limited amount of freedom of action and of opportunities for character development with reductions in current levels of suffering.

Sterba is able to reach his conclusions by regarding God as acting on a par with other moral agents. Thus he writes: "If it is always wrong for us to do actions of a certain sort, then it should always be wrong for God to do them as well." (Sterba 2019, p. 57). Certainly God is to be understood as a moral agent, a claim that Sterba well defends (Sterba 2019, pp. 111–17), but he writes as if God were the same kind of moral agent as ourselves, but just much more powerful. Instead, we need to bear in mind,

with Ward, that "God is good in the ways that are proper to the unique creator of all" (Ward 2007, p. 62). Predicates ascribed to God, such as goodness, make sense at the appropriate level, the level of creator. Accordingly, divine goodness does not involve (more or less frequent) interventions in the way that the goodness of a very powerful superhuman might well do. Divine goodness involves instead the creation of a regular world, a world that enables the emergence of life, of purposeful life, and of rational life, equipped with freedom of action and of creativity. We should not, as Taliaferro puts it, confuse or conflate "ethics within a world" with "the ethics of creating a world" (Taliaferro). Once this is recognised, the Free Will Defence can be understood against its broader context (as can the Irenaean theodicy), and, with this context understood, will turn out to comprise an adequate theodicy for moral evil. This same context, with its capacities for nurturing life, can also, I submit, be argued to comprise an adequate theodicy for natural evil.

6. Sterba's Argument from Rights

Sterba further argues that an all-good God would intervene to prevent not only the significant evil outcomes of free human action, but infringements of rights that a just political state would seek to uphold (Sterba 2019, 2020). Further, he appears to adopt a deontological approach to rights, suggesting that (subject to certain exceptions) there are foundational obligations of all moral agents to respect them, as and when they are able to do so.

That is not my own understanding of rights. On my understanding of rights, they are not morally fundamental, and do not generate fundamental obligations on the part of relevant moral agents. Rather, they derive from moral rules about the treatment of parties that we regard as rights-holders (whether human or non-human), rules that are morally mandatory in all but exceptional circumstances, because observance of these rules upholds the general good, but which admit of exceptions where the consequences of infringements of the rules outweigh the consequences of setting a precedent for infringing the rules. Rights, on this view, can be regarded as conclusions, rather than as basic premises (Attfield 2019, pp. 143–47).

Accordingly, if God's obligations were to be considered analogous to those of a very powerful human agent, Sterba's account of God's obligation to observe rights would already be subject to a scrutiny of whether infringements of the said rights were justifiable in terms of their consequences in the relevant circumstances. But God is not to be regarded as a moral agent on a par with a very powerful human agent; rather, God is to be regarded (let it be repeated) as (potentially) the creator of the material universe.

This is the context in which the question of whether human beings have rights against God would have to be asked. This question resembles the question considered by Paul (in his Epistle to the Romans) of whether a pot (or other vessel) could reasonably complain to the potter about its nature or function (Romans 9: 20–21). But I am no more committed to Paul's message here (implicitly that the pot has no such rights) than I am to the Pauline Principle, also based on the Epistle to the Romans, discussed above. Indeed, a good God is to be expected to recognise the moral rights of human and other rights-holders, where the implications of these rights for the obligations of human moral agents are concerned, and where no exceptions apply; and if God's will is to be understood as aligned to morality (as I join Sterba in holding), then a good God will generally favour rights being respected and matching obligations being observed by creaturely moral agents.

However, God is plausibly not obliged to create at all, let alone to create the actual world, or its creatures, or the moral right-holders and the moral agents within it. A good God may (and arguably has) nevertheless create(d) a regular world and make general provision for the flourishing of his or her creatures. But granted the evils to which the living creatures in a regular world are susceptible, and in particular the evils involved for such creatures as victims of immoral actions within the world's system of natural laws and regularities, there is a contradiction involved in holding that a good God would desire rational creatures, living in a regular universe, to exercise free will, with all that this state of affairs entails, and to develop mature characters, with all that this too entails, and that the same God

would intervene to prevent significant harms and suffering to creatures that become victims of the evil impacts of immoral creaturely actions. If the above argument about the need for a regular world, without frequent interventions to prevent the significant bad outcomes of immoral actions, stands up, then God cannot be obliged to intervene to prevent serious infringements of moral rights. If the argument works against God being obliged to prevent significant evils is successful in the first place, then it succeeds again in the context of interventions to prevent infringements of moral rights.

7. Compensation in an After-Life?

Sterba devotes some of his book to arguing that not even an afterlife with opportunities for "soul-making", followed by an unending period of bliss and beatitude, could compensate the victims of suffering and cruelty permitted by God to take place prior to, or culminating in, their death. His argument is that this permission on the part of God remains unfair to these victims, except where there is an "organic" link between their suffering and their post-mortem experience; and that in most cases there would be no such "organic" connection (Sterba 2019, pp. 35–45).

But it is far from clear what such an "organic" link amounts to, let alone whether it is as significant as Sterba suggests, as long as God grants former sufferers opportunities after death for "amendment of life" and/or (perhaps after that) perpetual bliss. As some theologians have recently maintained, such post-mortem redress could also be made available to animals whose lives were afflicted with suffering, unlikely as they are to discern any organic link between their sufferings and their subsequent happiness (Southgate 2008; Sollereder 2019).

It is also somewhat remarkable that Sterba in effect makes the absence of an "organic" link between this-worldly suffering and post-mortem compensation a sufficient condition of God's non-existence. For he holds that in the absence of such an "organic" link, God's permission of suffering is uncompensated, and since an all-good God would not permit uncompensated suffering, no such God can possibly exist. I have already contested the premise that an all-good God would under no circumstances permit uncompensated suffering, if its possibility were a necessary condition of the existence of the kind of regular world in which living creatures and eventually rational creatures with free will and capacities for character development could lead their lives (see the two previous sections). Yet a good God might also decide to grant post-mortem existence and a better life to creatures whose suffering would otherwise be uncompensated, and (in face of this possibility) the demand that such post-mortem existence and the kind of life that it made possible must be "organically related" to the sufferers' previous suffering appears too strong. Certainly this demand seems disproportionate to the claim that its non-satisfaction so conflicts with the nature of an all-good God that no such God can exist, even as a logical possibility.

Ward maintains that provision for some form of post-mortem existence is a necessary component of any satisfactory theodicy (Ward 2007, p. 72). I am not convinced about this claim, and take the view that a satisfactory theodicy can be found in the expanded version of the Free Will defence and of the Irenaean theodicy (expanded to include the requirement, for the existence of creatures to have free will and capacities for development of moral character, that the universe be structured by natural regularities close to the kind that our world actually exhibits). Yet it is worth tracing Ward's own account of post-mortem life, with a view to considering whether a victim of this-worldly suffering could be grateful for their life as a whole, rather than wish that he or she had never existed.

In considering this question, Ward discusses the story told by Ivan Karamazov within Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

> Ivan protests that if it is inevitable to torture a baby so that its unavenged tears are the foundation of final human happiness, such a world is not worth creating. Even an endless ecstasy for all people is not worth the torture of an innocent baby. (Ward 2007, p. 57)

Not even Ivan's pious brother, Alyosha, has a reply; he even agrees that he would not assist in the creation of such a world. But, as Ward proceeds to remark, Ivan's protest is built on the suppositions

that an alternative to the existence of the world described is possible, and that the torture is a means to the happiness of the rest of humanity. Ward suggests that these suppositions be replaced with a scenario such that

> there is no alternative, that universal happiness, for the baby as well as for the torturer, is only possible in a world where that torture may occur, and where, given many evil choices by finite wills, it does occur. (Ward 2007, pp. 57–58)

Further, we are asked to suppose that the torture is not a *means* to happiness, but a foreseeable but forbidden consequence of the existence of such a world. We further suppose that the torture is a possible consequence of the only sort of world in which happiness is possible for free finite creatures, and that "the baby can only have supreme happiness if it is born into a world in which it is so tortured" (Ward 2007, p. 58). Ward now suggests that the proper question to ask is:

> would that baby, after its terrible death, finding itself as a rational and mature agent in a world offering endless bliss, still say: 'I would rather never have existed'?

And his verdict runs: "In the perspective of endless bliss, that torture will soon diminish to the merest speck, an atom of misery lost in an eternity of bliss" (Ward 2007, p. 58).

Ward here accepts that the scenario with which he replaces that of Ivan Karamazov is a work of fiction. But it is, of course, itself a response to a fiction, indeed to a fiction within a fiction; and several of the features of Ward's scenario are later argued to be features of the actual world. Ward's readers might question whether the world of natural regularities, free will, and thus the possibility of torture, is also the only possible world allowing universal happiness for human beings, presumably after death. Yet if it is held that such happiness depends on the development of maturity of character, which in turn requires a world such as our own, then it is not unreasonable for Ward to include this supposition, as long as there is provision for attaining this maturity of character either before death or after it. Ward adds several qualifications and correctives to his response to Ivan Karamazov, which it is unnecessary to replicate here. For he appears to make the point that in the circumstances of a post-mortem life with prospects of bliss, the tortured baby, now a mature person, might reasonably be glad and grateful that he or she was born, as might other victims of suffering undergone in this life. He or she could reasonably be glad and grateful even if there were no "organic" connection between his or her suffering and his or her current life of bliss. Certainly, the former baby might need to go through a process of "soul-making" before attaining bliss, and might encounter in the course of it both challenges and new suffering (Hick 1977, pp. 350–52). Yet, even if so, her or his attainment of maturity and friendship with God could still make him or her glad to have lived.

Life after death would not, as in Plato's belief, be an implication of the natural immortality of human beings, but a gift of God, and, while a good God might confer it, God would not be obliged to do so. Yet the possibility that God does or will confer post-mortem existence and eventual bliss could be held to strengthen the case for God's goodness, and to weaken the case for the impossibility of the existence of an all-good God. The uncertainty of post-mortem existence could itself be regarded as an aspect of the cognitive distance that Hick claims to be indispensable for the development of human maturity; but the very possibility of bliss in a post-mortem existence is an additional ground for holding that the actual world, with all its evils, is the creation of a good God.

For Sterba, rejecting the possibility of satisfactory compensation for the victims of evil and suffering in this life serves an ancillary role; for the possibility of such compensation might buttress his theistic opponents' denials that God is obliged to intervene in this life to prevent the worst impacts of the immoral choices of free human agents, and of natural evils. The conclusion of this section is that this possibility does indeed reinforce the conclusion that God has no such obligation, an obligation which would in any case conflict with a good God's decision to create a world governed by natural regularities.

8. Conclusions

Sterba's case depends on the premise that a good God would have an obligation to intervene to prevent the worst impacts of immoral actions and choices, and also the worst impacts of natural evils. He reasons from the non-fulfilment of this purported obligation to the conclusion that the existence of the God of traditional theism is impossible.

But there is no sound basis for this premise. For this premise conflicts with the expanded version of the Free Will Defence, the version that includes the decision of a good God to create a world governed by natural regularities. It also conflicts with an expanded version of Hick's Irenaean theodicy, for opportunities for "soul-making" also depend on the world in which human action is situated being regular and partially predictable. Further, its claim that God is obliged to intervene to prevent the worst impacts of natural evils conflicts with what a good God would do when deciding to create a world without divine interventions and governed by natural regularities.

Sterba accepts that a good God would make provision for opportunities for "soul-making", but claims that God's failure to intervene in this world to prevent horrendous suffering shows that such provision is insufficiently made. Yet God's non-intervention turns out to be an implication of his or her decision to create a world that is regular and partly predictable; and provision for "soul-making" (or the development of a mature character, aligned with God's will) could also be provided in a post-mortem existence, if, as Sterba firmly contends, eternal bliss cannot be appropriately bestowed on people who have not undergone the kind of "soul-making" that he regards as a prerequisite (Sterba 2019, p. 37). (But this very requirement could well be an unnecessary abridgement of God's freedom and goodness; it may be true, but it is hardly reliable enough for an argument such as Sterba's for God's non-existence to depend on it, even in part.)

Accordingly, the claim that God has reasons (which can be partially grasped by human beings, but are not fully known to us) for permitting the world's evils appears after all to be tenable, and certainly to be logically possible. This in turn means that the existence of the world's evils (proposition B of the opening section of this essay) is implied by the conjunction of the existence of the God of traditional theism (proposition A of that section) and God having these reasons (a state of affairs corresponding to a proposition serving the role of C in that section). God's having these reasons is logically possible itself, and compatible with "A".

But this is enough to show that the existence of the God of traditional theism is compatible with the existence of all the evils of the actual world. I have argued elsewhere that God's existence is also probable, alongside the existence of these evils (Attfield 2006, 2017), but that is not the issue here. The main current conclusions are that Sterba's case for the incompatibility of the existence of God and of the evils of the actual world has not been made, and that God's existence and the world's evils are compatible after all.

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Essay

The Problem of Evil, Skeptical Theism and Moral Epistemology

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Abstract: This paper argues that skeptical theism isn't susceptible to criticisms of the view presented in James Sterba's new book on the logical problem of evil. Nevertheless, Sterba's argument does serve to underscore the unpalatable moral-epistemological consequences of skeptical theistic skepticism (STS): for precisely the reasons that STS doesn't succumb to Sterba's critique, STS threatens to undermine moral knowledge altogether.

Keywords: problem of evil; moral skepticism; moral epistemology; skeptical theism; modal skepticism; axiological skepticism; ethics; philosophy of religion

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1. Introduction

I will use the term 'skeptical theist' in referring to one who embraces both theism and skeptical theistic skepticism; and I will define 'skeptical theistic skepticism', or 'STS', as the conjunction of the following skeptical theses:

ST*(a)* We shouldn't think that the possible goods that are known to us are (probably) representative of those there are; and
ST*(m)* We shouldn't think that the entailment relations we believe to obtain between possible goods and the prevention or permission of possible evils are (probably) representative of those there are.[1]

Where 'E' stands for some paradigmatic instance(s) of inscrutable evil, like the abduction and murder of a child (or an aggregate of likewise inscrutable evils), skeptical theists claim that ST*(a)* and ST*(m)* undermine inductive inferences of the form:

1. We don't know of any morally justifying reason for God to permit E.
2. So there probably isn't any morally justifying reason for God to permit E.

Although skeptical theists intend STS to undermine *inductive* arguments from evil—in particular, those that hinge on an inductive inference like the move from (1) to (2)—Sterba insists, plausibly, that he must contend with STS since the same skeptical strategy might be directed against his own account.[2]

The thrust of STS vis-à-vis the argument from evil is this. We shouldn't affirm an inference like the move from (1) to (2) unless we have reason to be confident that the relevant goods and entailment relations that are known to us are representative of those there are. But in light of STS, we shouldn't think that the relevant goods and entailment relations that are known to us are representative of those there are: for all we know, there's some good that we don't know about, such that its realization is logically incompatible with God's prevention of E. Thus we shouldn't affirm any inference like the move from (1) to (2).

2. Sterba's Reply to STS

Sterba's primary quarrel with skeptical theist's account is this. If God's permission of E were justified by the kind of good to which STS alludes, then God would have to be far less powerful than an average human—which is totally implausible. As Sterba argues,

> Here we are dealing with situations where we lack the causal power to prevent the evil consequences of both immoral actions, and we appeal to that lack of

> causal power to justify why we permit the lesser evil consequence to prevent the greater evil consequences. Now, for just such situations, we are imagining that it is logically impossible for God to prevent the consequences of both immoral actions that are just causally impossible for us to prevent. Right off, that would make God impossibly less powerful than ourselves.[3]

Since *logical impossibility* is far more stringent than *causal inability*, the notion that it might be logically impossible for God to prevent E seems to imply that God is far less powerful than humans, who are merely causally unable to prevent E. This, argues Sterba, is wildly implausible.

I agree that it's implausible to suppose that, in certain cases, it may be logically impossible for God to prevent a single instance of evil that humans are merely causally incapable of preventing—e.g., the abduction of a child. But I don't think that's really an implication of STS. We might put the skeptical theist's point this way.[4] For all we know, there's some good, G, such that the value of realizing G outweighs the disvalue of allowing E. And for all we know, G stands in a logical relationship to E that makes it impossible for anyone (God or human) to prevent E in any state of affairs in which G is realized. So it's logically impossible for God (or anyone else) to prevent E in any state of affairs in which G is realized. Thus, with respect to the logical possibilities surrounding the realization of G vis-à-vis the prevention or permission of E, God's power is equal to ours—just as God's power is equal to ours with respect to the inability to make 2 + 2 amount to something other than 4. As it happens, humans are also causally incapable of preventing E (let's say). God has the ability to prevent E (causally speaking); but God chooses to refrain from preventing E, in favor of realizing G, given that the realization of G is logically incompatible with the prevention of E. In terms of causal powers, then, God is more powerful than we are. However, since it's logically impossible for anyone to prevent E in a state of affairs in which G is realized, God lacks the ability to *both* prevent E *and* preside over a state of affairs in which G is realized. The inability to do logically impossible things is a standard limitation on the power of even an omnipotent being. So the scenario I've just described is not only consistent with God's being vastly more powerful than we are, it's entirely consistent with divine omnipotence.

Perhaps Sterba would reply that a good like I've just described would be truly foreign to us. But this is precisely the skeptical theist's point: we shouldn't think the possible God-justifying goods or entailment relations that are known to us are representative of those there are. So, for all we know, there's some good or entailment relation that's unknown to us—perhaps a good or entailment relation that's totally unlike the goods or entailment relations that are known to us—such that God's failure to prevent E would be morally justified by *that* good. So I don't think that Sterba's answer to STS succeeds. Nevertheless, as I'll now argue, we should reject STS altogether in light of its moral-epistemological consequences. So I agree with Sterba's assessment that STS isn't a problem for his argument, even though I disagree with his reasons for believing this to be so.

3. The Moral-Epistemological Implications of STS

It is a matter of some controversy whether or to what extent God would be morally motivated to realize sentient flourishing generally or human flourishing in particular.[5] Nothing in my argument hinges on the outcome of that debate. That said, we'll need a term to describe whatever it is that God would be morally motivated to realize—whatever that may be—and, given a few qualifications, 'flourishing' strikes me as an eligible candidate. So let 'S' be any human; and let 'F' be any (aggregation of) feature(s) of S's life, such that: *ceteris paribus*, by virtue of God's moral perfection, God would be motivated to realize F.[6] If and insofar as F is realized in the life of S, we will say that S *flourishes*. Note that it needn't be the case that S or any other human *recognizes* the flourishing of S as such in order for it to be the case that S flourishes. For all I intend to say about flourishing, S and every other human might fail to recognize that S flourishes either because we fail to recognize

that some known feature of S's life constitutes a form of flourishing, or because we fail to recognize that some known form of flourishing is realized in the life of S, or both.

I now argue that the skeptical theist is in no position to deny that God (exists and) has realized a morally optimal pattern of flourishing in the actual world. And if we shouldn't deny that God has realized a morally optimal pattern of flourishing in the actual world then we should embrace skepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge.

My argument begins with a *fact*, a *conjecture* and an *implication*. The *fact* that I have in mind is this. Every single day, according to relatively recent estimates, roughly 29,000 children under five years of age perish for want of life-sustaining necessities like food, shelter and basic medical remedies.[7] We will call this *The Fact*.

Here I should preempt two potential objections that might otherwise appear down the line. First, humankind's ability to prevent most of the suffering implicated in *The Fact* would do no more to diminish God's culpability in permitting it than God's ability to prevent all of this suffering would diminish humankind's culpability in allowing it to continue. Second, I will not address the assertion, even should anyone be so bold as to make it, that the agonizing deaths of more than 10.5 million children per year falls within the range of that which, relative to God's moral situation, would be a matter of indifference.

Our *conjecture* calls for a couple of terminological conventions. Let *Set PW* be the set of all possible worlds. Imagine that each member of *Set PW* has a value, and that the value of each member of *Set PW* corresponds to its level of *per capita human flourishing*: The gross quantity of human flourishing in that possible world, divided by its total human population. Suppose that the values of all the members of *Set PW* were added together, and call the sum *T*. Finally, if *T* were divided by the population of *Set PW*, the result would be the *mean* level of per capita human flourishing across all possible worlds, or 'μ'. For ease of expression, we'll stipulate that possible worlds with a level of per capita human flourishing more than n standard deviations above μ are in a subset of *Set PW* that we will call *possible worlds with the most per capita human flourishing*.

Now, for all we know, possible worlds with the most per capita human flourishing are ones in which relatively few humans have the opportunity to flourish a great deal, while many humans flourish only some and many others flourish not at all. We might say that such worlds would have an *undistributed* arrangement of human flourishing. At the opposite extreme, for all we know, the possible worlds in which human flourishing is distributed absolutely equally may be ones in which all humans flourish some but no human flourishes a great deal, and the level of per capita human flourishing is far less than it might otherwise be. We might call this a *distributive* arrangement of human flourishing. For present purposes, we needn't speculate about the extent to which God, *qua* morally perfect person, would aim to bring about a distributive or undistributed arrangement of human flourishing—or whether, *qua* omniscient, omnipotent being, God's agency would be limited by the sorts of tensions implicated in these epistemically possible extremes. Instead, we will stipulate that an arrangement of human flourishing is *morally optimal* if it strikes a morally appropriate balance between distributive and undistributed human flourishing (if there is such a balance, whatever it may be).

The conjecture runs as follows. It seems plausible to suppose that God would have an interest in the flourishing of sentient creatures; and it doesn't seem totally unlikely that bringing about human flourishing in particular would be among God's highest priorities. One might even suppose that a person like God would bring about the most human flourishing that is logically consistent with a morally optimal arrangement of human flourishing.[8] A subtler, slightly stronger form of this supposition is the view that God would bring about *a morally optimal arrangement of* the most human flourishing that is logically consistent with a morally optimal arrangement of human flourishing. For ease of reference, I will use the phrase *optimal pattern* to describe a morally optimal arrangement of the most human flourishing that is consistent with a morally optimal arrangement of human flourishing. And I will refer to the assertion that 'God would bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing' as *The Conjecture*.[9]

Two clarificatory remarks are in order here. Note first that *The Conjecture* is subjunctive: God *would*—i.e., if God exists—bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. So embracing *The Conjecture* doesn't entail a commitment to theism. Second, *The Conjecture* should be read to imply that God would bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing over any (aggregation of) good(s) the realization of which is incompatible with an optimal pattern of human flourishing. In other words, *The Conjecture* claims that no good is such that God would realize *that* good rather than realizing an optimal pattern of human flourishing. We will revisit these matters in more detail below.

Finally, the *implication* unfolds in the following way. Let α and β be any two possible worlds. Imagine that in possible world α, on average, 29,000 children per day perish for want of basic life-sustaining necessities; and in possible world β, on average, less than a single child per day perishes for want of basic necessities. Let 'pattern α' denote the pattern of flourishing exhibited in possible world α; and refer to the pattern of flourishing exhibited in possible world β as 'pattern β'.

Provisionally, just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that *The Conjecture* is true: God would bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. In light of *The Fact*, we know that the actual world exhibits pattern α rather than pattern β. So if God exists, given *The Conjecture*, it follows that pattern α is no less optimal a pattern of human flourishing than pattern β. (Absent *The Conjecture*, of course, it may be that pattern β is more optimal a pattern of human flourishing than pattern α, yet their respective logical entailments make pattern α morally preferable, human flourishing notwithstanding, to pattern β. But that would imply that there's some (aggregation of) good(s) that a morally perfect God would realize over an optimal pattern of human flourishing. And that would contradict our provisional assumption that *The Conjecture* is true.) So it follows from *The Fact*, theism and *The Conjecture* that: A world in which 29,000 children per day perish for lack of life's basic necessities conforms to a pattern of human flourishing no less optimal than that of a world in which, on average, less than a single child per day dies under such circumstances. Since this is a logical implication of conjoining {*The Fact* & *The Conjecture* & theism}, we'll refer to it as *The Implication*.

Notice that *The Fact* is merely an observation about the world we inhabit; and the skeptical theist is committed to theism. So as far as it concerns the skeptical theist (*qua* theist), *The Conjecture* entails *The Implication*.[10] And if *The Conjecture* entails *The Implication*, the skeptical theist cannot have more reason to deny *The Implication* than she has for denying *The Conjecture*.[11] This yields the following dilemma. The skeptical theist is in no position to assert that *The Conjecture* is false. Yet if *The Implication* is true (or true for all we know) then we shouldn't think that we know very much at all about the moral status of human conduct.

We have defined 'flourishing' as nothing other than some feature(s) of human life that God, by virtue of moral perfection, would be motivated to realize. It follows that human flourishing is a morally valuable good. Thus an optimal pattern of human flourishing is, *ceteris paribus*, a morally appropriate arrangement of a morally valuable good—*viz.*, the good of human flourishing. (It's important to observe that this doesn't entail the truth of *The Conjecture*, which posits that an optimal pattern of human flourishing is a morally appropriate arrangement of human flourishing *whether or not all other concerns are held equal*). It follows that God, *qua* morally perfect person, would bring about a less-than-optimal pattern of human flourishing *only if* there is some (aggregation of) good(s), G, such that: The realization of G is at least as morally valuable as an optimal pattern of human flourishing; and the realization of G is logically incompatible with the realization of an optimal pattern of human flourishing.[12] We'll refer to such a good as 'a good that would morally justify God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing'.

For argument's sake, suppose that the skeptical theist wishes to deny *The Conjecture*. To that end, the skeptical theist might point to some good, G, and claim that G would morally justify God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing—and that, moreover, God would in fact realize G instead of bringing about an optimal pattern of

human flourishing. (Perhaps, e.g., the skeptical theist claims that the realization of G is not only *as* morally valuable as the realization of an optimal pattern of human flourishing, but in fact *more* so.) It would follow that *The Conjecture* is false.

Notice that any argument along this line would constitute a theodicy: "I know of some good that would morally justify God in realizing a less than optimal pattern of flourishing (e.g., free will, soul-making, etc.); and indeed, God *has* realized that good instead of realizing an optimal pattern of flourishing. Hence, *The Conjecture* is false." I take my 2015 paper on skeptical theism and theodicy to have demonstrated that STS is incompatible with theodicy.[13] Broadly, where 'G' is any given (aggregation of) good(s), I argue that those who embrace STS cannot consistently claim to know that G would morally justify God in realizing one state of affairs rather than another. My account would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the skeptical theist's reasoning about whether some or other good would morally justify God in realizing a state of affairs in which the pattern of flourishing is suboptimal. Rather than rehearsing the details of that argument here, I will proceed on the assumption that my argument on that point succeeds. Given that assumption, the skeptical theist cannot, with consistency, point to a particular good and deny *The Conjecture* on the grounds that God would realize (or has realized, or will realize) *that* good instead of bringing about a state of affairs that includes an optimal pattern of human flourishing.[14]

The skeptical theist might go on to claim that we needn't know *which* good morally justifies God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing in order to know that *some* good morally justifies God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. However, this only gives us a reason to deny *The Conjecture* if we have some reason for thinking that, in point of fact, God (exists and) hasn't brought about an optimal pattern of human flourishing.[15] Presumably, we'd come to know that God hasn't brought about an optimal pattern of human flourishing by pointing to some feature of the world—e.g., *The Fact*—and adducing that an optimal pattern of human flourishing wouldn't have that particular feature. But the skeptical theist claims that STS undermines precisely that line of reasoning. So at most the skeptical theist can claim to know that *if* (God exists and) the pattern of flourishing in our world is less than optimal *then* there is some good that would morally justify God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. The point to notice is that the skeptical theist *cannot claim to know* that the pattern of flourishing in our world is in fact less than optimal. Thus the skeptical theist has no reason for thinking either that God wouldn't or that God hasn't brought about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. So, for all the skeptical theist claims to know, *The Implication* is true.

One might think that this result is reason enough to reject skeptical theism. "It's just obvious," the argument would begin, "that *The Implication* is false. (Perhaps there is a good that would morally justify God in failing to bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing. Be that as it may, features of our world like *The Fact* make it clear that our world doesn't conform to an optimal pattern of human flourishing.) Yet skeptical theism entails that *The Implication* is true or true for all we know. So we should reject skeptical theism." I would expect the skeptical theist to reply along the following line. "For all we know, humans can flourish in ways that are unknown (to us), some of which may be involved in *The Fact*. Furthermore, there may, for all we know, be unknown ways of realizing human flourishing. So we shouldn't doubt that *The Fact* stands in unknown entailment relations to known or even unknown ways of human flourishing. Accordingly, it's not at all obvious that the pattern of human flourishing that we see in the world is less than optimal."

Here's the difficulty with that response. Suppose that X is a way of human flourishing that's totally unknown (to us). What are X's properties? Unless I assume that properties of unknown ways of flourishing would resemble properties of known ways of flourishing, I have no idea. (And surely the skeptical theist denies that we are entitled to such an assumption.) So let F_X be a feature of X in virtue of which X is a way of human flourishing, such that F_X is unlike any known feature of any known way of human flourishing. What reason do we have for thinking that F_X does not, unbeknownst to us, adhere to some or

other way(s) of human life? Given STS, none at all: We haven't a clue what F_X might be. Nor can I imagine, given STS, a good reason for supposing that F_X—whatever it may be—wouldn't be just one among *many* unknown features of human flourishing that might, for all we know, attach to *many* known ways of human life. So if we endorse STS then we shouldn't doubt that there are many unknown features of human flourishing that adhere to all manner of known ways of human life. I will hereafter use the phrase *deep axiological skepticism* to describe the view that, for all we know, there are many unknown ways of flourishing that adhere to all manner of known ways of human life. Thus we've just established that STS implies deep axiological skepticism.

Now let W be a way of human life that we least associate with flourishing—for instance, a relatively brief life, the entirety of which is spent languishing from debilitating illness and lack of adequate nutrition. And let F_X be some unknown manner of human flourishing that, unbeknownst to us, adheres to some known way(s) of human life. Given deep axiological skepticism, I cannot think of any reason for supposing that F_X isn't a feature of W: As we have no idea what F_X could be, we have no reason for thinking that F_X does not, unbeknownst to us, adhere to W. So for all we know, W constitutes robust human flourishing no less than, say, a life of healthful leisure and high-minded contemplation, replete with the affections of family and friends who enjoy the same. Accordingly, we have no *moral* basis for thinking that we should orient our conduct toward realizing one of those ways of life rather than the other. Nor, it seems, would we have any principled moral basis for choosing one rather than another from among the many ways of human life that we take to be more constitutive of human flourishing than W. So deep axiological skepticism leaves us without any basis for directing our actions toward one *telos* rather than some (or any) other. Therefore, STS implies skepticism about moral knowledge.

4. Objections and Conclusions

I'll close by considering a couple of objections, the first of which is this. I would expect the skeptical theist to object that we needn't know anything at all about an optimal pattern of human flourishing, or whether or how God might go about realizing an optimal pattern of human flourishing, in order to have a grasp of human flourishing that's sufficient for the purposes of directing our own actions toward that end. "While it may be morally appropriate for God to bring about (an optimal pattern of) the flourishing of all humankind," the argument would contend, "It is morally appropriate for us to bring about the flourishing of ourselves and those to whom we stand in special relationships—and, perhaps, once we've satisfied those obligations, we morally ought to do our best to bring about the flourishing of some subset of those who remain. We needn't know the details of God's moral situation in order to know exactly what we morally ought to do."

This objection misses the force of my argument: For all the skeptical theist claims to know, *The Implication* is true. If *The Implication* is true (for all we know), then how are we to regard *The Fact*? Is the apparent suffering of millions of starving children *constitutive of* human flourishing (as a soul-making theodicist might claim—cf. Stump; Hick)?[16] Or is it merely a regrettable but ultimately *necessary condition* for the realization of an optimal pattern of human flourishing? Could it be some combination of the two, or something else entirely? I don't see a reason, consistent with skeptical theism, for rejecting any of these possibilities. And if, for all we know, the human experiences implicated in *The Fact* are constitutive of human flourishing, I don't see any reason at all for thinking that we know what flourishing consists in or how flourishing is to be achieved. Since flourishing is, by definition, a morally significant good, our ignorance about what constitutes flourishing and how to achieve it should undermine any confidence we have in the deliverances of moral cognition.

Another objection is that deep axiological skepticism needn't bother the skeptical theist much, at least insofar as the skeptical theist holds theistic background assumptions about morality. As Bergmann and Rea note,

> Skeptical theists are, after all, *theists*. Thus, when they consider the bearing of skeptical theism on *their* moral practice, they will inevitably and quite sensibly do so in a way that takes account of other things that they believe. But once this fact is appreciated, it is clear that most skeptical theists will find themselves completely untouched . . . The reason is simple: theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act.[17]

The thrust of the objection is that, at most, deep axiological skepticism threatens to undermine the moral knowledge of those who do not hold theistic background beliefs about morality.

Note that this objection is predicated on theistic belief. So if this is the skeptical theist's only prospect for laying claim to moral knowledge, it follows that only *theists* who embrace STS can consistently claim to possess moral knowledge. Thus, on skeptical theists' evident supposition that moral skepticism is a damnable implication for their view, the specter of moral skepticism would present the non-theist with a compelling reason to reject STS. In short, the skeptical theist's skepticism would be highly unattractive to any non-theist that isn't content to embrace moral skepticism. Moreover, the skeptical theist hopes to persuade others that her skepticism is plausible or even commonsensical. Since a great many philosophers reject both theism and moral skepticism, that hope is frustrated if those who embrace STS must thereby assent to the disjunction 'theism or moral skepticism'. So this objection, even if it succeeds, should be of small consolation to the defenders of skeptical theistic skepticism.

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Notes

1 See Bergmann (2001) and Howard-Snyder (2009), both of which are consistent with STS.
2 See Sterba (2019, p. 98, n. 4).
3 Sterba (2019, p. 79).
4 There are several possibilities here, involving a variety of different possible logical connections between possible goods and possible evils (e.g., cases in which E's not being prevented *by God* is what matters to the realization of G, or the possibility thereof). This example is merely the simplest.
5 On this point, see Van Inwagen (2006); Jordan (2012) and Murphy (2017).
6 If one prefers, we might construe S more broadly, letting 'S' stand for any *sentient creature*; or, alternatively, we could construe S more narrowly, letting 'S' stand for 'any human person that is among the elect' or, per Jordan (2012), 'any human person that is beloved by God'. It makes no difference to my argument.
7 Pogge (2008, p. 2); this estimate is based on data from 2007—which, as the availability of such information goes, is relatively recent.
8 Two details. First, since a logical impossibility isn't logically consistent with anything, the proposition in question carries an implicit recognition of logical constraints on God's agency. Second, one might suppose that a morally optimal arrangement of human flourishing would be something like the most human flourishing that's logically consistent with some baseline for those who flourish least. (For a more sophisticated alternative, see Rawls's two principles of justice (Rawls 1971, pp. 60–65)). Naturally, I don't suppose that any human mind has approached the sort of complexity that would inform God's thinking on matters of how, if at all, flourishing should be distributed. Nor do I assume that distribution is the only factor against which God might weigh the level of per capita human flourishing.
9 By way of accounting for Adams's view that *arête* consists in closeness with God, I might change *The Fact* to an observation about divine hiddenness (cf. Schellenberg 2015). References to *flourishing* might instead speak of 'closeness with God'; and *The Conjecture* might be changed to the thesis that God would bring about a morally optimal pattern of closeness with God. The rest of my argument would proceed along the very line that it does.
10 For any p, q, r and x: $((p \wedge q \wedge r) \rightarrow x) \rightarrow ((p \wedge r) \rightarrow (q \rightarrow x))$.
11 For any q and any x: $(q \rightarrow x) \rightarrow (\neg x \rightarrow \neg q)$; and $(\neg x \rightarrow \neg q) \rightarrow \Pr(\neg x) \leq \Pr((\neg q)$.

[12] We can simplify our analysis at no cost by classifying the prevention of evil(s) as a 'good'.

[13] Coley (2015). One objection that my 2015 paper overlooks is this. "Isn't it possible for God to just *tell us* what good justifies God's permission of E? If so, then the claim that STS is incompatible with theodicy is too strong—for there's at least one scenario in which the skeptical theist might embrace STS and theodicy: namely, a scenario in which we affirm STS and God reveals the reason(s) that justify God in not preventing E." I'd answer this concern by observing that the skeptical theist doesn't have any reason for believing that it is, in fact, possible for God to reveal God's reason(s) for not preventing E: what if the reason just isn't the sort of thing that any human mind could comprehend? Given STS, I see no reason for rejecting that possibility. So, given STS, we shouldn't think it *is* possible for God to reveal God's reason(s) for not preventing E.

[14] Along these lines, it's worth observing that *The Conjecture* would be no less true in the event that God would bring about an optimal pattern of human flourishing only because God would bring about some (other) good, G*, such that: Given the realization of G*, the realization of an optimal pattern of human flourishing would be inevitable.

[15] If the skeptical theist could consistently claim that God (exists and) hasn't brought about an optimal pattern of human flourishing then she might deny *The Implication* and infer, via *modus tollens*, that *The Conjecture* is false.

[16] See Stump in Howard-Snyder (Stump 1996, pp. 49–68); Hick in Rowe (Hick 2001, pp. 265–81). Stump and Hick might deny that debilitiating illness or lack of adequate nutrition are *constitutive* of human flourishing. Still, given STS, we can't deny that *W* constitutes a mode of human flourishing—for reasons of which we are unaware, which may or may not be connected to illness or disease.

[17] Bergmann and Rea (2005, p. 244); authors' italics. It's worth noting again that Bergmann and Rea's *theistic reply* is presented in response to Almeida and Oppy's Dilemma, specifically. But their point would apply to the simple version of the Objection in the ways outlined above.

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